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Fragments of the Sacred

A Symptomatic Reading of Resonance Theory

It is rare for a work of critical social theory to have a broad public impact. Even in Germany, „das Land der Dichter und Denker." To be sure, some earlier works of the Frankfurt School made waves in neighboring fields, such as law, philosophy, and political science. One obviously thinks of Jürgen Habermas' now massive oeuvre. But while Habermas' political essays did sometimes penetrate into the „public sphere", his turgid prose style rendered his academic work impenetrable to the broader public.

In this and other regards, Hartmut Rosa's work stands apart. Rosa's two major works, *Acceleration* (Rosa 2013) and *Resonance* (Rosa 2019), have not only sparked ongoing discussions throughout the humanities and social sciences in Germany; they have also penetrated public consciousness.

Rosa's work differs from earlier variants of Critical Theory in at least two ways. First, the lucidity and accessibility of its prose, which recalls first-generation theorists such as Erich Fromm or Herbert Marcuse. Second, for its focus on „the good life." Normative work in the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School tradition has typically focused on „the right" rather than „the good." Rosa's „resonance" ethics has a broad appeal that extends beyond the seminar room. As such, it marks the advent of a fourth generation of critical theory.

Rosa's thinking about resonance crystallized slowly over the course of a decade, (Gura 2007; Rosa 2013). In that book and in subsequent essays, finally achieving its penultimate form in *Resonance* (Rosa 2019). Rosa presents resonance as a discovery, as something that was always already there waiting to be unearthed. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition (Merleau-Ponty and Smith 1962; Waldenfels 1997), he argues that resonance is a universal form of human experience – perhaps even the most fundamental form of human experience. It follows that one should find evidence of resonance in all times and places. And, indeed, at the end of *Resonance,* Rosa proposes a comparative and historical research program into the various forms it has taken across time and space.

The goal of this essay is to place resonance theory within a much wider comparative and historical context that extends beyond European modernity. It will be argued that resonance theory describes rather than discovers, and that what it describes is a historical particular: the fragmented culture of the post-Christian West. Resonance is part of what remains of the Christian sacred.

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That is only *part* of what remains of the Christian sacred becomes clearer if we compare Rosa's theory of resonance to classical theories of the sacred. Resonance describes the underlying dimensions of sacred *experience.* But it omits the dark and transgressive forms of sacred experience. And it sheds the ontological and moral dimensions of the sacred that made the sacred a durable and meaningful. The dissolution of the Christian sacred has led to amnesia as well as discovery.

This essay proceeds in IV parts. Part I summarily reviews modern theories of the sacred and compares them to Rosa's theory of resonance, exposing some key differences between them. It concludes that resonance theory (incompletely) describes fragments of the (Christian) sacred. Part II critically reviews neo-Weberian theories of secularization, particularly that of Charles Taylor. It argues that some of the deficiencies and blindspots in resonance theory are likely due to Taylor's influence on Rosa. More generally, it concludes that the neo-Weberian narrative and the resulting *Zeitdiagnose* are fatally flawed and in need of replacement. Part III sketches an alternative narrative based on a neo-Durkheimian theory: *the fragmentation of the sacred.* What is truly distinctive about the Western trajectory, it concludes, is not the cultural diversity of the contemporary era but rather the *monopolization of the sacred* by the Western Church of the Middle Ages. The conclusion offers a critical reflection on resonance theory. If Rosa's goal is to limn a secular version of „the good", then that vision is incomplete. It requires a morality of the just as well as an ethos of the good if it is to guard itself against the devolution into darkness and transgression.

1 From the Sociology of the Sacred to the Phenomenology of Resonance

The grand ambition of Durkheim's last work is contained in its title: to describe „the elementary forms of religious life" (Durkheim, Cosman and Cladis 2001). Or, more plainly, to discover a common denominator that unites all religious traditions, whether „primitive" or „modern", „Eastern" or „Western." Durkheim proceeds by elimination. „Primitive" religions make no distinction between the natural and the supernatural, for example, and some „Eastern" religions are non-theistic. Supernaturalism and theism cannot serve as common denominators. Having thus dismissed these and other possible definitions of religion, Durkheim finally arrives at his famous claim that all religions are grounded upon a distinction between „the sacred and the profane."

