Mirrored Distortions: The Sacralization of Politics and the Radical Secularization of Religion. Philosophical and Theological Approaches

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DOI: 10.18355/XL.2026.19.03.01

Abstract
The study analyzes, from a critical philosophical and theological perspective, the symmetry between the sacralization of politics and the radical secularization of religion in Western society. On the one hand, secular entities—such as the state, the nation, or the political party—assume religious functions, transforming political ideologies into "political religions"; on the other hand, religion is excluded from the public sphere and confined to the strictly private sphere. These new configurations lead to an anthropological crisis with implications for the integrity of democracy. Do theology and philosophy possess the resources and creativity necessary to reflect upon and propose a balance between the Church and the *Polis*? This study aims to provide an answer to this question.
Key words: sacralization of politics, secularization, civil religion, Church

1. Introduction

The contemporary world is faced with a problem when talking about the relationship between political authority and religious faith. This problem is like a pendulum, swinging between two extremes that are both problematic: on the one hand, there is the idea that politics is sacred, and on the other, there is the idea that religion is completely secular. The aim of the study is to analyse these symmetrical pathologies, inviting critical reflection on the place of the Church in the city and on the legitimate limits of secular power.

The first line of analysis concerns the sacralisation of politics, a phenomenon by which the state or a particular ideology assumes a soteriological character, claiming for itself absolute authority and an aura of sacred intangibility. This tendency, visible from ancient monarchies to modern totalitarian regimes and the subtle forms of contemporary political idolatry, produces an inversion of ends and means: the instrument becomes the ultimate goal.

The second line of inquiry focuses on the opposite pole: the radical secularisation of religion. This is not limited to a necessary institutional distinction, but involves a programmatic exclusion of the religious voice from the public sphere, reducing faith to a strictly subjective and private experience. In the context of what has been called the "dictatorship of relativism," the study questions the illusion of an "axiological neutrality" of public space, examining how the void left by the withdrawal of religion is frequently filled by new "civil religions" and secular beliefs that function as undeclared dogmatic systems of meaning.

2. The Sacralization of Politics

Modern and contemporary political imagination is marked by a paradox: while classical political theory insisted on the essentially instrumental character of political structures—ordered toward the common good and limited by the contingency of history—numerous concrete regimes have aspired to a quasi-theological status, arrogating to themselves functions and predicates traditionally reserved for the divine. This movement of the "sacralization of politics" is not a marginal aberration, but a recurrent temptation of the *polis* whenever transcendence is weakened, privatized, or displaced.

From a theological and philosophical perspective, sacralized politics is best understood as a form of idolatry: the absolutization of a finite reality, the transfer of ultimate meaning and of salvific expectation onto a historical power. In biblical terms, it is the erection of a "golden calf" in place of the living God; philosophically, it is the reduction of the infinite horizon of meaning to an immanent project, "closed" upon itself. Eric Voegelin (1987: 120) famously described this process as the "immanentization of the eschaton": religious expectations concerning ultimate fulfillment are projected onto the plane of history and attached to political programs that claim to realize paradise on earth . In this sense, sacralized politics is not simply politics decorated with religious symbols, but a profound structural deformation of both politics and religion.

Historically, this sacralization takes multiple forms. In ancient sacral monarchies, the ruler appears as divine or semi-divine, the emblem of cosmic order, mediator between heaven and earth. The Pharaoh, the Roman emperor, or the god-king in various cultures condense religious and political power into a single figure. In such systems, loyalty to the sovereign has a soteriological dimension: to obey the king is to participate in the divine order. The state is not merely an institution; it is a sacred cosmos.

In Emilio Gentile's understanding, the "sacralization of politics" does not mean the mere use of religious vocabulary in public discourse or the ornamentation of state institutions with symbols of a transcendent hue. It designates a structural process, specific to modernity, by which a political entity—whether state, nation, race, class, party, or movement—is elevated to the rank of a sacred reality, invested with the prerogative of determining the fundamental meaning and goal of human existence, at least in historical terms (Gentile, 2006: xi–xii). Politics is no longer merely a sphere for the management of power or the juridical organization of society; it becomes the core of a veritable "religious system": it produces beliefs, myths, values, commandments, rituals, and symbols that demand allegiance, loyalty, veneration and, ultimately, a readiness for self-sacrifice.

