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Religion and Contestations of the Liberal Script.
Non-Liberal, Illiberal and Beyond Liberal

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines tensions between religion and the liberal script, arguing that contemporary political science and liberal political theory fail to address this question on the basic level – the level of religion as such (as different from the level of particular religions or religious organizations). It questions „critical religion" for considering religion as a social construct restricting deeper analysis. Drawing on approaches to the liberal script that distinguish individual and collective self-determination as its core principles, the paper focuses on the unity and tension between two similar poles in religion – the collective (logic of the sacred) and the individual (logic of salvation). The paper examines each pole through the lens of key theorists of religion and discusses how these dimensions conflict with the liberal script. Four spaces of tension between religion and the liberal script (as an ideal type) are singled out and analysed: non-liberal religion, illiberal religion (collective pole), illiberal religion (individual pole) and "beyond liberal" religion (pole of transformed collectivity).

1   INTRODUCTION

Before getting directly to the issue of religion and contestations of the liberal script (Börzel/Zürn 2020: 9–14), I would like to say a few words about how this topic gained significance for me in the first place. As a long-time researcher of global culture wars (confrontations between conservatives and liberal progressives) and how religion is involved in these wars (Stoeckl/Uzlaner 2020; Stoeckl/Uzlaner 2022), I kept asking myself: What does religion have to do with this? Why are religious actors so heavily involved in arguments over family issues, sexual freedoms, abortion, etc.? Why did the religious actors I interviewed for this research – primarily religious conservatives – consider these issues not only important, but essential to their faith, to the point that they refuse to consider those with differing (liberal, progressive) views as fellow believers? Is this an artificial engagement of religion in an ideological conflict, or does this confrontation affect the substance of religion itself?

The same question arose in the context of reflecting on the events of 22 February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale war against neighbouring Ukraine. Russia's largest religious organisation – the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) – did not just unequivocally support this campaign. The ROC also spent many years developing ideas that, among other things, became important ideological justifications for attacking its neighbour (opposition to the "immoral" liberal West, the "Russian world", and so on). This support was woven into a more general discourse of rejection of liberalism to the extent that this liberalism was found to be contrary to the very essence of Christianity, and the war itself took on the dimension of "sacred" (sacred war against immoral liberal West). Again – is this an artificial involvement of religion in political processes or an expression of some crucial dimension of religion itself? After all, this is exactly what the religious ideologues of the war insist upon – that they alone stand for true faith in this conflict. However, the few priests who could not remain silent and declared their disagreement with the course of the Church and the state also considered this issue not just as some kind of "ideological" disagreement, but an issue that had to do with the very essence of their faith.

These observations led me to ask: What is religion? How is it woven into conflicts like those presented earlier? Is this a case of the instrumentalisation of religion by politicised and ideologised

actors? Is it an artificial involvement of religion in processes with which it "really" had nothing to do? Or is religion woven into these processes substantially? Does religion have a logic that may lead it into conflict with the liberal order? Is religion just an object – an instrument to be used – or is it the driver of these processes, not just involved but actively influencing them? And if religion is substantially woven into these processes, how does this substance relate to the liberal script and the challenges it faces today?

Thus, my paper aims to understand religion – not as any particular religion or religious organisation, but as religion as such, as a phenomenon of human culture (one can also say as an ideal-type) – in its own right with its different dimensions and underlying logics. Such an approach allows a view of the "spaces of tension" that potentially emerge between religion and the liberal script, making religion an ever-present danger that can never be tamed or domesticated. I also show that the lack of this kind of analysis represents a gap in the existing literature dealing with religion in the field of political science and liberal political theory.

These starting reflections explain the structure of this paper. I begin by considering some preliminary issues – the standard way of dealing with the question of religion versus liberal order in contemporary political science and liberal political theory – and why it is not enough. I address the challenge of "critical religion" that considers "religion" a social construct and blocks attempts to think of religion as such, of what religion is substantially. Then, I make very general parallels between the liberal script and religion in the context of the duality of each of these phenomena. I examine religion in both its collective and individual dimensions, analysing the unity and tension between these two dimensions. This analysis leads to the problem of the illiberal dimension of religion, which challenges the liberal script in both its collective and individual poles. I highlight four

spaces of tension between religion and the liberal script: non-liberal, illiberal collective, illiberal individual, and "beyond liberal".

2 HOW TO APPROACH THE ISSUE OF RELIGION AND CONTESTATIONS OF THE LIBERAL SCRIPT?

The question of religion as a challenge to the liberal order, despite its importance and relevance in the context of what Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann and Anna Hennig describe as "the infusion of secular policies with religion" (2021: 13), seems too broad and unfathomable. The first thing to ask, therefore, is how to approach this problem at all.

The standard way to address this topic is to analyse the specific positions of religious actors (e.g. an organisation) on a particular point. Mariano P. Barbato argues, not unreasonably, that "the relation of religion and the liberal script can best be studied by concentrating on concrete relations" (2022: 3). One can list specific problem areas of the clash: "migration, religion, identity politics, education, reproduction, and sexuality" (Weiberg-Salzmann/Hennig 2021: 14). These positions of religious actors can then be categorised as liberal, non-liberal, or illiberal. An example of such a problem area is the position of the Russian Orthodox Church (Stoeckl 2016; Stoeckl/Uzlaner 2022) or the Vatican (Pappin 2021; Reuterswärd 2021) on reproductive health and sexual minority rights in the context of the ongoing "culture wars" that is gaining momentum. The problem, however, is that analysing positions – an undoubtedly important and necessary task – does not allow us to get to the heart of the question, to address this issue on the fundamental level, on the level of substance.