Durkheim argues that there are no transhistorical or cross-cultural forms of the sacred or the profane. What counts as „sacred" and what as „profane" is

completely specific to a given social and historical context. The contents of the distinction are arbitrary. What matters is not the content but the form: a binary opposition. The sacred can only be understood in relationship to the profane, and vice versa. What's elementary is the form, not the contents.

We can distinguish two underlying dimensions in Durkheim's usage of the sacred/profane distinction. What is common to all variants of the sacred/profane distinction, says Durkheim, is that: a. some things are set apart and regarded as special while others are not; and b. that some actions are enjoined or forbidden while others are regarded with indifference. The „things" in question may be times, places, persons and objects, and the „actions" in question define our proper relationship to sacred things. Durkheim does not explicitly name these two dimensions. Let's call them the ontological („things") and the moral („actions").

Like Rosa's theory of resonance, Durkheim's theory of the sacred must itself be seen in historical context. *The Elementary Forms* sits at the confluence of two major research programs in fin-de-siecle social science: the anthropology of „primitive" or „ethnic" religions in the Americas and the Antipodes and the comparative study of the „modern" or „world religions" of Eurasia. Durkheim sought to build a conceptual framework capacious enough to accommodate, say, the „primitive religion" of the Australian Aborigines and the „modern religion" of French Catholicism, not to mention the orthodox Judaism of his own childhood (Lukes 1972).

The sociology of the sacred was not just a program of research, however. For some, including some scholars of religion, it was even a religion in its own right. This was most clearly the case for scholars such as Mircea Eliade, whose comparative scholarship had eventuated in a personal embrace of religious syncretism. For him, and for others, the use of the definite article – *the* sacred – implied that there was a single reality behind the profusion of religions (Eliade 1961). For these „traditionalists" or „perennialists", modern religions were a corrupted form of an original *ur*-religion that supposedly antedated Christianity (Sedgwick 2009). Not surprisingly perhaps, many of these „traditionalists" were attracted to paganism and fascism (Rose 2022). The Italian „traditionalist", Julius Evola was among them. So, it appears, was Eliade himself (Stigliano 2002).

The sociology of the sacred also attracted inter-War intellectuals from the anti-fascist left, such as Durkheim's student, Georges Bataille (Noys 2000). He and other members of the *College de Sociologie* took the Durkheimian tradition in another direction (Falasca-Zamponi 2011). They emphasized the ways in which rituals of transgression could create new forms of the sacred, and, in this way, serve as sources of political solidarity and resistance. They allied themselves with avante-garde artists, such as the Surrealists. They challenged conventional sexual mores in their writing, and in their own lives (Bataille 1986). They celebrated „waste" and „excess" as challenges to the ethics of frugality and scarcity that helped legitimate

capitalism (Bataille and Hurley 1988). They showed that new forms of the sacred could be – and were being – created by means of new forms of post-Christian ritual and in ways that disrupted the social order rather than reinforcing it. They lionized transgressive figures such as Baudelaire and DeSade. In short, they detached ritual from religion, and the sacred from social order. There were „secular" forms of sacrality, and disruptive and even transgressive forms of ritual.

The Durkheimian School and its offshoots were by no means the only current flowing into the study of the sacred. There was also another tributary that originated in Protestant lands. Influenced perhaps by direct experience with French Catholicism and Orthodox Judaism, the Durkheimian school emphasized collective ritual (Bell 1992; Smith 2020). By contrast, the Protestant current highlighted individual experience. The path had already been blazed by renegade Transcendentalists such as Emerson (Gura 2007) and liberal theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (Clements 1992), not to mention pietist revivalists such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. It was then given an academic twist by the pragmatist psychologist William James, who famously catalogued the „varieties of religious experience„(James, Carrette, James and Taylor 2003). By which me meant the *inner* experience of *individuals.* For him, religion was less about ultimate truth or social cohesion than about getting on in the world, particularly for those „twice-born" men and women who had encountered debilitating psychological obstacles along the way. Meanwhile, the Lutheran phenomenologist and theologian Rudolf Otto emphasized the underlying commonalities of religious experience (Otto 1926). At their core, he claimed, was a personal encounter with the „numinous", marked by a combination of fear and awe. In this, Otto's definition combined the dark and even transgressive side of sacrality emphasized by Bataille et al with the light and functional side highlighted by the Durkheim school.

How does Rosa's theory of resonance fit into this stream of work? How does it compare to previous theories of the sacred? What does it retain? And what does it leave out? The comparison is revealing.

