



Secularization as a Challenge for a Contemporary Order Theology

Ulrich Engel, O.P.

The Franciscan-Dominican research project “Transmission of Faith in Social and Religious Transformation Processes” runs over a period of two years. The phenomenon of secularization in its multifaceted nature and in all its contradictions is understood as the challenge for religion, church, religious orders, faith and theology in Europe. The research project, sponsored by the Philosophical-Theological University Münster (PTH) and run by the Capuchin order, is being carried out together with the Dominican philosophical-theological research center Institute M.-Dominique Chenu (IMDC) based in Berlin. As part of the research project, twelve theology lecturers from the US, India, Eritrea, Italy, Hungary, Croatia and Germany discussed around the theological definition of the relationship of the Church with the world in particular, around various identity models and around the ecclesiological question regarding the relationship between weakness and power. It became clear during the symposium that (at least beyond politically militant secularisms) secularization phenomena should not be treated as problems at first. Rather, they challenge churches and the religious to redefine their place in the world, their identity and their attitudes towards secularized society.

Keywords: *Secularization, Contemporary Theology of Religious Life, Franciscan Theology, Dominican Theology, “Weak” theology, Political Spirituality, Spirituality of Presence, Disempowerment of Church*

Following an international symposium “Woran Glaubt Europa? / What Does Europe Believe In?” held in 2009 in Madrid, a research project, begun in the summer of 2011, has been made to deal with the issue of “the transmission of faith in social and religious transformation processes”

over a period of two years. The phenomenon of secularization in its multifaceted nature and in all its contradictions is understood as *the* challenge for religion, church, religious orders, faith and theology in Europe. The research project, sponsored by the *Philosophical-Theological University Münster* (PTH) and run by the Capuchin order, is being carried out together with the Dominican philosophical-theological research centre *Institute M.-Dominique Chenu* (IMDC) based in Berlin.

On the basis of the discussion results from Madrid,¹ published in the bilingual conference volume, the secularization project is investigating how a mainly Franciscan order theology (and also in a broader sense the theologies of the mendicant orders altogether) can react to the phenomenon. What consequences do current developments have for the formation of the next generation of religious men and women² and particularly for the orders' pastoral activity?³ An empirical study in the research project under the guidance of Michael Ebertz (Freiburg/Br.) examines the trends in secularization *ad intra* in the area of male mendicant order communities. Various workshops, symposiums, contact trips and courses at a national and international level are aimed at linking the theoretical insights with practical experiences, at transforming it in the religious life lived (e.g. in the area of forming religious vocations) or at entering into intercultural discussions beyond the limits of one's own horizon.⁴

Secularized world and human experience as *loci theologici*

As part of the research project, twelve theology lecturers from the US, India, Eritrea, Italy, Hungary, Croatia and Germany gathered in Münster in March 15-18, 2012. Prepared and presented by Thomas Dienberg, OFM Cap (PTH), Thomas Eggensperger, OP (PTH/IMDC) and Ulrich Engel, OP (PTH/IMDC), the discussions revolved around the theological definition of the relationship of the Church with the world in particular, around various identity models and around the ecclesiological question regarding the relationship between weakness and power. Based on the concept of the kenotic self-communication of God (Karl Rahner,

¹ Thomas Dienberg / Thomas Eggensperger / Ulrich Engel (Hrsg.), *Woran glaubt Europa? Zwischen Säkularisierung und Rückkehr des Religiösen / What does Europe believe in? Between secularization and the return of religious life*, Münster 2010.

² My talk on the task of orders in a changing society was conceived as an interim report from the research project as part of the annual meeting of the Formation Directors of the German Conference of Religious Superiors (AGAL) on March 6-7, 2012 in Zell/M. et al.

³ This area includes, for example, the forum with practitioners from various fields of Franciscan pastoral care which took place on January 12, 2012 in Frankfurt/M. as part of the research project.

⁴ For the study design and further aspects of the content, see also research project's website: www.saeculum.eu.

SJ⁵) and on the pastoral constitution of the Second Vatican Council “*Gaudium et spes*,” the Mainz pastoral Stefan Knobloch, OFM^{Cap} defined the world – even in its secular form – as a space of God’s presence⁶ and, following this, characterized human experiences in their postmodern plurality as *loci theologici* (Melchor Cano, OP). In this context, the sacramental duty of making this deeply kenotic presence of God (cf. Phil 2) symbolically visible has been assigned to the Church – and to religious orders as well.⁷ The fact that an exciting discussion on the *topos* of “detachment from the world,” brought into the discussion by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Germany in 2011, followed the start of the symposium may be hardly surprising.⁸ The participants present at the discussion all agreed that the spiritual and theological resources of mendicants have always been world-oriented and in no case have they primarily fled the world.