First, there is nothing inherently "religious" about a particular position; the same or similar positions can be held by non-believers (e.g. atheist conservatives). Second, these positions can change to

the exact opposite – without turning religious actors into non-religious ones. For example, the Catholic Church in the 20th century changed its position on "human rights" without losing its religious character. Third, the position itself, whatever it may be – even the most antiliberal position – is a challenge to liberalism only on a superficial level. At a deeper level, it may well be compatible with it. After all, liberalism at the level of its very substance (freedom of conscience, freedom of expression) implies the possibility of a wide variety of positions ("reasonable disagreement" or "reasonable comprehensive doctrines" (Nussbaum 2014: 20)). The question is how a position is defended – through arguments or dominantly imposed by suppressing any objections (Rawls 1997). Fourth, the very positions on specific issues often reflect more fundamental conflicts, where the disputed aspects themselves merely symbolise this deeper dimension. For example, culture wars are not concrete bickering over specific issues but symbolic points of contention that deal – at least in the fantasies of the participants – with the fate of the community as such (for example, Hunter (1991), in his seminal work on US culture wars, emphasised that these wars are linked to questions of the meaning of America and its identity).

Hence, we can conclude that analysing positions as such is not enough because it does not allow us to get to the heart of the problem. The discussion needs to be taken to a more fundamental level, considering the substance of religion and its relationship to identity, social order, and individual freedom. Only then will it be possible to understand and comprehend the tension between religion and the liberal script.

It is exactly this level of analysis that is lacking in contemporary political science. Probably, the only exception in the context of my research, is the field of religion and violence, which deals with partly similar topics but is more interested in violence *per se* (terrorism, martyrdom, wars, etc.)

than in the tension between religion and political order (Jerryson et al. 2012; Juergensmeyer 2017: Part 2; Powers 2020). So, this obvious gap needs to be addressed. Here, I agree with Barbato, who emphasises that the analysis of positions should not imply a refusal to discuss the problem at a more abstract conceptual level (2022: 3). That said, I recognise the difficulty of not just talking about religion as such, but even defining what religion is (see Hughes/McCutcheon 2021; on "critical religion" in Section 4).

Another important nuance is to find a "golden mean" between "whitewashing" religion and accusing it of all sins. Whitewashing religion involves attempts to portray it as an innocent victim on the part of those who seek to instrumentalise it for their own ends. For example, this is a common trope in works on religion in the context of right-wing populism. One can find in these works the following types of reflections: politicians hijack religion to mobilise it for their nationalist and anti-Muslim – in the case of Europe – identity politics with the promise to "save the people" (Marzouki et al. 2016) or right-wing populist actors "hijack religion for illiberal purposes" (Weiberg-Salzmann/ Hennig 2021: 14; for further criticism, see Giorgi 2022). The opposite pole is represented by the works of, for example, "new atheists" who see religion generally or a particular religion as the root of all social problems (Amarasingam 2012). The only way to understand who is right in this dispute – and whether anyone is right at all – is to examine the phenomenon of religion itself.

3 LIBERAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RELIGION: TO GOVERN AND REGULATE

Contemporary political science avoids the question of religion as such in the context of its clash with the liberal script. Instead, particular religions, particular religious actors, and particular aspects of illiberal or non-liberal manifestations

of religion are considered. That is, there are no approaches that seek to understand religion as a phenomenon of human culture, to understand the logic that leads to confrontations with the liberal order. In this section, I look at liberal political theory, which I show is characterised by a similar avoidance of religion.

As we approach this question, we immediately discover a curious paradox. On the one hand, religion and the danger it poses "is central to the historical elaboration of Western liberalism, from the European wars of religion onward" (Laborde 2017: 1). For example, in "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689), John Locke addressed the problem of religion, which he perceived as a threat. Locke believed that the tolerable sphere of true religion ("care of souls") should be clearly separated from the sphere of "civil interests" (1689 [2003]: 218). Only such a tamed religion deserves toleration – but not the religion of, for example, "papists" (Catholics), who violate established limits and pose a threat to civil peace. Similarly, John S. Mill drew attention to religion "as a special danger to liberty because of the strength of people's attachments to their own religious observances and their corresponding aversion to the practices of others" (Sikka 2019; see Mill 2001). This same attitude of seeing religion as a potential threat has also spilled over into contemporary liberalism: it has led to an attitude that Amy Gutmann has called "two-way protection" – protection of religion from the state and protection of the state from religion (Gutmann 2000; see Laborde 2017: 15).

On the other hand, despite this acknowledgement of importance, religion has been remarkably neglected in the liberal tradition. As Cécile Laborde, perhaps the foremost expert in the field of liberalism and religion, states, "[religion] strangely, […] has remained relatively underanalysed by liberal political philosophers" (Laborde 2017: 1). There is a need, therefore, for liberal philosophers

"to grapple with fundamental questions concerning the special (or otherwise) nature of the ethical-sociopolitical category of religion and its relationship with the liberal state" (Laborde/Bardon 2017: 2).

But here, we immediately encounter the next paradox: the liberal tradition, even if it aims to address the challenge of religion, thoroughly avoids engaging with religion. The most influential tradition of liberal thought, the school of liberal egalitarianism, is built on the premise that "there is nothing special about religion" (Laborde 2017: 28). As Laborde (2020: 62) writes: "The dominant academic school of liberal political theory today, inspired by John Rawls, embraces what might be called liberal egalitarianism. This school of thought explicitly denies that religion is special and that it should be subjected to a special regime of protections and constraints". That is, religion as something special, an independent object of study, is absent in this tradition. Instead, religion is dissolved in other related concepts and phenomena.

Laborde cites several strategies for sidelining religion, which she calls "dissolving religion," "mainstreaming religion", and "narrowing religion". As Laborde (2017: 6-7) explains:

> The dissolving strategy has been developed by Ronald Dworkin, who bites the ethical salience bullet and rejects exemptions on the grounds that no defensible distinction can be drawn between and among religious and nonreligious ethical views. The mainstreaming strategy is associated with Christopher Eisgruber and Lawrence Sager, who analogize religion with existing protection-worthy categories, such as disabilities, vulnerable identities, or close association. The narrowing strategy analogizes religion with a specific subset of conscientious duties, and has recently been articulated by Charles Taylor, Jocelyn Maclure, and other liberal egalitarians.