Resonance theory diverges most sharply from the Durkheimian approach to the sacred. The Durkheimian approach is methodologically collectivist. It insists on the „sui generis" reality of the social, and therefore on the causal primacy of collective ritual. The paradigmatic form of the sacred is „collective effervescence." Now, in his methodological statements, Rosa (rightly) insists on the need to connect micro and macro, emic and etic, interpretivism and structuralism, and so on (Reckwitz and Rosa 2023). But his theoretical analysis of resonance does not really adhere to these methodological principles. Rosa posits the transhistorical nature of resonance by grounding it in a phenomenological account of experience. What's more he theorizes resonance in individualistic (if relational) terms. Note that three of the four forms of resonance (vertical, diagonal, and circular) can be experienced

in complete (human) solitude. And while the fourth form (horizontal) can take both individual and collective forms, it is conceptualized in terms of a dialogue in the form of a dyad.

Nor does this exhaust the differences. The ontological and moral dimensions that underpin the Durkheimian theory of the sacred are absent from Rosa's idea of resonance. To be sure, Rosa does not omit material „things." Objects may be „diagonal" relata in experiences of resonance. Nor does he ignore social spaces. He notes various realms of social life that often figure as „spheres of resonance." But there are no things or places that are inherently „resonant" in the way that things and places can be inherently and durably „sacred" in Durkheim's sense. What's more, time figures into Rosa's theory only in the sense of speed. Acceleration hinders resonance; deceleration promotes it. But there are no inherently „resonant" times. Further, resonance does not have a moral dimension. It does not forbid or enjoin. It does not generate a theory of justice. And the only virtue it knows is „openness" to the world. It is morally and ethically „thin." Finally, resonance is explicitly decoupled from religion. There may be some overlap between spheres of resonance and religion, but there is no necessary relationship. This, in contrast to the Durkheimian tradition, where religion and the sacred were tightly and inherently connected.

In some ways, resonance theory can be seen as a straightforward continuation of the Protestant current. And indeed of long-term Protestant trends towards individualism and iconoclasm and against ritual and materiality (Eire 1989; Keane 2007; Muir 1997). Rosa's theory of resonance closely resembles Otto's definition of the sacred in its phenomenological and relational approach as well as its emphasis on „uncontrollability" and „otherness." But with one key difference: it omits the dark side of the sacred that runs from the fire-and-brimstone preaching of the revivalists through the „fear and trembling" of the existentialists to the „mysterium fascinans and tremendum" of Otto and other phenomenologists. In this turning away from the dark side, of course, it follows the general trend within the liberal Protestantism of the 20th century to dispense with the problem of evil.

We can now begin to see why the fragmentation of the sacred is the historical condition of possibility a theory of resonance. Theories of the sacred bundled together the four dimensions of resonance into a single, integrated package. A package, moreover, that contained particular times, places and things, that were regarded as sacred, regardless of whether they were personally experienced as such. A package, finally, that was held together by certain positive and negative injunctions regarding good and evil. The theory of resonance spotlights four inner dimensions of sacred experience while setting them apart from the ontological and moral dimensions of the sacred. The four axes of resonance only became discoverable once the integrated package of the sacred came unbundled.

Fragmentation is not just theoretical, a matter of analytical dissection. On the contrary, the conceptual shifts are tracking structural and cultural shifts. The theory of resonance is a symptom of historical change, not the discovery of a ground state. To understand how the assemblage we call „the sacred" fell apart, we must first understand how it was put together. And to understand that we must first move beyond secularization theory.

2 Historical Backdrop: 'Disenchantment of the World' or Fragmentation of the Sacred?

The dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion is secularization theory (Tschannen 1991). And the dominant version of that paradigm, inside and outside of sociology, is Max Weber's disenchantment narrative. Now, Weber himself rarely used the word „secularization", and then only in the narrow legal sense of placing church property under „secular" control. But Weber's followers constructed a theory of secularization out of three of Weber's concepts: differentiation, rationalization and disenchantment (Berger 1969; Casanova 1994; Gauchet 1997).