Jakab Várnai, OFM, dogmatist at the religious order university *Sapientia Szerzetesi Hittudományi Főiskola* in Budapest, whose work was funded jointly by the Benedictines, Franciscans and Piarists, described the phenomenon of secularization from a view of sociology of religion (particularly with reference to the Hungarian sociologist of religion, Miklós Tomka, who died in 2010) as a commercialization of (Hungarian and European) society in general and of religion in particular. A development like this, which always goes together with a religious upgrading of capitalism,⁹ entails a far-reaching anthropological crisis according to Várnai. This particularly concerns the subject fatigue as diagnosed by Johann B. Metz. The subsequent discussion deals critically with the sociological model of the religious market and against this background invoked the political-theological power of persuasion of a gratuitousness which is confirmed by Christians and lived practically. This was cultivated centrally in the Franciscan tradition in the concept of *paupertas*.

⁵ Cf. Paul Rulands, Selbstmitteilung Gottes in Jesus Christus: Gnadentheologie, in: Andreas R. Batlogg et al., *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners. Quellen – Entwicklungen – Perspektiven*, Mainz 2003, 161-196.

⁶ Cf. also Stefan Knobloch, *Mehr Religion als gedacht! Wie die Rede von Säkularisierung in die Irre führt*, Freiburg/Br. 2006.

⁷ For the connection between a kenotic Christology and ecclesiological issues cf. Rainer Kampling, *Das Lied vom Weg Jesu, des Herrn. Eine Annäherung an Phil 2,6-11*, in: *Bibel und Kirche* 64 (2009), 18-22.

⁸ Cf. Ulrich Engel, *Streit um Kirche und Welt. Plädoyer für eine dialektische Relativitätstheorie des Katholischen*, in: *Wort und Antwort* 53 (2012) [in print] et al.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Capitalism as Religion*, in: idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. in cooperation with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Bd. VI, Frankfurt/M. 1991, 100-103.

On the way to a postmodern form of Franciscan spirituality

The concept of the religious supermarket can be taken up again particularly with regard to intercultural and interreligious discussion. The dogmatist Sebastian Kuthukallunkal, OFMCap, who teaches at the *Institute of Philosophy and Religion* in Eluru, India, drew attention to this fact. Critically aware of the often problematic role of Christian missionary efforts (which are borne substantially by religious orders), Kuthukallunkal sought a postmodern form of Franciscan spirituality. It became clear that “religion” and “discipleship” should be distinguished absolutely in the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer because only a practically-oriented theology of discipleship is capable of entering into dialogue with other – including secular – cultures.¹⁰ This dialogue is to be structured rather as a search than in terms of doctrine and includes messianic, non-cosmic and cosmic aspects of a Christian presence in the tradition of Francis of Assisi. Although his geopolitical background is entirely different, the Bible scholar Tedros Abraha, OFMCap, who teaches at the *Pontificio Istituto Orientale* in Rome, also highlighted the *being present* that is fed on faith in Jesus Christ as the central element of the Franciscan way of life. In view of the massive political persecution of Christians, Abraha diagnosed an increasingly militant secularism for Eritrea.

Plea for a “weak” theology of offering and of presence

Johannes B. Freyer, OFM, Professor of Dogmatics and former director at the Pontifical University *Antonianum* in Rome likewise defined secularization as a genuinely inherent element of the Christian faith. Based on a tendency to demystifying religion, which can be identified to Judaism and Christianity, he interpreted the shift towards the world found in John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham as one which elevates and recognises in a particular way the intrinsic value of worldly things.¹¹ Behind this orientation towards the world lies an incarnational theology which was particularly at home in the medieval foundation of new religious orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans.¹² In terms of the concept of a permanent incarnation (Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP¹³), God does not come to a world which is completely

¹⁰ Cf. also Diana de Palanca Vallescar, *Ordensleben interkulturell. Eine neue Vision*. From Spanish by Helene Büchel (Theologie der Dritten Welt Bd. 37), Freiburg/Br. 2008.

¹¹ Cf. Johannes B. Freyer, *Der demütige und geduldige Gott. Franziskus und sein Gottesbild – ein Vergleich mit der Tradition* (Veröffentlichungen der Johannes-Duns-Skotus-Akademie für Franziskanische Geistesgeschichte und Spiritualität Bd. 1), Mönchengladbach 1991.