One can respond to this, but religion is still present in liberal thinking! However, within liberalism, religion exists only as an object of regulation, management, or control – permission or prohibition. One can spot this tendency already in Locke, as discussed earlier. In this respect, the title of Laborde's book "Liberalism's Religion" (2017) is very telling. It is not religion as such, but the regulation of religion within the liberal order (for an analysis of the blind spots in the liberal understanding of religion, see Stoeckl 2017). As an illustration, let me examine Laborde's position. For Laborde, religion is literally a "black box" and there is no need to understand this black box – what it contains, by what laws it exists, or other intrinsic aspects. Instead, it is enough to emphasise the facets of the black box that matter for its management. Laborde highlights several such facets or dimensions – "nonaccessible", "socially salient and divisive", "comprehensive", "theocratic" (Laborde 2017: 241). This interpretation reflects how liberalism sees religion. For example, "nonaccessible" is how religion really looks to those who are not immersed in it, who expect citizens to explain their position in "accessible" language (in line with the liberal value that Laborde calls "Justifiable state"). However, nonaccessibility can hardly be called a substantial feature of religion as such – actually, it requires considerable explanation to understand how Laborde elevates it as a decisive facet of religion. Similarly, "comprehensive" and "theocratic" are merely possible facets of religion and need further explanation to understand their substantive connection to religion at all (why *these* facets, in particular, are emphasised above others).

Religion is recognised by the liberal tradition only as an object of governance and regulation and only to the extent necessary for these purposes. This position is evident in the main themes addressed under the rubric of liberalism and religion. Sonia Sikka (2017) summarises these themes as follows: 1) religion and the public use of reason: can religious arguments be present in secular public space? (John Rawls, Robert Audi, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, etc.; Sikka 2010, 2016; Thompson 2023); 2) balancing different rights and values within liberalism: how can religious freedom be reconciled with other rights? Can religious communities themselves be non-liberal? (Den Otter 2015; Spinner-Halev 2008); 3) can complete religious neutrality be achieved? If religion is also a culture, how can we avoid the inevitable predominance of one culture over another? (Beaman 2012, Mahmood 2005).

Such an attitude (liberalism's treatment of religion as an object of governance and regulation) is well-suited for political liberalism (Rawls 2005), which avoids delving into any worldview issues. Instead, political liberalism seeks to create a fair, just, and rational framework for the interaction of individuals and groups. But this attitude is ill-suited for the task of understanding religion and the "spaces of tension" between it and liberalism. If religion is simply a passive entity, a weak and feeble partner willing to submit to any rational liberal regulations, then it might well be left as a black box, relevant only in the context of its management and regulation. In such a scenario, no conflicts would arise, and society would continue peacefully and constructively.

However, today, the liberal script is in crisis and is threatened from all sides. Since religion is widely considered as one of these threats (such as fundamentalism or religious populism), it makes sense to reconsider certain inherited assumptions. One such assumption is that liberal order is the active force (subject) and religion is only a passive object of influence and regulation – an example of what Peter Berger (2008) called "secular bias". If we reconsider this assumption and acknowledge religion as an independent force, understanding religion as a special pole of human existence becomes relevant and meaningful. What is the logic of religion, how does religion manifest itself in

its different dimensions, and why does this logic sometimes clash with the liberal order? The issue of appeal of this logic and why it is sometimes successful in confronting the liberal order seems no less relevant.

Here, I immediately encounter an obvious objection, which explains – at least in part – the reluctance to deal with the question of religion at the level that I suggest. According to this objection "religion" is a social construct; it is a product of imperialism, colonialism, and Protestant influence; it is impossible to conceptualise religion as a phenomenon of human culture because there is no such thing as religion. This perspective is what the tradition of "critical religion" teaches us. I will discuss this question in the next section.

4   IS IT POSSIBLE TO TALK ABOUT RELIGION AFTER "CRITICAL RELIGION"?

The previous section concludes by mentioning perhaps the most obvious objection to posing the question of religion. This objection, rooted in the tradition of "critical religion" (for a recent critique of "critical religion", see Watts/Mosurinjohn 2022; for a recent debate on it, see Issue 3-4 2024 of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*), maintains that "religion" is a social construct, so it makes no sense to discuss religion in general (as an ideal type). Indeed, in recent decades, many works have critically examined not only the discipline of religious studies (Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 1997) but also the very concept of "religion" (together with "secular") as a social construct of modernity. Such studies suggest that it is impossible to talk about religion as such. Instead, they prefer, for example, analysis of different discursive strategies of constructing "religion" in the context of other similarly constructed concepts, such as "secular", "state", "power", and "private and public" (Fitzgerald 2017; von Stuckrad 2013). Or, they avoid the question of religion altogether, preferring to

focus on more specific topics connected to religion (like the ones I mentioned when discussing political science and liberal political theory). This critical examination of the concept of "religion" has even been called – to emphasise its significance – "a Copernican turn in the study of religion" (King 2017: 1–22; for a very good summary of "critical religion" approaches see Laborde 2020: 59–62).

What does this Copernican turn really mean? On the one hand, a valuable core in the critical study of religion leads to important breakthroughs in our understanding of religion. Indeed, some conceptualisations of religion have proven to be limited and inadequate, such as the entrenched liberal attitude of considering "religion as belief and voluntary association" (Sikka 2017). Such a conceptualisation of religion prevents us from seeing cases where religion is a cultural practice, a way of life, and an "inherited group identity" (Sikka 2017). The division into "secular" and "religious" does not work in many non-European cultures (Asad 2003). Many discursive constructions in history have configured the relationship between religion and politics or religion and culture differently. It is very difficult to disagree with all of this.

But this same approach sometimes leads to radical conclusions, which, if you think about them, turn out to be unconvincing. Examples include the thesis that it is impossible to unite different religions with the word "religion" because religions are too different or the thesis that so-called "religions" ("Islam", "Buddhism", "Judaism" etc.) were "invented" by imperialists and colonists. These extreme interpretations of "critical religion", often adopted – paradoxically – without any critical reflection, contribute to many researchers' refusal to engage with the question of religion in general, with the question of religion as a phenomenon of human culture.

For example, Laborde (2017: 20) summarises such an extreme position: "There is no feature, or set of features, that all religions share. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Shintoism have nothing in common – and no feature that would allow us to distinguish them from nonreligious ideologies, such as nationalism". I consider it a summary of an extreme version of "critical religion".

