

The Spirituality of the Secular State: Reflections about Reconciliation in Politics

2.1 Introduction

One can see that in the secularization process of modern societies there is an increasingly broader and clearer rejection of the Christian faith and the churches. On the other hand, there is, especially in Brazil, a “cultural war” between Christian churches and non-Christian religions, between the Christian church and public policies that affirm the state’s laicity. We are living in a time when religion and state are mixed insofar as political representatives look for benefits from the state for their churches and also try to impose church interests on the state. It is true that, according to a study by Rudolf von Sinner, the Christian churches made significant contributions in Brazil, such as the re-democratization process and the social movements associated with liberation theology, the ecclesial base communities and the Pastoral Work with Children, which took millions of children out of a situation of hunger and vulnerability. According to Sinner, the Christian churches’ goal is the search for the common good, rather than the search for privileges for church members. The Christian churches brought very significant benefits for public life in Brazil, in spite of the critique levelled at the mistakes and unlawful acts practiced by church representatives (Sinner 2012, 149-197; 275-278). Notwithstanding the awareness of that contribution, there is a movement that aims to deny the Christian presence in Brazilian society and to make it fall into oblivion, under the justification that a lay state cannot tolerate the Christian presence. In the words of the anthropologist Débora Diniz, “my argument is simple – religion must be a matter of private ethics, and public health policies should not be founded upon religious mysticisms about a good life” (Diniz 2013, 1704–1706).

Based on these considerations, in this chapter I focus on the analysis of the dimension of forgiveness and reconciliation of the Christian tradition that was taken on by the secular state.

2.2 Secular State and Christian Tradition: A Process of Forgetting

In the Western tradition Christian theology is declining, although it still provides sustenance in issues that are fundamental for the existence of the

secular state. In this respect Terry Eagleton claims that the functioning of the modern state depends on the “spiritual disposition” of its members. The state needs a culture in order to function, and this culture is permeated by the theology of Christian tradition. According to Eagleton, “Culture is a kind of ethical pedagogy which will fit us for political citizenship by liberating the ideal or collective self buried within each of us, a self which finds supreme representation in the universal realm of the state” (Eagleton 2000, 7).

A problem arises when the state imposes conducts that are considered politically correct, such as the concept of tolerance. Thus, the state, with its policies of toleration, institutionalizes the way in which conflicts among its citizens are solved. The state directs, interferes and manipulates the freedom of its members to guarantee tolerance with the goal of making individuals have the feeling of being free to think and believe according to their conscience (Schmid 2007, 70)¹. On this basis, the understanding of freedom can be summarized in the phrase “human beings think and the institutions rule”. As a consequence, one can see that the democratic state assumes for itself the responsibility of guaranteeing tolerance, freedom and equality by means of coercion. In this way the institution or the state assumes the role of the Christian churches, which modern reason intends to render invalid. Culture becomes something like a religion and the secularized culture of Protestantism transformed the religious dimension into meanings tied to material progress, thus eliminating the religious meaning of the world and of life. Thus, the state plays the role that the churches used to have in the past. Tzvetan Todorov teaches that the structures of modern democracies are permeated by the thinking of Pelagius and Augustine. The French Revolution, which created its messiah, belongs in the tradition of Pelagius. “If there is a messiah, he is a collective character, the people – an abstraction that allows some individuals to present themselves as his incarnation” (Todorov 2014, 31).

The French Revolution looked for salvation in the realm of lower, earthly things and, although it eliminated the idea of God, it maintained the vices of the old religion that it wanted to combat, such as dogmas, proselytism, intolerance to critique, its martyrs and holy days. It became a political religion. This is the structure that can also be found in other liberal democracies (Todorov 2014, 32-33). Fraternity, taken from the Christian religion, was now defended with the power of armies and Napoleon was considered the messiah of the Enlightenment. Thus, the new tyrannies established by the lay state, in favor of

1 Schmid uses a play on words in German: “Der Mensch denkt und die Institution lenkt” (“Human beings think and the institution rules”), which refers to “Der Mensch denkt und Gott lenkt” (“Human beings think and God rules”).