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André CORTEN and Marie-Christine DORAN

Immanence and Transcendence in the Religious and the Political

Transcendence and immanence as concepts have taken a new relevance in the context of converging processes of crisis of legitimacy, in both religious and political conceptions, linked with a growing individualism. The authors attempt to situate this growing interest, which crosses various fields of study, by examining the literature and by discussing the heuristic value of transcendence and immanence when placed in the current context of what they analyse as a transformation, rather than a withering away, of the relationship between collectivities and the sacred, whether on religious or political levels.

Key words: *immanence · transcendence · religion and politics · sacred*

Dans un contexte où convergent des processus de perte de légitimité liés à la montée de l'individualisme, tant au plan politique que religieux, les notions de transcendance et d'immanence ont pris une nouvelle importance. Les auteurs entendent à la fois situer la portée de ces notions croisant plusieurs champs de recherche, mais également analyser leur valeur heuristique lorsqu'elles sont confrontées au contexte actuel, dont il sera montré qu'il n'est pas celui d'un dépérissement mais plutôt d'une transformation des liens entre collectivités et sacré, que ce soit sur le plan politique ou religieux.

Mots-clés: *immanence · transcendance · religion et politique · sacré*

The growing interest in the ideas of transcendence and immanence can be traced to the question of the loss of meaning. Religion “à la carte” is either welcomed or shunned. With the perceived weakening of the state comes the possibility of the withering away of the political, or, on the contrary, new hopes for emancipation. At both the religious and political levels we are seeing a legitimation crisis resulting from the triumph of individualism. The authority of religious dogma and the eminence of the *res publica* are no longer uncontested. We might bewail the loss and confusion of social meaning. Or conversely, we might rejoice in confronting the idea that human spiritual and political autonomy springs from nihilism, that is to say is without ground.

The legitimation crisis at work in both religious and political authority does not correspond to received secularization theory. On the contrary, the idea of a religious resurgence has been widely discussed. In the last quarter-century, in the Near and Middle East, in the United States and even in Latin America and Africa, new forms of religious expression are at work. The aim of this paper is to show that this so-called religious resurgence is, more accurately, a change from a transcendent to an immanent form of the religious. Far from withering away, the religious and the political, until now defined in classical terms as transcendent, now display numerous traits which can be considered as immanent. In this paper we also defend a subsidiary thesis: that this increasing presence of immanent traits leads to new patterns and processes of sacralization (often understood as neo-transcendentalization). Finally, in the third part of this paper, we address the relationship between the religious and the political. Is the religious primordial, as proposed in the classical conception of the theologico-political? Or, on the contrary, does the evolution of the political influence that of the religious?

Some Terms in Need of Clarification: Transcendence, Immanence, Sacred

“Transcendent” generally means the extra-social, the extra-natural, the supernatural, that which goes to or comes from above. The word “transcendence” contains the following semes (minimal units of signification): exteriority, superiority and break with continuity. On the religious level, the radical distinction between “the world” down below and the heavenly world above is central to the definition of religious transcendence. On the political level, transcendence is associated above all with the idea of the sovereignty of Divine Right. In western political thought the idea of popular sovereignty draws its inspiration from the transcendent image of the people, an entity which transcends all expressions of any particular will.

“Immanent” means that *which resides* within reality, that which does not rely upon something external to itself for its existence. Immanent then appears to be the opposite of transcendent, if not its outright inferior: something is immanent by a kind of loss or negation of transcendence. Immanent is not only polysemic; it is also composed of semes which can be placed in opposition. In fact, as underlined by Gauchet (1985), immanent can mean being completely immersed or quite the opposite, completely autonomous. On the religious level, immanent refers to situations where contact with the world of the beyond (and the world of the dead) is immediately assured (notably by means of possession). In 19th-century theological romanticism (Schleiermacher) and contemporary charismatic movements (notably Pentecostalism), the interest shown in emotional spiritual pleasure displaces the divine from the outside towards the interior world of intimate individual sensations. On the political level, immanence as indicative of a society whose orderly functioning does not depend upon meta-social or extra-social guarantees can point the way to an emancipatory autonomy, such as

the protection afforded by an invisible hand within the system (as it happens, the market).