This statement is false. All the religions listed above – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Shintoism – are united by the feature of "being about connection with personal or impersonal supernatural / transcendent forces" (a standard substantive feature of religion that is used to analytically separate it from non-religious phenomena: see for example, Riesebrodt 2009: 72–79; Pollack/Rosta 2017: 34–49). All these religions are characterised by both the dimension of the sacred and the dimension of salvation. In Shintoism, the dimension of salvation develops due to its fusion with Buddhism (Hardacre 2017) (on these dimensions – see below). There are certainly many nuances in the question of defining religion and identifying some of its common features, but to claim that "Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Shintoism have nothing in common" is to plunge us into absolute conceptual chaos. If it was true, why do we even retain the concept of "religion"? No attempt to get rid of "religion" by replacing it with some other concept – for example, "cosmographical formation" (Dubuisson 2003) – has been successful. We can then say – following the same logic – that "liberalism", "nationalism", and "communism" have nothing in common at all and that the concept of "ideology" is a construct invented by Marx at the behest of French revolutionaries to undermine Western civilisation.

Mentioning nationalism does not work either. If there are religious features in nationalism, we can still separate religion from non-religious ideologies. Nationalism (and other ideologies) can take

religious form. Much has been written about the connection – both historical and substantial – between nationalism and religion (see, for example, Gorski/Türkmen-Dervişoğlu 2013: 138–140). Moreover, if some borderline phenomena do not fit well into one or another category, it is not a reason to give up any attempt to categorise the world!

The thesis that there is no such thing as "Buddhism", "Hinduism", or "Judaism", that they are "inventions" of imperialism, can hardly be defended in its *radical* form. The West did not "invent" religions through its colonial efforts. I find the position of Martin Riesebrodt (2009: 44) much more reasonable:

> What is true is that the encounter with the West led to a systematization and canonization of religious practices and ideas. But it is false to conclude from this that previously existing practices did not represent a religion and that the West thus became a universal creator of religions. British imperialism and Anglicanism did not invent Hinduism, and Buddhism did not invent Shinto. Instead, these processes manifest the structural characteristics of religious competition. In such situations the more weakly organized participants are sometimes forced to increase their efficiency in order to be competitive.

The perception of one's own practices and beliefs was changed and transformed by the encounter with the "other", forcing one to better manifest and systematise what was only potentially contained in one's own culture. These influences were not unidirectional – they involved mutual recognition between different cultures, each strongly influencing the other's idea of what "religion", "secularity", "civilisation", or "barbarism" were (see, for example, Veer 2001).

In this sense, extreme constructivism needs to be balanced by at least some degree of realism. A return to realism – in the context of a more general

turn to realism (Dreyfus/Taylor 2015) – can well be stated as a tendency of contemporary approaches to the study of religion (Schilbrack 2024a). As one proponent of the realist approach put it:

> According to the realist, discursive construction presupposes material entities, properties, and effects that the discourse did not create. The creative power of discourse to manufacture things in the world is thus like that of the worker who builds a house with bricks, not like that of a god who creates ex nihilo simply by saying, "Let it be" (Schilbrack 2024b: 433).

Religion is not only discursive realities, not only play of words, but also the reality of individual and collective life.

If "the category of religion, in sum, fails to capture a universally recognizable or semantically coherent reality" (Laborde 2017: 21), can the same not be said for other categories like "politics", "economics", "law", and "culture"? This, actually, was the idea of one of the leaders of the "critical religion" movement, Timothy Fitzgerald (2024: 247), – to critically deconstruct all these concepts:

> "secular", "society", "politics", "the economy", "the nation-state", "culture", "modern", "progress", "nature", "Enlightenment", "liberal", "liberty", "science", "history" and a string of others that are commonly and uncritically deployed by academics, journalists, politicians and other pundits as though it is obvious what they refer to.

But the main point remains: what is the purpose of such critical deconstructions? Are they meant to throw our thinking into conceptual chaos? To block thinking about religion in principle? This radicalism seems destructive and fruitless. Moreover, it contradicts the intentions of the scholars who carried out such a Copernican turn.

For example, Talal Asad absolutely did not want attention to discourse to paralyse our thinking about what lies beyond discourse. Kevin Schilbrack (2024b: 434) describes his position quite unambiguously:

> Asad said: "I certainly did not want to claim that as a historical construct 'religion' was a reference to an absence" (quoted in Martin 2014: 12). Instead, as people use a particular discourse to inform and regulate particular disciplinary practices, they produce a Wittgensteinian "form of life" (2014, 12). Asad criticizes those who get so distracted by the word "religion" that they fail to see that it refers to a discursive-and-material form of life, "a coherent existential complex" (2001: 217).

The "golden mean" position makes the most sense – between absolute constructivism (religion is whatever we call "religion") and essentialism (we accurately capture in words the real essence of religion), or between non-realism and "naive" realism (rightly criticised by the critical study of religion). The golden mean position is a position in the spirit of "critical realism" (Bhaskar 2008; Collier 1994) or the concept of "trueing" in the sense of constant circling around the truth (and never being able to express it fully, Andersen 2023). Schilbrack summarises the critical realist position by stating, "one can make the reflexive, critical, deconstructing turn and still hold that one's concepts name things that exist and have their effects independently of those concepts" (Schilbrack 2024b: 423).

So, taking into consideration all these reflections, I attempt to carry out my analysis of religion as such. Despite all arguments of "critical religion", we continue to use the concept of "religion". We continue to categorise some phenomena as "religious" and others as "non-religious". We continue to argue about secularisation, implying that religion, and not some construct called "religion," is disappearing – or not disappearing, but rather transforming (Kasselstrand et al. 2023). These practices suggest that under the signifier

"religion", some reality still appears in different embodiments and configurations in different epochs and cultures. As Schilbrack aptly summarises, "the concept of 'religion' is socially constructed, but religion nevertheless exists, 'out there' in the world" (2010: 1117).