E. Gentile (2006: xiv) insists that this modern sacralization of politics must be distinguished from older forms of sacralization of power. In archaic and ancient societies, political authority was often directly identified with the divine or considered its immediate emanation, as in the case of the Egyptian Pharaohs. In the Greek city-states and in republican Rome, the religious dimension was embedded in civic religion: political institutions, the cult of the city's gods, festivals and rituals were all parts of one and the same sacred universe. Later, in Christian monarchies, the sacral character of power was articulated through the doctrine of the divine right of kings, confirmed by the Church; until the emergence of popular sovereignty, the tension played out between two sacralized powers—spiritual and temporal—each claiming primacy by virtue of an "investiture" from above.

Modernity, however, radically changes the configuration of the relationship between the religious and the political. The affirmation of the sovereignty of the state, then of the "sovereignty of the people," the secularization of culture, the loss of the Church's spiritual hegemony, the juridical separation between Church and state, and the rise of mass politics are constitutive moments of a new historical phase, in which the sphere of the political becomes autonomous with respect to traditional religions. Only against this background does the phenomenon that Gentile calls a "religion of politics" become intelligible: not a traditional religion that absorbs politics, nor a politics that exercises spiritual authority through a confession (as in various forms of caesaropapism), but politics itself becoming the bearer of an autonomous religious function.

In this sense, the sacralization of politics presupposes the transformation of a secular entity into a transcendent instance vis-à-vis individuals, untouchable and in principle beyond challenge, around which an entire symbolic and normative universe is

organized. Thus, one can properly speak of a "religion of politics" when the nation, the state, the race, the class, or the party become objects of collective belief, are surrounded by founding and salvific myths, by values presented as absolute, by commandments whose violation is treated as sacrilege, and by rituals meant to sustain the sense of a "holy" belonging (Gentile, 1996: 58). In this guise, the political is no longer a mere "means" to the common good; it becomes a final "end," an instance to which the destiny of individuals and of the collectivity is subordinated.

The structure of this phenomenon has a pronounced analogy with the structure of historical religions. There is a political "god"—be it the nation, the race, or the class—raised above history as the principle of identity and meaning; there is a "canon" of texts—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the *Communist Manifesto*, etc.—implicitly treated as normative scriptures; there is a "mythology" that rewrites the history of the collectivity under the form of a sacred history, with providential origins, heroic epochs, falls, and restorations; there is a "cult" of heroes, martyrs, and leaders, memorialized in mausoleums, monuments, national cemeteries, parades, and commemorations that punctuate a secular liturgical calendar. In the totalitarian versions, the leader himself is transfigured into an earthly demiurge, whose person becomes the object of an idolatrous cult. All these function as cultic signs of a "civil religion" that sacralizes the state, its institutions, and its universal mission.

Both "civil religion" and "political religion" are forms of the sacralization of politics, but they differ in their relation to pluralism, freedom, and existing religious traditions. Civil religion, illustrated by the American case, sacralizes a democratic political system, acknowledges the plurality of ideas, allows competition for power, and coexists—at least in principle—with different religious confessions. It does not demand unconditional adherence to a single political code; it does not coercively impose a totalizing creed. Rather, it offers a shared symbolic horizon, a minimal axiological and ritual consensus regarding republican values, which—so some authors argue—is indispensable for the cohesion of a modern democracy.

Political religion, by contrast, designates the sacralization of a political system founded on an uncontested monopoly of power, on ideological monism, and on the obligatory subordination of all dimensions of life to a sacralized political code. Italian fascism, German Nazism, and Soviet communism are paradigmatic examples in this sense: fascism explicitly assumes the status of a "religion" of the nation and the state, instituting the cult of *Il Duce*; Nazism divinizes the Aryan race and the *Führer*, constructing a syncretism of Germanic myths and racial neopaganism; Bolshevism, while proclaiming atheism and denouncing traditional religions as the "opium of the people," recreates in secular form distinctly religious structures—dogmatic doctrine, the party-church, the cult of Lenin and Stalin, festive calendars, rituals of initiation and violent excommunications of the "enemies of the people" through imprisonment and even assassination.