Durkheim, by building a bridge between religious and political immanence, makes room for the idea of the sacred. The sacred is, in this paper, the third important idea. According to Durkheim, the social, despite being composed of multiple particular wills, derives its unity from its totality. For him, there is no external principle which stands outside society. The social whole is nevertheless symbolized by means of the sacred. Humans separate their social whole into two orders of reality, the profane and the sacred; both of these orders are products of immanent human activity. At times, Durkheim uses the term transcendence in order to stress the separation of these two orders and as proof of a whole which is external to individuals (the symbolization of the immanent social whole). Traditionally, the sacred takes on the form of the religious, but as a symbolization of the social whole, the sacred can take on other forms.

Immanent Tendencies in the Religious Domain

Traditional Jewish monotheism is without doubt the clearest example of transcendence: exteriority (which one cannot look upon); superiority (the handing down of the Laws from up high on Mount Sinai); and break with continuity (which one cannot name). Gauchet's well-known thesis is tripartite: (1) the appearance of transcendent monotheism is a contingent phenomenon (why does it appear with this ethnic minority?)—one could have remained totally immersed within a world-view where meaning is organized by group law; (2) monotheism is not the culmination of progress in religious beliefs—it is the beginning of the leaving behind of religion, of the exit from religion; (3) it is this exit from religion which allows an understanding of the emergence of the state in the course of human history and, by the increasing distance separating humans from God, the constitution of an individual subject formed within a collective self-consciousness.

The logic of Gauchet's diagram is as follows: primordial immanence, transcendence (as the exit from religion), the immanence of today's world (yielding democracy, but also placing it in danger); contemporary religious immanence is barely taken into consideration. In opposition to Gauchet, in this paper we take religious immanence as our point of departure. Two movements need to be considered: first, the development of Pentecostalism since the beginning of the 20th century, especially since the 1980s (more than half a billion people have converted to these charismatic movements); second, even if religious affiliations and obedience to church authority have declined in some countries, religious beliefs have nonetheless led to a search for new forms of authenticity (Taylor, 1989). Gauchet thinks of the religious in strictly cognitive terms, yet it also evolves at an emotional level. Contemporary religious immanence manifests itself in the triumph of emotion and authenticity; immanence is a veritable source of social cohesiveness in a fragmented and individualistic world.

Neo-Transcendentalization or Sacralization?

Characteristic of non-transcendental religions, immanence invites its adherents to partake in a shared sense of unity which, according to Gauchet, is derived from a lack of self-consciousness as to the veritable founding of the social. Characteristic of the “exit from religion”, transcendence institutes a unitary world of signification which, contrary to immanent religions, reflects a self-conscious awareness as to the founding of the social. The immanence of the contemporary world which flows from this exit from religion yields a “tearing of meaning” (Gauchet, 2002), yielding a situation where each one of us strives individually to ground his or her participation in the social. Those who come together through this contemporary self-rule are often dragged down by repetitive models of behaviour.

The “tearing of meaning” obliges society’s members to conceive of a universe which is not governed by a principle of intelligibility. Once the holder of a monopoly on the use of violence, the established state no longer serves as the guarantor of the established order. Now, individuals waver between the dread of merely surviving and the acceptance of being reduced to consumers. This wavering affects in different ways religious and political immanence.

On the religious level, the loss of a transcendental referent, most notably the fear of God, leaves individuals staring into the abyss of their own violence. These individuals are drawn towards three possible solutions: (1) a return to rigid practices and the search for the protection of an authority (fundamentalism); (2) an infatuation with all that is new in the religious marketplace; (3) the invention of new integrative communal symbols by means of individual conversion.

On the political level, immanence is marked by the state’s increasingly economically driven actions. International competition and the ideology of privatization finds the state withdrawing from its traditional role as the guarantor of the common good. Faced with this emotional vacuum on the one hand, and with the loss of signposts to values on the other, three possible responses can be identified: (1) a search within the religious for a relic of transcendence (a search which can lead to nostalgia for authority); (2) a focus upon transparency by means of new forms of representation, nourished by ideals of participatory democracy; (3) a displacement of instituted imaginaries of violence (previously concentrated in the image of the state’s monopoly of the legitimate use of violence) towards other imaginaries where individuals are actors in the transformation of things.

Immanence never appears as stable. Through its differing manifestations, we can identify two principal movements: the neo-transcendentalizing return to the past, and the invention of a new sacred which can be either political or inspired by religious figures.

Theologico-Political or Pre-Eminence of the Political

The classical theologico-political form, synthesized in Carl Schmitt’s famous formulation “All significant concepts of the Modern theory of the State are

secularised theological concepts” (36), supposes the precedence of the theological or the religious. As to the question of transcendence, the explanation of the modern state’s formation, right up to this day, reiterates Schmitt’s formulation. The notion of sovereignty by which the modern state is defined is inspired by the all-powerful Judaeo-Christian God.