"Critical religion" can be interpreted as an effort to expand our understanding of religion, making it more critical and reflexive rather than blocking the very possibility of thinking about what religion is. A critical approach to understanding religion is needed (in the spirit of "critical realism"), not a complete rejection of the very attempt to comprehend this phenomenon under the pretext that it is a "social construct" and a product of "imperialism" and "colonialism".

For example, Stephen Bush (2014), in his book *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power* says that "three understandings of the nature of religion – religion as experience, symbolic meaning, and power – have dominated scholarly discussions, in succession, for the past hundred years". He adds that "proponents of each of these three approaches have tended to downplay, ignore, or actively criticize the others". Bush (2014) then draws a logical conclusion:

> Why should the three approaches be at odds? Religion as it is practiced involves experiences, meanings, and power, so students of religion should attend to all three. Furthermore, theorists of religion should have an account that carefully conceptualizes all three aspects, without regarding any of them as more basic than the others.

I agree with the general premise. If different approaches have paid attention to different dimensions of religion, then instead of criticising each, it makes sense to move toward an integrative understanding of religion that would combine its different dimensions and try to understand its logic. This approach seems to be more reasonable

compared to dogmatic claims that there are no religions, only discursive constructs.

Moreover, to make my approach even less vulnerable to criticism along the lines of "critical religion", I have chosen the following strategy for my analysis. Rather than attempting to identify religious substance in the historical flux of different religious movements and traditions (which, I believe, is also a possible strategy), I draw on the tradition of understanding and conceptualising religion in the social and philosophical thought of the 20th and 21st centuries. Therefore, my analysis of religion is built upon analysis and systematisation of the ideas of key theorists of religion – I consider the ideas of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Henri Bergson, René Girard, Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz, Martin Riesebrodt, debate on the Axial Age religion etc. It is in this legacy that I look for the very "religion as such", whose tensions with the liberal script I would like to systematise and categorise. In that sense, I would like to bridge the tradition of religious studies with the tradition of political science and liberal political theory.

5 THE DUALITY OF THE LIBERAL SCRIPT AND DUALITY OF RELIGION

I do not discuss liberalism in detail (Freeden 2015). For example, I do not consider the difference between comprehensive and political liberalism (Nussbaum 2014). For my analysis – to demarcate the "spaces of tension" between religion and the liberal script – it suffices to outline the most general contours of this script. However, this theme can then be developed further in the direction of a closer focus on both liberalism (specific types of liberalism, such as perfectionist / political, specific liberal values and principles etc.) and religion (specific religions, specific religious organisations at a specific moment in time etc.).

In addition to the well-known substantive aspects (Börzel/Zürn 2020: 11–12), it is important to emphasise duality when defining the liberal script – in particular, its individual and collective dimensions. There is a debate on this issue – either the individual pole is determinative (Börzel/Zürn 2020), the individual pole and the collective pole are two intrinsic poles, of which the former is dominant (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021), or both poles are equivalent and co-constitutive (Börzel/Risse 2023: 5). In the context of my narrative, the very singling out of these two poles is essential, as it is in light of this duality that I consider religion.

For this reason, I will take Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse's approach as the conceptual fulcrum since it most consistently emphasises both the individual and collective dimensions. Such an approach attempts to overcome the purely individualistic understanding of the liberal script and speaks instead of two poles of the script – the pole of individual self-determination and the pole of collective self-determination. As Börzel/Zürn (2023:5) write, "individual and collective self-determination have to be considered first-layer principles of the liberal script if the limits of ISD are collectively defined", and add that "ISD and CSD should, therefore, be treated as the co-original (*gleichursprünglich*) and co-constitutive core of the liberal script". They further consider illiberal challenges (Laruelle 2022, 2023; Sajó et al. 2022) as challenges to the liberal script from each of these poles – either from the pole of individual self-determination or from the pole of collective self-determination. Emphasising the duality of the liberal script can be seen as an attempt to find a sustainable middle ground between the extremes of "cosmopolitanism" and "communitarianism" (De Wilde et al. 2019; Palaver 2021).

I chose this particular approach because it fits perfectly with the question of the substance of religion (as an ideal type), which, like the liberal script,

has two different poles, often in tension with each other – on the one hand, religion as a collective phenomenon ("sacred" – Durkheimian tradition) and on the other hand, religion as a path of individual "salvation" (Weberian tradition). I should acknowledge that my approach to religion is, to a considerable degree, formed and influenced by the approach of Wolfgang Palaver (2020; 2021), whose ideas I try to expand and develop.

The duality of religion is a recurring theme in 20th-century philosophical and theological discussions (for an excellent overview of the debate, see Palaver 2020, 2021: 5–9). This duality was best labelled by Henri Bergson in his *The two sources of morality and religion* ([1932] 1974). He distinguished two types of religion: "static religion" – associated with collective dimension, preservation of the community, and suppression of centrifugal forces – and "dynamic religion" – associated with freedom, overcoming parochial thinking, and breaking habits of closed human communities (see also Worms 2012). This same duality of religion can be seen in the tradition of debates about the Axial Age religions (Bellah/Joas 2012) – Charles Taylor examines them through the concepts of "embeddedness" (pre-Axial Age religions) and "disembeddedness" (Axial Age religions) (Taylor 2012). The distinction between two types of religion (one associated with the notion of "sacred" and the other with the notion of "holy" or "saintliness") is a cornerstone in the tradition associated with René Girard (Palaver 2020). A reflection of this duality in the sociology of religion can be seen in the discussion of "culturalised religion" (Astor/Mayrl 2020) or "religion as culture", in contrast with "religion as faith" or "religion without culture" (Roy 2017).

It is important to note here that it is not so much a question of two different religions, separable in the same way that Islam is distinct from Christianity, but of the coexistence of these two dimensions within each particular religious tradition.

Static and dynamic religion, to use Bergson's terminology, are present in each religion (he called such religions "mixed", 1974: 203). The tension between these two poles is an inherent feature of every major tradition (Palaver 2018). In this respect, they are co-constitutive elements of religion as a phenomenon of human culture, although theologians and philosophers may argue about exactly how these two poles should relate. For example, Christian theologians may legitimately question whether it is possible to completely eliminate the static element in religion or whether such a deliverance can only be conceived in the eschatological perspective of the Second Coming.