Differentiation is of course a core concept in the classical social theories of the fin-de-siècle. But like „secularization", the „differentiation" concept was not a central term in the Weberian lexicon. It appeared only a few times in Weber's oeuvre, most notably in the second *Zwischenbetrachtung* (Weber 1958). There, Weber famously spoke of the differentiation of seven „value spheres" in Western societies: familial, religious, economic, political, scientific, artistic and erotic. The initial catalyst for the differentiation process, he argued, was the rupture between „mundane" and „supramundane" realms in the „world pictures" of the „world rejecting religions" that emerged in what Weber's student, Karl Jaspers, would famously call „the Axial Age„(Jaspers 1953). In what became the West, Judaism and Christianity were the key examples. The „transcendental breakthrough" during the Axial Age generated logical and sociological tensions between religious and non-religious values and elites which drove the differentiation process forward.

Unlike „secularization" and „differentiation", „rationalization" *was* a central concept in Weber's work, on some readings, *the* central concept (Hennis 1982; Schluchter 1985). Weber defined rationality in purely formal terms, as a relationship between means and ends. Rationalization took two basic forms: the adjustment of means to ends to maximize efficiency; and the clarification of ends to maximize consistency. Weber argued that differentiation drove rationalization and vice versa in a self-reinforcing fashion. Or, more specifically, that competition within and between elites drove rationalization. The differentiation of value spheres

made it possible to distinguish their specific ends from one another and to choose the most efficient means to their realization. In this regard, religion and eroticism are just as susceptible to „rationalization" as are politics and markets.

The third master concept of neo-Weberian secularization theory is „disenchantment." It has been a source of much misunderstanding in the Anglophone literature on secularization. The problem is that the English term means both less and more than *Entzauberung*, the German original. Less insofar as it conceals the connection to Weber's theory of „magic." And more insofar as it suggests a psychological state rather than a social relation. For Weber, recall, magic connoted a form of „social action" that aimed to control or manipulate unseen forces or powers. „Disenchantment" does not mean „disaffection" or „alienation", as is sometimes suggested by Anglophone writers (Bennett 2001). It means the evacuation of such forces and powers from „the mundane world" and their relocation to a „supramundane realm" where they can be worshipped or appealed to via „worship" or „prayer" but not controlled or manipulated with „magical" rituals or formulas.

While such misunderstandings are generally absent from the Germanophone scholarship, debates about the meaning of disenchantment are not. Roughly speaking, one can distinguish between minimalist and maximalist readings. On one side are those who argue that disenchantment is limited to the scientific sphere and that re-enchantment via charismatic leaders remains an ever-present possibility, if not a particularly likely one (Schluchter 2009). On the other side are those who take Weber at his word when he speaks of „the disenchantment of the world", and not just of „science", even if they do not accept his diagnosis (Joas 2021). This is not the place to review that debate in hopes of resolving it. My own position, which I cannot defend here, is that Weber's position was itself ambiguous and inconsistent, and therefore susceptible to both the minimalist and maximalist readings (for a similar view, see: (Lehmann 2008).

Now, although Weber himself did not advance a theory of secularization, it is not difficult to construct a narrative of secularization out of various pronouncements in his work. Such a narrative runs roughly as follows: 1. the Hebrew prophets articulated a particularistic form of ethical monotheism, a religion of one supreme God who proclaimed a moral law and established a covenant with one people: the Israelites. 2. Pauline Christianity universalized Jewish monotheism by abolishing the ritual laws of the „old covenant" and extending a „new covenant" to „the gentiles." 3. Medieval Catholicism took two steps backwards by: a. distinguishing a higher priestly vocation from a lower lay vocation and b. reintroducing a magical element into its soteriology via the sacraments („transubstantiation"). 4. Protestantism took two steps forward again by: a. announcing the „priesthood of all believers" and b. making the sacraments a mere symbol bereft of soteriological si-

gnificance. This disenchantment process was most pronounced in Reformed Protestantism and its sectarian offshoots – „innerworldly asceticism" in Weberian parlance. 5. The rise of the modern, bureaucratic state and of modern, Western capitalism – in a word of „states and markets" – and of the „impersonal orders" of modern society more generally then completes the disenchantment process by purging all remnants of magic from everyday life.