Which primary factor explains this shift of immanence at both the religious and political levels? Or rather, should one speak of two shifts which find their common source at another level altogether? For example, this common source could be what we commonly call “modernity”. Yet modernity, despite the fact that it places the meta-narrative reason in the domain of immanence, includes the idea of transcendence.

For the past 50 years, the intimately linked processes of secularization and modernization have perhaps been wrongly perceived as having a specifically religious character. What was once seen as secularization is now understood as a tearing of meaning. This tearing was also lived as a kind of challenge which seemed to be inscribed in the very movement of modernity. This is why we associate secularization and modernization.

In the 1950s, the welfare state seemed to give an overarching meaning to an ensemble of social practices which unwittingly masked this tearing of meaning; this tearing resulted from the fact that “welfare” was only an insurance structure offering a false sense of security to repetitive consumer behaviour. The “social whole” was only an actuarial system—secularization signalling a shift from the sacredness of solidarity to a guarantee of consumption, or at least of security. In this illusory universe of unified meaning, the religious was called upon neither as a refuge nor as a means of appeal. Under the influence of “socialist realism” religion even seemed superfluous.

The withering away of the welfare state and the disappearance of an alternative “common good” attainable under another socio-political regime, in part because of religious pressure (notably in Poland), makes the immanence of the political obvious. The expression “The End of History” sums it up.

Reality now dictates that the founding of the political is no longer governed by an intelligible principle. New *transformational founding factors*¹ are emerging within imaginaries of violence. However, these imaginaries do not follow an intelligible path which one could conceptualize as to its future logic. Some of those without status to govern (*sans-titre à gouverner*) demand a “verification of equality” (Rancière, 1998). The political does not take place on a level playing field; it is determined by a radical social dissension.

In the 1980s, the coming to terms with the idea that the founding of the political is divorced from any intelligible principle (an idea that explains, for example, the fall of the Berlin Wall), is generally accompanied by an explosion of new religiosity in both Islam and charismatic Pentecostalism. Beyond these movements, new forms of sacralization (for example that of money) are manifest in rituals which display a surprisingly sacred character. When new manifestations of the sacred arise, the signposts separating the sacred from the profane are blurred, yielding an even greater impression of total immanence.

Conclusion

We have seen that transcendence and immanence are two notions of limited heuristic value, although they still exert some influence. On the one hand, immanence continues to function as the opposite of transcendence—while also acting as a vehicle of neo-transcendentalization, thereby masking new elements of sacralization. On the other hand, numerous authors—Sartre, Maffesoli, Deleuze—have been led to speak of immanent transcendence; even Gauchet speaks of an “absolute terrestrial”, a paradox underlined by Luc Ferry (2004) in his debate with Gauchet at the Collège de Philosophie.

NOTES

Translated by Michel Carrier, with the collaboration of Marie-Christine Doran.

¹ Translator’s note: derived from the French word “instituer”, meaning to establish or to found, the neologism “instituant” is polysemic. It evokes not only the idea of something new which is in the process of being established or founded but also that which radically alters the structure of that which is already established or founded. Our choice of translation seeks to reflect the complexity inherent in the term.

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André CORTEN, PhD in Political and Social Sciences (Université de Louvain), is a professor of political science and discourse analysis at the Université du Québec à Montréal and founding member of the GRIPAL (Groupe de Recherche sur les Imaginaires Politiques en Amérique Latine). Among other books and articles, he is the author of *Pentecostalism in Brazil: Emotion of the Poor and Theological Romanticism* (Macmillan, 1999) and of *Alchimie politique du miracle* (1999). He is the co-editor of three books on Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America and has recently published a partly autobiographic essay *Planète misère: Chroniques de la pauvreté durable* (Autrement, 2006). ADDRESS: Groupe de Recherche sur les Imaginaires Politiques en Amérique Latine, Département de Science Politique, UQAM, CP

8888, Succ. centre ville, Montréal, Québec, H3C 3P8, Canada. [email: amcorten@hotmail.com]

Marie-Christine DORAN holds the Academic Gold Medal of the Governor General of Canada 2005–2006 for her PhD in political science from the Université du Québec à Montréal. She is currently an invited researcher and lecturer at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and a founding member of the Groupe de recherches sur les Imaginaires Politiques en Amérique Latine. She has published scientific articles in four languages. ADDRESS: Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologiques (CADIS), École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 54 Boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris, France. [email: doran@ehess.fr]