6   RELIGION: THE COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL DIMENSIONS

The collective and individual dimensions of religion are equally essential in the sense that neither can be said to be more important than the other. At the same time, they can be analysed separately, especially since, at a certain stage, they come into conflict with each other (more on this later). In addition, their relationship can be viewed from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. In the diachronic (i.e. vertical or historical) context, the collective dimension of religion holds primacy over the individual, as the collective dimension emerged earlier in history. But in a synchronic (i.e. horizontal or "contemporary") context, the collective and individual dimensions coexist, share equal importance, and can both harmonise and conflict with each other.

My analysis of these dimensions will be structured around the ideas of key 20th and 21st centuries' figures, each of whom drew attention to a different fundamental facet of the phenomenon under study. Through the integration of these facets, religion can be seen not only in all its essential complexity but also in all the varieties of its contestations of liberal order.

6.1   THE COLLECTIVE DIMENSION OF RELIGION: THE LOGIC OF THE SACRED

I labelled the first dimension of religion as collective. One can think of other possible designations (used by one or another author), for example, "archaic religion" (Bellah 2011), "religion of the sacred" (Girard), "static religion" (Bergson), or "religion of the pre-Axial Age". The main aspect of this dimension is the emphasis on community-building, order-forming (symbolic) and order-sustaining (legitimising, conservative, static), and centripetal (anti-individualistic) elements of religion.

It is not by chance that I start from this pole: the collective dimension of religion is the primary, most archaic form. Religion as an individual path of salvation grows out of this form much later. "Archaic religions" or religions of the pre-Axial Age are collective religions. The key concept here, to use Taylor's terminology, is "embeddedness": the embeddedness of the individual in the community and of the community itself (and of the social order sustaining it) in the cosmos, in short, in the sacred order. Here, the individual is not disembedded from the community and the community is not disembedded from the sacred order (Taylor 2012: 32).

Different authors throughout the 20th century have revealed essential facets of this collective dimension of religion.

6.1.1   HENRI BERGSON – STATIC RELIGION AND THE CLOSED SOCIETY

Henri Bergson (1974) provides the most general description of this dimension. He calls it "static religion" (as opposed to "dynamic religion"). Static religion holds the community together, consolidates it, and prevents it from disintegrating under the influence of evolving rational capacities that push humans down the path of individualism. Static religion is a "natural religion" in the sense

that it corresponds as closely as possible to the nature of the human being as a gregarious creature inclined to live in closed communities that oppose their neighbours. Bergson is important for my narrative because he highlights the essential features of this collective dimension of religion – being intrinsic to human nature (as he writes, "'static religion' is natural to man, and that nature does not alter" (Bergson 1974: 300)), the consolidating, preserving influence on the community, the blocking of individualism, the congruence with the spirit of the "closed community".

6.1.2 EMILE DURKHEIM – THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE SOCIAL

Emile Durkheim, in his conceptualisation of religion, takes the logic of the collective dimension to its limits (Durkheim 1995). A community is literally a reality *sui generis* that is more than just an association of its individual members. And religion is an integral part of this reality. In religious experiences and religious symbols (that is, in the "sacred" as opposed to the "profane"), he sees the material, visible embodiment of the community itself as a powerful supra-individual entity – with its collective representations and collective affects (both joyful and sad).

I would like to emphasise three Durkheimian points important for the following narrative. The first is the relationship between religion and identity. Religious symbols in this "archaic" dimension of religion are, above all, an expression of the essence of the community. Behind the sacred symbols is the community itself, the worship of which is the core of this "archaic" dimension of religion, albeit covered by references to supernatural forces. The second is the connection between religion and the emotional experience of the collective "we" (both in its negative and positive dimensions). Third, thanks to Durkheim, we can speak of the religious dimension of the social or the social dimension of the religious. The

power of this "social" distorts any religious tradition that falls within its field of influence, subordinating it to the logic of the archaic sacred (up to the point of direct contradiction to the doctrinal provisions of this or that religion).

6.1.3 RENÉ GIRARD – RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

René Girard makes an important addition to Durkheim's concept of religion. Durkheim underestimated the problem of violence as inextricably linked to the sacred – although he did write about the "ambivalence of the sacred" and the related problem of scapegoating (Palaver 2020; also see Appleby 2000; Fish 2005: 28–29).

The collective dimension is not only an experience of collective effervescence or collective grief that unites members of a community but also a space of internal tension and conflict. Religion solves this problem through the mechanism of scapegoating – exile or exclusion of the person declared to be the embodiment of "social negativity" (Girard 1977, 1986, 2001). The logic of the sacred is the logic of solving the problem of violence and internal tension by turning the violence of "all against all" into the violence of "all against one (or few)". It is the logic of the lightning rod. This logic is "an unconscious social mechanism to overcome a dangerous internal crisis" (Palaver 2020: 28). The victim of violence, according to Girard, then acquires sacred status and posthumously becomes an object of worship (one can notice clear parallels with Freudian reflections on totem and taboo here).

In the context of the following narrative, it is important to emphasise the link between collective religion and violence upon which Girard insisted. Archaic religion, in its essence, is the persecution of the minority by the majority (and the celebration of this persecution), the scapegoat mechanism, and the "representations of persecution"

that ideologically justify the need for the violence of "all against one" or "all against the few". Collective religion not only expresses the identity of the community and gives it the joy of experiencing a collective "we" (as in Durkheim) but also maintains the unity of this "we" by channelling the energy of internal conflicts into innocent victims, just as lightning discharges into a lightning rod.

6.1.4   CLIFFORD GEERTZ AND PETER BERGER – RELIGION AND THE SYMBOLIC ORDERING OF THE WORLD

Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger add another important facet to the collective dimension of religion (Berger 2022; Berger/Luckmann 1991; Geertz 1993). They speak of the symbolic order-forming and order-sustaining aspect of religion.