From this perspective, the twentieth century appears as the "golden age" of the sacralization of politics. The world wars, revolutions, decolonization, and the formation of new states were accompanied by the elaboration of heroic and salvific myths, of national and party rituals, of symbols that sacralized secular entities and demanded extreme sacrifices "on the altars" of nation, race, or revolution. Nevertheless, the sacralization of politics does not necessarily lead to totalitarianism: it can take the form of a democratic civil religion, vital for the cohesion of a pluralist society, or it can radicalize into intolerant, totalizing political religions characteristic of fascist and communist regimes. Moreover, even democratic civil religions can, in certain conjunctures, adopt "invasive, intolerant, and exclusive" attitudes, becoming instruments for the marginalization of minorities or for the justification of violence in the name of sacralized values. Precisely for this reason, from a

theological-philosophical standpoint, the central issue is not merely to register the existence of the sacralization of politics, but to evaluate its content: what, exactly, is being absolutized, sacralized?

Christianity, at least in its classical theological articulations, has introduced a decisive rupture into this picture of the relationship between the sacred and the political. By distinguishing between God and Caesar, between the *Regnum Dei* and any earthly kingdom, the New Testament instituted a critical distance between faith and political power (Luke 20:25). Augustine radicalized this distinction in *The City of God*, opposing the *civitas Dei*, ordered to the love of God, to the *civitas terrena*, ordered primarily to self-love and domination (Augustine, 1998: XIX.17–24). Earthly political orders are thus not demonized; they have a legitimate role in restraining violence and promoting a certain degree of peace. But they are systematically relativized: no empire, no regime can claim to be the Kingdom of God. When this Augustinian and evangelical distinction is blurred or forgotten, political orders easily assume sacral functions.

As already indicated, modern totalitarianisms offer exemplary cases. Hannah Arendt (1973: 460), in her analysis of twentieth-century totalitarian movements, shows how they produce comprehensive "worldviews" that explain history in totalizing terms and demand unconditional loyalty. Whether in the form of Nazi racial mythology or of Marxist-Leninist teleology, the political movement acquires a quasi-religious status: it offers a grand narrative of origin and destiny, a catalog of saints and martyrs, rites of initiation, commemorative festivals, and an eschatology of final victory. The party and the leader are not mere administrators of power; they are bearers of destiny.

Theologically, this dynamic can be described in terms of a displaced soteriology. Salvation—understood broadly as liberation from evil, injustice, and alienation—is no longer sought in the transcendent God, but in the historical success of the nation, race, class, or political system. Ernst Kasemann (1969: 102) spoke of the "apocalyptic" structure of Christian hope, oriented toward a Kingdom that is not the product of human planning, but both gift and judgment. When such hope is severed from its transcendent reference, it does not simply vanish; it metamorphoses into political eschatologies in which the party, the state, or the revolutionary vanguard plays the role of Messiah.

For this reason, many theologians and philosophers warn against a "theology of the state." Oliver O'Donovan (1996: 11), for example, argues that political authority is a good given by God, but only within strict limits: it is a response to sin and disorder, not an ultimate horizon of meaning. The state may be used by God as an instrument of judgment and provisional peace, yet it is never itself an object of faith. When the state claims more—when it demands religious-type assent, unconditional trust, or total life-orientation—it usurps the place of God and becomes an idol.

Such idolatry is often signaled by the emergence of political "liturgies." Robert Bellah's classic essay on "civil religion" in America describes how symbols, rituals, and narratives surrounding the nation and its leaders can function in a quasi-religious manner, with a sacred history, a canon of texts, and a pantheon of heroes (Bellah, 1967). Although Bellah does not equate American civil religion with explicit totalitarianism—nor does Emilio Gentile—his analysis shows that the sacralization of politics is not confined to openly dictatorial regimes. Even in liberal democracies, the nation, the constitution, or the "free market" can be invested with an aura of untouchable sanctity. Formal blasphemy laws may be absent, but certain political dogmas are insulated from critique as if they were articles of faith.

From a Christian perspective, this is problematic not because political communities or liberal institutions are necessarily unjust, but because the attribution of ultimate meaning to them contradicts the transcendent reference of faith in God. John Howard Yoder (1994: 39–40) criticizes what he calls "Constantinianism": the long-standing historical pattern by which the Church has aligned itself with imperial or national

power, theologically legitimating the state and sacralizing its political intentions. In this view, even the language of a "Christian nation" or "chosen people" applied to a particular political entity risks confusing the biblical narrative with national mythology.

At the same time, sacralized politics often instrumentalizes the Church itself, demanding from it a kind of sacramental endorsement of political projects. Churches may be tempted to exchange prophetic distance for access to influence, imagining that by blessing the throne they can steer history toward the good. In practice, however, this strategy generally leads to the nullification of Christian witness. When the Church becomes effectively the chaplain of the state, its capacity to judge political power in the name of a higher norm is compromised.