¹² Cf. Ulrich Engel, “*Praedicatore del Verbo fatto Carne*.” Zur Theologie der Inkarnation im Dominikanerorden, in: idem., *Gott der Menschen. Wegmarken dominikanischer Theologie*, Ostfildern 2010, 89-98.

¹³ Cf. idem., *Theologische Mystik im Konflikt*. Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP und die Grundintuitionen seiner Theologie, in: Mariano Delgado / Gotthard Fuchs (eds.), *Die Kirchenkritik der Mystiker – Prophetie aus Gotteserfahrung*. Bd. 3: *Moderne* (Studien zur christlichen Religions- und Kulturgeschichte Bd. 4), Fribourg – Stuttgart 2005, 351-369.

foreign to him, as Ante Vuckovic, OFM from the theological faculty of the University of Split in Croatia formulated. On the basis of a basic optimistic spirituality of the incarnation of God, Freyer sought to reinterpret the vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, which are central to religious life, in terms of a “weak” theology of offering and of presence. The extremely lively discussion showed that such a thesis is compatible with postmodern philosophy in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, in my opinion it remains open how the outlined deconstruction, which is critical of religion and tends towards monotheism, acts towards postmodern-nihilistic deconstructions such as Gianni Vattimo’s so-called “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*)¹⁴ because even if monotheism and secularisation appear to deconstruct religion equally (although this thesis has also been called into question again), it remains open how –not least in terms of methodology– the line can be drawn from the Christian-presecular Middle Ages to post-Christian secularized postmodernity.

Medieval orientations for a contemporary political spirituality?¹⁵

Behind this systematically fundamental issue lies, last but not least, the more concrete question of what or how religious orders can learn from their history for their common life and for their pastoral mission. Are medieval or early modern social practices as they are handed down in various sources suitable for providing answers to questions on contemporary dealings with phenomena (unknown in those times) such as the (post)modern trends towards pluralization, individualization or deinstitutionalization? Joe Chinnici, OFM, a church historian at the Franciscan School of Theology of the University of Berkeley, CA, tried exactly that. Based on the topological location of church life in today’s world, he saw theology confronted with the task of submitting its sources to a relecture. He emphasized the secular public sphere, among others, as the place where the (historical) genesis and (currently relevant) validity can coalesce.¹⁶ Chinnici’s colleague at the Franciscan School of

¹⁴ Cf. Gianni Vattimo / Richard Schröder / Ulrich Engel, *Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation*, ed. by Thomas Eggensperger on behalf of Institut M.-Dominique Chenu – Espaces Berlin (Passagen Forum), Wien 2004; Thomas Eggensperger, *Sich Reiben an der Religion. Gianni Vattimos Blick auf Christentum und Kirche*, in: *Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart* 51/2011, 127-132.

¹⁵ Cf. also Thomas Eggensperger, *Spirituelle Dynamiken in einem säkularisierten Europa? Teil I: Religionsoziologisch-sozialethische Skizzen zum deutschsprachigen Raum*, in: Paolo Martinelli (Ed.), *Esperienza, Teologia e Spiritualità. Relazioni al Seminario di studio sulla teologia spirituale promosso dall’Istituto Francescano di Spiritualità della Pontificia Università Antonianum di Roma e dalla Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule di Münster (Supplemento di Italia Francescana 84,3 [2009])*, Roma 2009, 123-131; Ulrich Engel, *Spirituelle Dynamiken in einem säkularisierten Europa? Teil II: Ein systematisch-theologischer Deutungsversuch*, in: *ibid.*, 133-136.

¹⁶ Cf. also Benoît Bourguine / Thomas Eggensperger / Pierre-Yves Materne (Hrsg. / Éd.), *Theologische Vernunft – Politische Vernunft. Religion im öffentlichen Raum / Raison théologique – raison politique. La religion dans l’espace public* (Kultur und Religion in Europa Bd. 8), Berlin 2010.

Theology in California, Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, deepened this idea. From her subject, philosophical theology, she has reconstructed beauty as the key to transcendence insofar as beauty also addresses people today and not just in the Middle Ages as a central world experience.¹⁷ In Ingham's view, an open area for dialogue with the secular world can thus be outlined based on tradition. Insofar as the act of beauty in the Franciscan theological tradition – such as with Duns Scotus – is understood as a moral act, points of contact also emerge for common and social life. In this context, the aspects of lived communicative truth, friendship and poverty were discussed in terms of sustainability.