Any community – actually, any human being – must deal with the problem of chaos. How do we create meaningful order out of the original chaos? According to Geertz (1993: 93), religion, in its essence, is just that – a symbolic system, a system of distinctions that allows us to recode the original chaos into a human-understandable order. It is not just a model of reality (in the sense of describing what "is") but a model for "reality," that is, literally creation of the world, of what "is".

Berger (2011; 1991) conceptualises religion in the same way. It is necessary to create order out of chaos – this is the process of the "social construction of reality", in particular, of social reality. This process is performed by symbolic means on a collective, intersubjective basis. The order created out of chaos (*one* of many *possible* orders) then acquires the character of objective reality for the individual. This objective reality then shapes the individuals themselves – "the structures of this world come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself" (Berger 2011: 22). Order (or nomos) protects against the experience of chaos, against a state of anomie, a

state of "world-loss", a state of "world-lessness" (Berger 2011: 30). Religion is an organic part of this process. It is the ultimate form of world construction up to the point at which "the entire universe" is understood "as being humanly significant" (Berger 2011: 38). In addition, religion is what guards this nomos, this system of symbolic distinctions, and keeps it from chaos and disintegration (Berger 2011: 43). Religion sacralises the existing nomos. It legitimises the social order by linking "precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality" (Berger 2011: 43). That is, religion anchors existing institutions, systems of distinction, and social roles in a sacred order.

Geertz and Berger are important for my narrative because they draw attention to the essential connection between religion and the symbolic ordering of the world. This is the symbolic order-forming and order-sustaining dimension of religion. In this sense, when, for example, we talk about the position of certain actors in the context of culture wars, this aspect must be considered. We are not talking about separate, stand-alone issues. A bigger concern lurks behind them – that of social order as such. Religious conservatives are concerned with the stability of the social order in the face of possible anomie and chaos. Connection with this nomos, its maintenance, and defence against anomie (and figures symbolising this anomie) is an essential feature of the collective dimension of religion.

6.1.5   WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO EMPHASISE THE COLLECTIVE DIMENSION OF RELIGION?

The description of the collective dimension of religion may seem something taken for granted and even trivial. However, I find it necessary to emphasise this collective dimension today. There is a clear tendency in academic literature not to recognise this dimension as being *essentially* connected to religion (especially evident in

the literature on secularisation (Kasselstrand et al. 2023) and religion and right-wing populism, as discussed later). Issues of religion and identity, religion and culture, and religion and the distinction between "us" and "them" are often interpreted as a secularisation of religion, as a kind of secular *ersatz*-religion, which pretends to be religion but lacks any real essence. Such manifestations of religion are seen as "artificial" religion, as an abuse and instrumentalisation of religion (which, for example, right-wing populists use for political purposes). Only individual religion is recognised as genuine. In fact, this modelling of religion aligns with liberal Protestantism, where an individual's personal faith and personal path of salvation are the main concerns (here, the approach of the critical religion is very useful). But individual religion, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, is only one possible historically late form that religion, which was originally a collective phenomenon – apart from any questions of individual faith and salvation – can take. As Guy Ben-Porat and Dani Filc (2022: 67) put it: "religion is always political to some degree".

6.1.6 THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COLLECTIVE DIMENSION OF RELIGION

A brief consideration of the key figures in the history of thinking about religion as a phenomenon of human culture allows us to understand the essential features of religion in its collective, static, order-forming, and order-sustaining dimensions. It allows us to understand religion as an expression of identity, a force for creating and maintaining social order, a violent mechanism of "all against one", and a means of containing individualism. Here, I want to address the issue of "religious functions": religion does not fulfil these functions (to express identity, legitimise social order, or channel violence); these are the *essence* and *substance* of "archaic" static religion. To talk about the function of religion is to say that religion is *something else* and *also has* these

functions. But here, the point is that these features are the very essence of religion – not just its functions (e.g. Berger (2011: 35): "religion *is* [*emphasis is mine*] the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established"; see also Milbank's (2011: 111–112) criticism of this functionalist thinking about religion).

Another important clarification: when one speaks of "archaic" religion, one does not mean that it is something from the past, that this collective dimension has somehow disappeared. As Bergson (1974: 300) aptly put it, "'static religion' is natural to man, and that nature does not alter". The collective, archaic dimension of religion remains with us (radiating through all the dogmatic, doctrinal differences of particular religions and confessions). In this sense, one can still speak of the tension between the pre-Axial Age forms of religion and its Axial Age forms.

For example, Charles Taylor (2007: 412–413) develops the idea of the "Durkheimian" dimension within modern social order in relation to religion. Yes, the classical (or "paleo-") Durkheimian order is no longer possible – Taylor illustrates this order with the "ancien régime" and "baroque" Catholicism before the French Revolution. However, he argues that a "neo-Durkheimian" order persists where

> religious belonging is central to political identity. But the religious dimension also figures in what we might call the "civilizational" identity, the sense people have of the basic order by which they live, even imperfectly, as good, and (usually) as superior to the ways of life of outsiders, be they "barbarians", or "savages", or (in the more polite contemporary language) "less developed" peoples (Taylor 2007: 455).

In this quote, many facets of the collective dimension of religion discussed earlier shine through at once.

Certainly, secularisation has had a significant impact on this dimension, but so far, it has not been completely undermined anywhere. Religious tradition is still inextricably linked to the symbols of community (and to experiences of collective joy and sorrow) (Durkheim). Religious tradition is still entwined in the logic of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. "the Christian roots of Europe" and the "Muslim question") (Girard). Religious tradition is still an integral – albeit increasingly contested – part of the symbolic ordering of reality – at least of social reality (chronology, holidays, "kinship structures", notions of propriety, etc.) (Geertz, Berger). Religion continues to restrict individual freedom – in terms of behaviour and thought (public morality, "offended feelings of believers", faith as a "cognitive distortion", etc.) (Bergson).

6.2 THE INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION OF RELIGION: THE LOGIC OF SALVATION

Section 6.1 discusses the collective dimension of religion, where religion acts as a force that nourishes the community, unites, structures, and symbolises the social order, provides the necessary experiences of collective unity, and solves the problem of internal tension and violence. However, the collective dimension of religion, even though it is the foundation, the base from which all other dimensions build, is not the sole element. The individual dimension of religion is the second most important pole, and without understanding it, no comprehensive view of religion is possible.