Philosophically, sacralized politics can be read as a particular form of what Charles Taylor (2007: 539) calls the "closed immanent frame." In a secular age, many people live within a horizon that recognizes only this-worldly goods and possibilities, even when they still employ religious language. Political projects tend then to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal or marginalization of transcendence, becoming bearers of ultimate significance. The survival of the nation, economic growth, security, or progress acquire an absolute character. Theological language may still be invoked—"God bless our nation," "manifest destiny"—but the functional object of hope and trust is restricted to an immanent reality.

From this angle, the sacralization of politics is not so much a return to premodern sacral monarchy as a distinctively modern pathos: if God has withdrawn—or rather has been excluded—from the public horizon through the process of secularization, if eschatological hope becomes unthinkable, then politics becomes "the art of the impossible," the last arena in which meaning and salvation are sought. This overburdening of politics with salvific expectations leads, however, to recurrent disappointment and violence. Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the "end of history," in which liberal democracy plays a quasi-eschatological role as the final regime, was precisely criticized for its implicit sacralization of a contingent political order (Fukuyama, 1992: xi).

In this context, authentic theology and critical philosophy have an important demystifying function. They insist on the provisional character of any political order and reaffirm the "eschatological reserve" that protects the transcendence of God and the dignity of the person from political absorption. Joseph Ratzinger (2004: 117) - Pope Benedict XVI - speaks of the "demythologization of politics" accomplished by biblical faith: by denying the divine status of the emperor, faith frees politics from sacral inflation and grounds its legitimacy in the service of justice and peace rather than in metaphysical claims to ultimacy.

This demythologization does not abolish politics; rather, it situates political power within an ethical horizon that transcends it. A state that knows it is neither divine nor absolute can be judged, limited, and reformed. Conversely, a state that imagines itself as the bearer of salvation becomes, almost inevitably, violent toward dissenters, "heretics," and those who question its political projects. The sacralization of politics thus represents not only a theological error, but also a grave political danger.

3. The Radical Secularization of Religion

If one pole of contemporary distortion is the sacralization of politics, the other is the radical secularization—or privatization—of religion. Here, the problem is no longer that the state claims to be sacred, but that religious faith is systematically excluded from the public sphere and displaced into the register of subjective preference. Religion survives, of course, in various forms—as personal spirituality, as a resource for private consolation—but it is denied any legitimate voice in public deliberation concerning the common good.

The *secular* is a category that defines the reconstruction of a reality different from the religious one (Casanova, 2011: 54). Thus, secularization can be classified into three different categories: (a) differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions; (b) decline of religious beliefs and practices; (c) marginalization of religion to a private sphere (Casanova, 1994: 211). This leads us to define secularization as a process of differentiation and emancipation of the secular (the lay) from the religious.

The standard justification for this exclusion invokes the neutrality of the liberal state: in a plural society, with diverse religious traditions, the state must not favor any particular worldview, religious or non-religious. Religion must therefore renounce its public claims in the name of civic peace; it must content itself with the formation of individual consciences in private. Public reason, as articulated for example by John Rawls (2005), must rely only on "freestanding" arguments, accessible to all citizens independently of their religious commitments.

There is here an important and legitimate intuition: the protection of religious freedom and the prevention of the coercive establishment of a religion. However, what Charles Taylor (2007: 19-20) calls "exclusive humanism" goes further, transforming the procedural neutrality of the state into a substantive anthropological thesis: people must construct the meaning of their lives without reference to transcendence, and any public appeal to God is *ipso facto* irrational or illegitimate. Religion is tolerated as long as it remains "harmless," confined to the private sphere and deprived of normative authority beyond voluntary communities.

This radical secularization of religion, however, leads to several contradictions. First, the claim of "axiological neutrality" is itself a claim laden with value. As numerous theologians and philosophers—including Nicholas Wolterstorff (1997) and John Milbank (2006) —have argued, the attempt to purge the public sphere of religious doctrines merely masks the fact that secular liberalism itself functions as such a doctrine, with its own metaphysical assumptions about the person, freedom, and the good. To forbid religious reasons in public discourse while tacitly presupposing the premises of secular humanism does not mean neutrality, but the masked establishment of a radical politics.

Second, the vacuum created by the forced withdrawal of religion from public life does not remain empty. Robert Bellah's notion of "civil religion," mentioned in the previous section, shows that secular societies generate their own quasi-religious frameworks of meaning—around nation, democracy, human rights—which provide an ultimate perspective. These frameworks may reject explicit religious language, but they function as religions: they distinguish between sacred and profane, orthodoxy and heresy. Criticizing certain basic liberal values is often treated as a kind of moral blasphemy.