Bernd Beermann, OFMCap, former director of the Capuchin order's international office for justice, peace and ecology was able to link onto the last keyword mentioned. As just one voice in a plural society, the Church is no longer able to enforce its positions by strength. Accordingly, she must give up established positions of power in favour of a "weak" presence. The daily social practices then become important, according to Beermann, in the commitment to justice, peace and sustainability;¹⁸ they are ultimately the expression of a Franciscan-political spirituality of poverty.

On the way to a theology of religious life under secular conditions

It became clear during the symposium that (at least beyond politically militant secularisms) secularization phenomena should not be treated as *problems* at first. Rather, they challenge churches and the religious to redefine their place in the world, their identity and their attitudes towards secularized society. For all the methodological problems, the stock of traditions of religious communities – particularly those of mendicants – appear to uncover treasures which in the course of a critical rereading are worth customizing to communal and individual practices again.

Many reflections in the course of the Münster symposium boiled down to the necessity of a disempowerment of church power and power representations. From this, a humble theology of presence should be developed in which the center is living together among one another and in that also with Jesus Christ, the God made man. In this sense, religious life could be defined particularly as "being in a relationship" equally with God and the world. Such a doubly-oriented reference –

¹⁷ Cf. Mary Beth Ingham, *Rejoicing in the Works of the Lord: Beauty in the Franciscan Tradition* (Franciscan heritage series vol. 6), St. Bonaventure, NY 2009.

¹⁸ Cf. Scott M. Thomas, *Living Critically and "Living Faithfully" in a Global Age: Justice, Emancipation and the Political Theology of International Relations*, in: *Millennium* 39(2) (2010), 505-524.

better friendship with Jesus Christ and people – aims at witnesses to hope and live out in its eschatological deep structure – namely in its present form. From the spiritual traditions of the medieval mendicant order movement, especially the Franciscan movement, contemplation and prayer above all can be named as forms of expression of such a friendship,¹⁹ but then so may also an attentive awareness of reality in its created beauty on the one hand and an unconditional solidarity with the world of brokenness²⁰ on the other. It is not by chance that both attitudes coalesce in the central Franciscan categories of *minoritas*, poverty and freedom.²¹ From a Dominican point of view, the aspect of language could be considered particularly in this regard but this is by no means neutral in its ambivalence between power and powerlessness towards the structures of social power and powerlessness. What language do we speak if we come into contact with people in an increasingly secularized society?

It goes without saying that some of the new (or perhaps only seemingly new) theology of religious life under the conditions of a secularized society outlined here in a few key words still has to be deepened theologically and substantiated pastorally. We will have to work on this in the next steps of the research project. ■



Prof. Dr. theol. habil. Ulrich Engel OP, was born in 1961 in Düsseldorf, and studied Catholic Theology in Münster, Bonn, Freiburg/Switzerland and Benediktbeuern. He is the Director of the Institute M.-Dominique Chenu in Berlin (www.institut-chenu.eu), Professor of Systematic Theology/Philosophy at the PTH Münster and at the University of Potsdam, and Co-editor of the theological journal “Wort und Antwort.” His selected published books are (with Thomas Eggensperger / Angel F. Méndez Montoya (Hrsg./Eds.), *In memoriam Edward Schillebeeckx. Impulse für Theologien im 21. Jahrhundert* / *Impetus Towards Theologies in the 21st Century*, Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag Ostfildern 2012; (with Thomas Eggensperger and Thomas Dienberg (Hrsg./Eds.), *Himmelwärts und weltgewandt. Kirche und Orden in (post-)säkularer Gesellschaft* / *Heavenward and Worldly. Church and Religious Orders in (Post) Secular Society*, Aschendorff Verlag Münster 2014. He can be contacted at Institute M.-Dominique Chenu, Schwedter Straße 23, D-10119 Berlin, engel@institut-chenu.info.

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas Dienberg, *Einlassen. Die christliche Kunst des Betens*, Stuttgart 2006.

²⁰ Cf. Ilia Delio, *A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World*. With Introduction by Joseph P. Chinnici, St. Bonaventure, NY 2003.

²¹ Cf. also Thomas Dienberg / Marianne Jungbluth / Niklaus Kuster (Hrsg.), *Inspirierte Freiheit. 800 Jahre Franziskus und seine Bewegung*, Freiburg/Br. 2009.