Weber's is a very Protestant reading of Western Christianity. Charles Taylor's certainly is not (Taylor 2007). And his version of the neo-Weberian narrative is of particular interest here because it is the only one that Rosa cites. This is not the place to review Taylor's argument in full. There are plenty of summaries available (Warner, VanAntwerpen and Calhoun 2010). Instead, I will simply highlight several features of Taylor's argument that are important to understanding various blind spots in Rosa's theory. The first concerns Taylor's methodological approach. It is wholly and resolutely „interpretive" (Taylor 2023). Accordingly, there is little discussion of „structure", e. g., the social organization of the Western churches or of religious forms of social domination. The stated goal is to „understand" not „explain." The second concerns the evidentiary basis of Taylor's argument. The bibliographical apparatus of *A Secular Age* consists almost exclusively of canonical works of philosophy and theology peppered with a few well-known studies of church history for good measure. There is little on the social history of Western Christianity and even less on the history of Western esotericism. History is reduced to intellectual history, social history is sidelined, and the history of the sacred becomes the history of the church. The third concerns his concept of „fullness", by which he means experiences that suggest there is „something more" to reality than the disenchanted world picture of scientific materialism would suggest. For some, that something more might be „God" or „nirvana" or something conventionally „religious." For others, it might just be a feature of human experience or a source of personal meaning, such as one might find in a devotion to family, say, or by listening to music. There is no discussion of a „dark" antonym to fullness, such as „Angst" or „emptiness."

The most obvious link between Taylor's theory of secularity and Rosa's theory of resonance is their respective concepts of „fullness" and „resonance." In this regard it is worth noting that *A Secular Age* was published in 2007 (Taylor 2007), just two years before references to „resonance" began to appear in Rosa's work. As noted earlier, Rosa does not explicitly advocate a purely interpretive approach to social science, and in his programmatic writings, he is clear that attention to social structures remains an indispensable moment in any properly sociological analysis. Nor can Rosa be fairly accused of reducing social history to intellectual history. On the contrary, he attributes the contemporary „crisis of resonance" to the dynamics of „acceleration" whose primary driver is modern capitalism. But Rosa's resonance

theory does not follow these methodological precepts. What Rosa *does* do, at least implicitly, and where the deeper influence of Taylor's work is evident is in: 1. His treatment of resonance as an anthropological universal rather than a „historical individual" (Weber). 2. His insistence that resonance is „uncontrollable" despite clear evidence that it can be induced and manipulated, the paradigmatic example being the Nazi rally. 3. His focus on positive forms of resonance inspired by attunement and oneness and his omission of negative variants that arise from transgression and destruction such as one might experience in an orgy or a riot. 4. The omission of fear-inducing forms of resonance. This is particularly striking in one of Rosa's favorite examples: of a solitary walker resonating with a mountain. A mountain may certainly induce awe; but it may also induce fear, whether a physical fear of falling or a metaphysical fear of finitude.

For all of these reasons, modern forms of resonance must be inserted into the *social history of the sacred* which must in turn be inserted into *the social history of power.* Only then can we fully understand why Rosa's „axes" of resonance have become theoretically visible, why some forms of resonance are omitted from his analysis, and why various „spheres of resonance" have become organizationally distinct. They are what is left when the Christian sacred collapses into its constituent parts, the church loses its monopoly over the sacred, and transgressive forms of resonance are unleashed. And the „best account" of those changes, to use Taylor's term, is a neo-Durkheimian narrative of fragmentation, not a neo-Weberian narrative of disenchantment.

3 Contemporary Culture: Secularization or Fragmentation?

Some versions of secularization theory center the Protestant Reformation. Others make the Scientific Revolution the turning point. Still others revolve around the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution. Or some combination of these events (Gorski and Altınordu 2008). But while the narratives differ in their details, the moral of the story remains the same: „the West" is exceptional in its secularity, and in this regard, ahead of „the rest" (Harrison 2018)

Of course, what is meant by „secularity" also varies from one version of the theory to another. Typically, it means one or more of the following: 1. The differentiation of religious and non-religious spheres. 2. The privatization of religious life and/or the decline of religious authority. 3. The decline of individual religious belief and practice. Let's call these the negative tenets of secularization theory.

To each negative tenet, there corresponds a positive tenet such that: 1. Secular spheres (e. g., state and market) governed by secular logics (e. g., power and profit) (Bruce 2002) . 2. A „naked public sphere" (Neuhaus 1984) stripped of religion and governed by „public reason" (Rawls 1997; Rawls 2005). 3. Personal beliefs and lifestyles freed from dogmatic prohibitions and „ontological insecurity" and guided by personal choice and scientific rationality (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Wilson 2016).