Jürgen Habermas (2006) has become increasingly aware of this problem. While defending the secular character of the state, he nonetheless acknowledges that post-secular societies must learn from religious traditions, which preserve moral intuitions that are difficult to translate into purely procedural terms. His appeal to a "complementary learning process" between secular and religious citizens recognizes that the absolute exclusion of religious voices impoverishes public discourse and abstracts it.

Theologically, the radical secularization of religion is not merely a sociological fact, but a spiritual and doctrinal challenge. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam understand faith not only as private assent, but as a way of life with public implications: moral and ethical commitments, the promotion of justice, the critique of unjust structures. When religion is reduced to inner feeling, its prophetic dimension is silenced. Rowan Williams (2012) observes that if faith becomes a purely inner conviction without any corporate or visible dimension, it ceases to be a faith capable of challenging or transforming social realities.

Moreover, this privatization deforms the very self-understanding of religious communities. The Church, in Christian theology, is not a voluntary association of individuals with private spiritual concerns, but a public institution, an organic bodyin Christ, *ekklēsia*, a visible community whose life is meant to bear witness to the Kingdom of God in history. When public expression is stigmatized, the Church is tempted either to withdraw into a ghetto, content with internal rituals and private consolation, or to imitate secular discourses in order to be heard, diluting its distinctive message. Both reactions confirm the hegemony of the secular frame.

The rhetoric of the "dictatorship of relativism," invoked by Joseph Ratzinger (Jankunas, 2011), targets precisely this phenomenon: the claim that, in a plural society, no truth can be affirmed as binding for all, that all values are ultimately equivalent, and that any assertion of objective moral truth is an act of intolerance. Paradoxically, this relativism becomes prescriptive: it forbids strong truth claims in the name of tolerance, turning itself into a rigid orthodoxy. Under the mask of neutrality, it delegitimizes religious contributions to debates about justice, human dignity, and the common good.

From a philosophical standpoint, this situation raises questions about the nature of reason itself. Alasdair MacIntyre (2007: 51-52) has argued that the Enlightenment project of constructing a universal, tradition-free rationality has collapsed, leaving behind a fragmented moral discourse in which value-judgments are often reduced to expressions of preference or emotion. In such a context, the exclusion of religious traditions—each with its own rationally articulated moral vision—further impoverishes public reasoning. What remains is often a technocratic or managerial rationality, skilled at calculating means but incapable of articulating shared ends.

In practice, the radical secularization of religion tends to produce an asymmetry: religious voices are expected to justify themselves in secular terms, while secular ideologies are never required to account for their own ultimate premises. Martha Nussbaum's defense of "political liberalism," for instance, acknowledges the depth of religious motivations, but nonetheless insists that only public reasons detached from religious premises are legitimate in political decision-making (Nussbaum, 2013: 19). Yet the line between "religious reasons" and "secular reasons" is often porous. Appeals to human dignity, equality, or solidarity have deep roots in religious traditions; to treat them as purely secular inventions is historically naïve.

An ironic effect of this dynamic is that secular societies, though officially neutral, frequently generate their own "dogmas" and "heresies." Certain positions on sexuality, bioethics, or identity politics are treated as being beyond discussion, such that those who dissent are not only refuted but morally excommunicated. John Milbank (2006: 268-269) interprets this as the emergence of a "liberal anti-culture," in which state and market define the parameters of acceptable discourse while simultaneously claiming to be culturally neutral.

At the same time, the marginalization of traditional religions can open the space for the proliferation of alternative spiritualities and quasi-religious movements, from forms of New Age syncretism to secular "faiths" in technology, progress, or nation. These often lack the critical resources and institutional depth needed to resist co-optation by consumerism or political manipulation. In other words, when historic religions are pushed into the private sphere, the public sphere does not become rationally purified; it becomes more vulnerable to irrational enthusiasms and new idolatries.