Now, the negative tenets are not without merit, if by „religion" one means „Christianity", and if one restricts one's vision to „the West" and ignores „the rest." There is overwhelming evidence that avowedly *Christian* belief and practice have declined in Western societies. Nor is America any longer an exception to this rule. The Christian churches there have undergone a rapid contraction in recent decades, particularly amongst younger age cohorts, and that decline has not left „strict" or „traditionalist" churches untouched (Burge 2023; Jim Davis 2023; Pollack and Rosta 2017). What's more, „the separation of church and state" has become a core tenet in the Western model of liberal democracy. It has come under challenge by religious conservatives and now by right-wing populists. But the prospects for a second „Christendom" seem remote at best. The role of religious ritual and religious elites in public life have surely also declined.

The case for the positive tenets is much weaker, particularly if one incorporates „spirituality" into the analysis (Albanese 2007; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Certainly, spiritual logics have penetrated secular spheres. This is perhaps most obviously true of the „soft" spheres of art and eroticism. But it is also true of „hard" spheres such as science and the economy. Notwithstanding Kantian prohibitions on metaphysical speculation from empirical premises, the „hard core" of modern science is surrounded by a large penumbra of spiritual speculation on „the Tao of physics" and the „origins of UFOs" (Pasulka 2019; White 2018). Call it parascience. Nor is the penetration of the spiritual into the economic confined to the mere commodification of the spiritual; it extends to techniques for managing „human resources" and maximizing personal „potential" (Chen 2022; Purser 2019). And while the authority of Christian clergy has surely declined, it is not clear that the influence of scientific rationality has undergone a corresponding growth, at least not as a principle of „life conduct."

And if one expands the analysis yet further to include „the sacred" in a Durkheimian sense, then the positive tenets are quickly rendered untenable. Seen from this perspective, the „secularization of the West" has not resulted in „the disenchantment of the world" much less the triumph of scientific materialism. It would probably be more accurate to say that the „secularization of the West" has resulted in the *pluralization of the sacred* (Berger 2014). In part, this process of pluralization is due to the fragmentation of the Christian sacred. To this though, one

must add a second process: the production of new forms of sacrality. Sacrality now comes in different sizes or scales ranging from the global (e. g., international human rights), through the transnational (e. g., extant „world religions“) and national („liberal democracy“) to the local (life-style enclaves) and individual (DIY spiritualty).

In sum, the plausibility of the neo-Weberian *Zeitdiagnose* and exceptionalist claims about Western secularity depend upon a narrow definition of „the religious“ that excludes contemporary forms of spirituality and sacrality and implies that the world is far more „disenchanted“ and „rationalized“ than it is. Likewise, the plausibility of the neo-Weberian narrative and exceptionalist claims about the Western trajectory depend upon a foreshortened historical perspective that stops at early modernity.

For if we extend our historical time horizon further back, not to 1500CE, as Taylor does, but to, say, 100CE, we find a cultural situation that more nearly resembles our own (Hopkins 2000). In the Western Empire, we find a variegated landscape that includes: 1) various and competing forms of monotheism, some Christian, others not, alongside. 2) high-brow, elite philosophies, some radically materialist (Epicureanism), some radically spiritualist (Gnosis), and others in between (Aristotelianism); 3) low-brow mass cults, some promising health and wellness, others eternal life, still others some of both. In short, we find a degree of diversity not unlike that which characterizes our own late imperial era.

Nor is this situation as exceptional as many moderns imagine. If we extend our geographical frame further out, beyond the bounds of Europe and its settler colonies, to the other great civilizations of Eurasia and Africa, our cultural situation suddenly appears more normal than exceptional. China and India have never been dominated by a single religion. Nor have the Muslim regions of the Near East ever been dominated by a single religious authority. Only Western Europe combines these two features.

4 From Monopolization to Fragmentation: A VERY Short History

Seen in a longer and wider perspective, what really sets the West apart is not its modern „secularity“ so much as its Medieval monopoly: *the monopoly of legitimate forms of the sacred claimed by the Roman Church* and largely achieved by around the year 1200. By this time, the Roman Church had effectively defined sacred space, time, objects, rituals and persons.