For Christian theology in particular, the challenge is to respond to this context without falling either into nostalgic theocracy or into a disembodied pietism. The option of re-establishing confessional states is neither desirable nor realistic; the complex pluralism of contemporary societies demands a form of political order that respects freedom of conscience and does not impose religious commitments. Yet, as John

Courtney Murray (2005) argued in the American context of the twentieth century, such a regime of religious freedom does not require the silence of religion: on the contrary, it presupposes the active, public contribution of religious communities to the moral fabric of the nation. Murray's intuition, later taken up in Catholic social teaching, is that religious freedom and the public role of religion mutually sustain one another: a state that recognizes its own limits, that refrains from claiming total authority over meaning and morality, leaves space for the Church and other religious communities to articulate visions of the good life. Conversely, a Church that respects the legitimate autonomy of the political order—its specific competences and methods—avoids both the sacralization of the state and withdrawal into irrelevance.

Thus, the radical secularization of religion is not the necessary outcome of modernity, but a particular interpretation of it—one that absolutizes a specific Enlightenment narrative. The task, philosophically and theologically, is to unmask the hidden norms and quasi-religious structures of this secularism, while at the same time articulating a model of public reason in which religious and secular voices can contribute on an equal footing. Habermas's notion of a "post-secular society," in which citizens are called both to translate, as far as possible, their religious intuitions into accessible language and to recognize the rational content of religious traditions, points toward such a model, even if its implementation remains contested.

4. Toward a Dynamic Balance between Church and *Polis*

If sacralized politics and radically secularized religion are symmetrical distortions, the central theoretical and practical task becomes the recovery of a dynamic balance: a mode of relating Church and *polis* that avoids both the idolization of politics and the privatization of religion. This balance is not a static compromise, but a historically renewed discernment in which theology and philosophy together illuminate both the limits and the possibilities of secular power.

A first step in this direction is to re-articulate the theological critique of political idolatry in a way that does not degenerate into anti-political quietism. To affirm that no political order is the Kingdom of God does not mean to suggest that political engagement is futile or corrupt in itself. On the contrary, it is precisely the transcendence of the Kingdom that grounds a critical and hopeful involvement in history. Johann Baptist Metz (1980: 88-89) insists that Christian faith includes a "dangerous memory" of suffering and injustice which constrains believers to resist structures of domination and to struggle for a more just society. This memory—rooted in the passion and resurrection of Christ—prevents the Church both from sacralizing any status quo and from capitulating to cynicism.

From this perspective, the Church's presence in the public sphere is not, first of all, a quest for power, but an act of witness. The Christian Church is a sacramental community whose practices—Eucharist, forgiveness, hospitality—form its members in ways of life that contest the violence and idolatry of the surrounding culture. The Church does not first offer a political program, but a way of being together, through Christ-like love, that embodies, in miniature, the peaceable order of the Kingdom. Yet this witness inevitably has political implications: it critiques immoral practices, injustice, and the cult of the gods of nation or consumerism.

Such a model protects against the sacralization of politics in two ways. First, it reminds the Church that its identity does not depend on state favor, legal privileges, or cultural dominance; it can remain faithful even as a minority or marginal community. Second, it equips the Church to speak prophetically to power, not as a rival sovereignty, but as a community accountable before a higher law. The distinction between God and Caesar remains crucial, but is now understood not as a divorce between faith and politics, but as the precondition for a responsible, non-idolatrous political engagement.

At the same time, the Church must resist the temptation of defensive withdrawal in the face of secularization. A purely inward pietism, content with private devotions and spiritual well-being, abandons the field of public meaning to other forces—often precisely to those sacralized politics or quasi-religious ideologies that the Church is called to critique. Gustavo Gutierrez's theology of liberation, despite its controversial elements, rightly maintains that Christian faith is inseparable from a "preferential option for the poor" and from concrete praxis for justice (Gutierrez, 1988: xxv). A Church that refuses complicity with political idolatry does not do so by leaving politics untouched, but by standing with the vulnerable, the excluded, and the victims of systemic violence.

This option for the vulnerable provides a crucial criterion for discerning the legitimate limits of secular power. Political authority, from a Christian perspective, is justified insofar as it serves the common good, protects human dignity, and secures conditions for the integral development of the person. When the State—whether in the name of security, economic growth, or cultural homogeneity—sacrifices the weak, deprives certain groups of rights, or treats persons as mere means, it exceeds its mandate and lapses into idolatry. The Church's prophetic role is then to warn of and criticize this excess, and to call to repentance.

Recognizing the legitimate autonomy of the political sphere also means admitting that the Church does not possess technical competence in all areas and should not seek to dictate public policy solutions on every issue. The Church offers principles of reflection, criteria of judgment, and orienting values, but leaves to the competent in the lay sphere the primary responsibility for political implementation. This distinction protects both the dignity of political reason and the integrity of theological discourse.

Philosophically, recovering a dynamic balance requires rethinking the very concept of the "secular." Charles Taylor's analysis suggests that "secularity" need not mean the exclusion of religion from public life, but the recognition of pluralism and the refusal of coercive establishment (Taylor, 2007: 1-4). In this reading, a secular state is not one that demands the silence of religion, but one that makes room for multiple worldviews to contribute to public debate under fair conditions. Such a "modest laicism" contrasts with a "maximal" laicism that seeks to push religion entirely into the private sphere.

Theological reflection can support this modest understanding by recalling that Christianity itself de-sacralizes political power without denying its legitimacy. The resurrection of Christ reconfigures authority: political rule is "authorized" by God, but at the same time judged and relativized by the eschatological Kingdom. The task of the State is not to embody salvation, but to provide a framework of justice and peace within which persons and communities—both religious and secular—can pursue their ultimate ends. A secular legal framework that protects freedom of conscience and equal citizenship thus corresponds, in a certain measure, to the Christian intuition that no temporal power is ultimate and that coercion cannot produce authentic faith.

What such a framework must not demand, however, is that religious citizens split themselves, adopting one set of reasons in "private" and another in public life. But such a requirement violates the integrity of the religious person and rests on a mistaken understanding of public reason. If citizens are free and equal, then they must be able to bring their deepest convictions—religious or otherwise—into the public forum, provided they are willing to argue, to accept the burdens of reciprocity, and to respect the rule of law. The exclusion of religious reasons *as such* is not neutral; it privileges radicalizing secular doctrines.

In this regard, Habermas's notion of a "post-secular society" offers a nuanced path. While maintaining that laws in a pluralist state must, in the last instance, be justifiable in terms accessible to all, Habermas nevertheless acknowledges that religious citizens may legitimately enter political debate with explicitly religious arguments (Habermas,

2006: 10-12). The burden of "negotiation" does not fall only on believers (who must seek publicly accessible formulations), but also on secular citizens, who are called to adopt a receptive attitude toward religious contributions. This process of mutual learning prevents both dogmatic secularism and clerical domination.

In such a context, the public role of the Church can be articulated along three interdependent axes: prophetic critique of idolatry—denouncing and resisting the sacralization of political and economic powers; defense of the vulnerable—bringing into public debate the perspective of those whose voice is often weakened or silenced; and contribution to moral deliberation—offering, from within its own tradition, rationally articulable insights on human dignity, the person, and the common good.

First, as William Cavanaugh (2002: 9-10) shows, modern states often claim a monopoly on legitimate violence, delegitimizing alternative forms of loyalty and community. When the state presents itself as the guarantor of ultimate security or identity, the Church must remind us that "here we have no lasting city" (Hebrews 13:14). This does not mean an anarchic rejection of all authority, but a refusal to grant absolute trust to any earthly power. The Church unmasks "civil religions" that sacralize war, consumerism, or national exceptionalism, pointing instead to the crucified and risen Christ as the measure of true power—the power of self-giving, saving love.

Second, the test of any political order, from a Christian perspective, is how it treats the least and most disadvantaged: the poor, migrants, the elderly, racial or religious minorities, those at the margins of economic and cultural systems. This suggests an epistemic and moral thesis: reality looks different when viewed "from below," and justice must be judged from the standpoint of those most affected by structures of power. In practice, this means that the Church's public interventions should not focus primarily on defending its institutional privileges, but on the concrete lives and rights of vulnerable persons.

In a secular democracy, such advocacy can and must be articulated in a way intelligible to all citizens, without hiding its theological roots. The language of rights and human dignity, although widely used, is profoundly nourished by religious narratives about the human being created by God and redeemed through the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. By making these sources explicit, religious traditions can both deepen public understanding of human rights and warn against reducing them to mere juridical formalities disconnected from practices of solidarity.

Third, the Church contributes to moral deliberation by offering evangelical and theological conceptions of the good life. Against maximal laicism (which would confine such conceptions to the private sphere) and sacralized politics (which would identify them with state ideology), the Church proposes a vision of human integrity rooted in the image of God, relationality, and the vocation to communion with God and neighbor. Although the Church must avoid proposing detailed technical solutions as if it were a political party, it can legitimately articulate non-negotiable moral thresholds.