In brief: *Space:* Europe had been divided into a system of parishes centered around churches (Bartlett 1993; Mazel 2008). *Time:* Its calendar was defined around the stages of Christ's life and the celebration of his Saints. *Objects:* Relics of Christ and his saints and martyrs had been redistributed across the European landscape. *Rituals:* The seven sacraments of the Roman Church had been codified and now organized the various stages of the life cycle. *Persons:* Priests and monks were recognized as „religious" persons leading a higher vocation than lay Christians. *Legitimacy:* By this time, the Roman Church was in a position to define and suppress „heresy" via the Inquisition and its domestic Crusades within Europe. And it did this of its own authority, without the consent of secular rulers. Equipped with a proto-bureaucratic administration, armed with mercenary regimes, and funded via tithes and tributes, the Roman Papacy was not directly dependent on worldly princes for legal, military of financial support. It was a sort of pan-European superstate. As such, it conducted its own foreign policy and supplied states with jurisprudence and functionaries (Grzymala-Busse 2023).

As an organization, the Medieval Church had certain features that set it apart from religious organizations across world history. It was *autonomous* from worldly authority, not only in legal principle but also in material fact. Church authority was *centralized and hierarchical.* It centered in Rome and the Papacy and extended down a chain-of-command. It was *hierocratic*, governed by a priestly caste that reproduced itself socially, via the ritual of ordination, rather than biologically, by means of procreation. Autonomous, centralized, hierarchical, and hierocratic – no other religious organization combined these features. And it was this combination of features that made the monopoly possible.

The unique position of the Roman Church in what became „Europe" was due to a series of highly-contingent – or if you prefer: providential – events, including: the conversion of Emperor Constantine to the Christian faith and the establishment of Christianity as the official faith of the Roman Empire; the subsequent emergence of the Bishop of Rome as *primus inter pares* within the churches of the Western Empire; the relocation of the Imperial Capital to Constantinople and the subsequent collapse of Imperial power in the Western Empire; the collapse of urban life and the „feudalization" of political authority following the „Barbarian invasions" and the rise of the Roman Church as the principal source of legal and cultural authority. This process was basically complete by Late Antiquity (ca. 700). However, it was not until the papal reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries that the autonomy of the church – including claims to superiority vis-à-vis worldly rulers – was fully consolidated. The peculiarity of this trajectory can be seen, not only in the contrast with the highly decentralized system of religious authority in the Islamic world, but also in the contrast with the „autocephalous" and „Caesarist" system of Orthodox Christianity.

„Fragmentation“, as used here, refers to the gradual collapse of the Roman monopoly and its various consequences. It occurred in five overlapping phases over the course of some eight centuries: 1. *Internal rivalries.* The (re)emergence of princely power and the rise of the commercial bourgeoisie beginning interacted with clerical rivalries within the Roman Church during the late Middle Agers, weakening and then dividing the Papacy in the „Great Schism.“ 2. *Territorial oligopoly*. The success of the Protestant Reformations led to the emergence of three competing „religious firms“ – Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist – each of which dominated particular territories. Reformation historians refer to this process as „confessionalization.“ 3. *Free markets.* The (relative) failure of the confessionalization process along the commercial axis stretching up the Rhine and its tributaries and across the Atlantic to the English Colonies created a zone of religious competition between rival sects and movements which set the stage for the religious revivals and democratic revolutions of the late 18th century. 4. *Globalization of the religious market.* Imperial and commercial expansion introduced non-Western rivals and religious hybrids into the West's religious markets, gradually exposing a broader public to non-Christian religions. 5. *Opening of the religious market.* During the second half of the 20th century the separation of church and state and freedom of conscience in Western liberal democracies led to the proliferation of non-religious rivals to religious firms and to highly individualized and hybridized understandings of the sacred. 6. *The New Market for Attention.* The rise of mass media and then of social media allowed non-religious actors and organizations to capture and commoditize the most elementary particle of the sacred: human attention itself. *Experience itself underwent fragmentation.* Experiences of an integrated sacred were increasingly displaced by fragmented experiences of resonance.

5 Conclusion: Resonance in a Semi-Secular Age

Thus far, this essay has highlighted various deficiencies of resonance theory by contrasting it with classical theories of the sacred. Resonance theory focuses mainly on the phenomenology of individual experience. In this, it diverges most sharply from the Durkheimian tradition, which took the sociology of collective rituals as its point of departure and included an ontological and moral dimension. Rosa's theory most resembles Protestant theories of the sacred, which likewise emphasized individual experience. But it differs from both the Durkheimian and Ottonian traditions in omitting dark and transgressive forms of the sacred, which inspire „fear and trembling“ or arise out of excess and destruction. And also in detaching resonance from religion.