A key challenge is to avoid the instrumentalization of religion by partisan politics. When Churches align themselves too closely with specific parties or ideologies, their universal message is narrowed and their prophetic freedom is compromised. Miroslav Volf (2013) warns that religion in the service of partisan politics loses its soul, becoming the chaplain of a faction, not a witness to reconciliation. A Church faithful to the Gospel will sometimes support policies associated with the left, sometimes with the right, but always from a standpoint that transcends these divisions. Its fundamental allegiance is not to political platforms, but to Christ's command of love.

Therefore, a theology of the *saeculum* does not collapse into secularism. It recognizes that history, institutions, and legal order are arenas of God's providential action and of human cooperation. The Church participates in this history, not as master or owner,

but as servant and sign. It refuses to sacralize any political order, but also refuses to abandon the earthly city to forces indifferent or hostile to the Gospel.

From a philosophical perspective, such a position resonates with certain currents of civic republicanism and communitarianism, which stress that political life is not reducible to the aggregation of preferences, but concerns common deliberation about the common good and the cultivation of civic virtues. Religious communities, through their practices of discipline, charity, and shared memory, can contribute significantly to this civic formation. They remind society that freedom is not only freedom from constraint, but freedom for truth, justice, and mutual responsibility.

Ultimately, the question arises: concretely, how can religious traditions refuse complicity with political idolatry without retreating into irrelevance? A few criteria of discernment can be proposed. Thus, the Church must constantly recall that its ultimate hope lies beyond history. Any political project, even the most just, is penultimate. This reserve prevents both despair (when reforms fail) and triumphalism (when they succeed). The Church's alliances should be measured less by access to power and more by proximity to those in vulnerable situations. The Church's own structures must be accountable, especially with regard to abuses of power. A Church that calls the State to transparency while hiding its own sins undermines its credibility. In a plural society, the Church cannot expect deference simply by virtue of its tradition; it must enter the public square willing to offer arguments, to listen, and to learn. This dialogical attitude does not relativize the truth of faith; it expresses confidence that truth can be proposed without coercion. Finally, ecumenical and interreligious collaboration is necessary, since various threats of political idolatry and radical secularization affect all religious communities. Joint initiatives for tolerance, peace, solidarity, or the protection of freedom of conscience can strengthen resistance to these everyday distortions.

Through such practices, the public dimension of religion can be reaffirmed without sliding into theocracy. The Church and other religious communities thus occupy a "critical-constructive" role: critical, insofar as they judge political power in the name of a higher justice; constructive, insofar as they contribute to social cohesion, moral formation, and solidarity.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the double distortion of the contemporary world—the sacralization of politics and the radical secularization of religion—betrays a deeper anthropological and theological crisis: the difficulty of articulating the relationship between transcendence and immanence, between ultimate meaning and penultimate structures, without confusion and without separation. Sacralized politics confuses these registers, divinizing history; radical secularization separates them, exiling transcendence from history. Both, in different ways, deny the paradox of the Christian claim that the Logos became flesh, entering history without being absorbed by it.

A renewed theology and philosophy of the *saeculum* will insist that political authority is real, necessary, and honorable—but finite, responsible, and always subject to judgment. Religion, for its part, is neither a mere instrument of social control nor a purely private disposition; it bears truth-claims and moral visions with inevitably public implications. Between idolatry and irrelevance there opens the narrow path of faithful presence: a Church that prays and protests against immorality, that celebrates the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist of unity and communion and advocates for justice, that recognizes the provisional wisdom of secular institutions yet refuses to identify any earthly city with the City of God.

The restoration of a dynamic balance between Church and *polis* will not be achieved through a single theoretical formula, but through the slow and contested work of communities learning to live this paradox in concrete contexts. It will involve legal

reforms protecting religious freedom, educational efforts cultivating religious literacy, and spiritual practices deepening discernment. Above all, it will require both believers and non-believers to rediscover a certain humility before the mystery of the human person and the common good: the recognition that no state, party, or ideology can bear the ultimate weight of meaning and that any attempt to assign it this task will, sooner or later, transform salvific promises into instruments of domination.

Against such distortions, the alliance of theological vigilance with philosophical critique offers a service not only to the Church but also to the *polis* itself. For only when politics knows that it is not God, and religion knows that it is not a party, can both cooperate in the fragile yet indispensable task of seeking justice and peace for the whole human family.

Declaration on AI use

OpenAI GPT-5.5 was used to assist with language editing and stylistic refinement. The authors retain full responsibility for all research content and interpretations.

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Words: 7406
Characters: 50 266 (28 stadard pages)

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