But these deficiencies can also be construed as advantages. For who today still has a „shattering" experience of „self-transcendence" that leads to a „second birth" in a conventionally religious sense? „Collective experiences" of any kind are rare in the increasingly individualistic societies of the modern West. And the ongoing decline of organized Christianity in Western societies suggests that it will be especially rare for such experiences to occur within traditionally religious settings. They are more common during musical festivals than religious services. And so not likely to give rise to moral beliefs beyond „fear of missing out" or sacred objects other than personal mementos. Nor do such experiences always culminate in „effervescence", an overflowing of boundaries and emotions. They may take the form of momentary epiphanies or feelings of joy. The great advantage of resonance theory is that it opens our eyes to more personal, more „secular" and less intense experiences that do not clear the bar of „transcendence." Seen in this way, resonance theory might seem like the appropriate theory for our „secular age."

Do we live in a „secular age"?

In *his* two master-works, *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that we do. He advances an influential *Zeitdiagnose* encapsulated in five neologisms: „the buffered self", „the immanent frame", „exclusive humanism", „ordinary flourishing", and „fullness." By the „buffered self", Taylor understands a modern self that has both „inner depths" and „external boundaries." As such, it seeks meaning and orientation from within rather than without and cannot be penetrated or possessed by outside forces. By the „immanent frame", Taylor means a „disenchanted" view of the „natural" world as a material reality governed by impersonal laws. For some, the immanent frame implies „exclusive humanism", the belief that „this is all there is" and the meaning of a life is made not found. For most, this leads to a focus on „ordinary flourishing", a vision of the good life that focuses on friends and family, health and wealth, and so on. But for many, including those who subscribe to exclusive humanism, there will be moments of „fullness" that suggest that this is *not* all there is and that meaning is not all humanly-made. And for a few, fullness can supply the predicate for religious belief.

Taylor's diagnosis is not entirely wrong. But it's not entirely right either. It's better described as half right. *Exactly* half right in fact. Taylor is right about inner depths, for example, but wrong about „external boundaries." If he *were* right, resonance theory would be wrong and „spirit-filled" religions like Pentecostalism would be declining, rather than exploding. The truth is that most Westerners, religious or not, do not subscribe to what we might call „exclusive materialism." Instead, the broad acceptance of scientific materialism – the core of what Taylor means by „the immanent frame" – more often goes together with a metaphysics of „spiritualism", the belief that the material world contains immaterial forces and hidden dimensions of some kind. Taylor is also right about the dominance of im-

manence. But he is wrong about its contents and origins. The „death of God" has not led to the triumph of scientific materialism, as radical versions of secularization theory had once predicted. Instead, it has led to a return of the gods. Not the personal gods of the pre-Christian era, to be sure, nor the „impersonal" gods of Weber's „value-spheres" but rather something in between: an immanent but „enchanted" order full of both personal „heroes" and impersonal „spirits." In such a world, „ordinary flourishing" does not suffice; *extraordinary* flourishing becomes both possible and desirable. For some, this might mean „resonance." But for others it takes darker and more transgressive forms. Rosa himself admits as much in *When Monsters Roar and Angels Sing,* his own, semi-autobiographical study of the heavy-metal scene. An immanent frame filled with friends and family is not enough; monsters and angels must be summoned, too.

We may not live in a Christian age anymore. But ours is not a „secular age" either. It is rather a semi-secular age in which traditional religion, DIY spirituality, and scientific materialism co-exist and inter-mix. Politically, the fundamental challenge of the semi-secular age is not the hoary question of „church and state" so much as the challenge of sustaining democratic solidarity amidst deep diversity. Given the many challenges facing Western liberal democracies, both from within (populism) and from without (climate), democratic solidarity is not only desirable but imperative. How it can be sustained in the face of growing diversity is the great, unanswered question. Existentially, the corresponding challenge is not the supposed „meaninglessness" of modern existence. Rather it is making sense of the surfeit of meanings that bombard us on a daily basis. In this sense, the political and existential challenges are intertwined. Whether we will solve them remains to be seen.

Resonance may be part of the answer. But it is surely not the whole of the answer, whether to the individual search for „a life worth living" much less to a democracy worth preserving. Classical theories of the sacred provide some clues about what is needful: collective forms of resonance, sacred times and places, all linked to a sense of the right.

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