The individual dimension emerged later, developing out of the collective pole, partly complementing and partly challenging it. If we follow Taylor (2012: 36), the key concept associated particularly with the religions of the Axial Age, is that of "disembeddedness", the disentagling of the individual out of the collective (separating the individual from the social order and the social order from the sacred order). The individual face

of religion surfaces – a separate person comes to the fore with their own history of relationship with a higher power and their own path to salvation. This personal path emerges as a reaction to that "dispute with life" that was alien to "archaic religion". From now on, the individual has a "transcendent" point of reference from which to critically examine both their own nature and the nature of the community to which they belong – as Bellah (2005: 88) put it: one receives "the capacity to examine critically the very foundation of cosmological, ethical and political order".

Different authors throughout the 20th century have revealed essential facets of this individual dimension of religion.

6.2.1 MAX WEBER – THE PROBLEM OF THEODICY AND SALVATION

If the key author for the collective dimension of religion is Durkheim, the key author for the individual dimension is Max Weber (1993), who formulated the basic concepts with which this pole of religion can be discussed. Weber sees religion as a type of social action related to a special area of interest – the problem of salvation (Riesebrodt 2009: 66). The problem of salvation relates to another fundamental problem – the problem of theodicy, which is the existence of evil – or suffering – in the world and the need to get rid of this evil. The significance of the Weberian approach is that it helps to discover religion from the opposite side of the collective; religion reveals its individual dimension as the history of a search for salvation by overcoming evil.

6.2.2 MARTIN RIESEBRODT – RELIGION AS A PROMISE OF SALVATION

Martin Riesebrodt (2009: 90) developed Weber's ideas into a full-fledged understanding of religion as a "promise of salvation". Salvation as a way for people to cope with crises – "their own

powerlessness, as in the case of their bodily mortality, their lack of control over the natural environment, or the instability of social relations" (Riesebrodt 2009: 171–172) – can take many forms. From the most general and simple ("popular") to those that are the prerogative of "religious virtuosi". The virtuosi highlight in their extreme manifestations the contradiction between the collective and individual dimensions of religion. Riesebrodt (2009: 122–148) offers numerous examples of religious virtuosi who defied the rules and conventions of their communities on the path to salvation.

What is important for my narrative is this emphasis on salvation as a challenge to the values of one's community. This aspect reveals the radical contradiction and even incompatibility between the individual and collective dimensions. One aims to suppress the individual and preserve the community. The other aims to emancipate the individual from the spirit of the collective on the path to salvation as deliverance from evil.

6.2.3 HENRI BERGSON – DYNAMIC RELIGION AND COSMOPOLITANISM

This contradiction between the individual and collective poles of religion is particularly sharpened by Henri Bergson (1974), who, along with "static religion", speaks of "dynamic religion". Dynamic religion is a force that breaks down the boundaries of a closed society, a mystical impulse that pushes towards openness and human universality.

It is important to note that this dynamic religion is primarily an individual phenomenon. The mystical impulse is not available to everyone but only to special individuals. Bergson describes dynamic religion through the great mystics who experience union with God and become instruments in his hands. In doing so, he praises Christianity above all, where mysticism is linked to action rather than passive contemplation.

In political terms, dynamic religion corresponds to an "open society" (the direct opposite of a "closed society"), democracy, human rights, and the project of a unified humanity.

Bergson recognises the inevitable tension between the collective and individual dimensions of religion. What is revealed in dynamic religion can only temporarily unframe a closed society, which corresponds much more precisely to human nature. Democracy and universalism, for Bergson, do not derive from human nature but contradict it in many respects – the unfolding of openness requires the influence of a special force (Bergson described it as a certain *élan vitale*). Humans, as such, are more prone to collective static religion, while dynamic religion is available only to a minority, dynamic religion is capable of opening for a moment, for those who can see it, the horizons of a different, universal humanity.

6.2.4 RENÉ GIRARD – RELIGION AND OVERCOMING THE SACRED

Rene Girard takes this confrontation to its limit. In his understanding, the dimension of the "archaic sacred" is overcome from within in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where the logic of "all against one" is replaced by a shift to victim's perspective, to the perspective of the "one" who suffers for no reason (this can be called "holy" or "saintliness" as opposed to "sacred"). The innocent victim is finally recognised as the victim of unjust violence (Schwager 1987). The Gospel narrative breaks the very foundation of tribal religions, exposing the violence that lies at the very foundation of this logic and the communities that are based on it.

Representations of the just punishment of the villain for the atrocities committed ("representations of persecution") are transformed into a story seen and told through the eyes of the "villain", who turns out to be, in fact, an innocent, righteous

human being. In this way, both the mechanisms of collective tribal religions and the ideological justifications associated with them are exposed (Palaver 2020: 55). Tribal logic is shattered, and humanity advances by this exposure towards greater openness and sensitivity to individual sufferings: "a nonviolent God replaced the violent God of the sacred past who no longer demanded sacrifices but nonviolence" (Palaver 2020: 55).

While Girard himself associated this dimension of "beyond sacred" with the Judeo-Christian tradition, a further development of the Girardian line was to emphasise that these two dimensions – "sacred" and "holy" or "saintliness" – are found in every mature religious tradition (Palaver 2018, 2020). At the same time, Girard, like Bergson, realised that the dimension of the holy is primarily the domain of individuals who can break ranks and not participate in the follies of the "lynch mob". The question of whether it was possible to conceive of such a community that would completely overcome the logic of "archaic religion" and transform itself into a community based on the principles "beyond sacred" remained open to Girard.

6.2.5 THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION OF RELIGION

The individual pole, alongside the collective, is the essential dimension of religion as a phenomenon of human culture. In contrast to the collective pole, the individual pole brings to the forefront the individual with their personal destiny and personal search for salvation (Weber–Riesebrodt). In this search, the individual can challenge and confront the values and ways of life of their community. An important aspect is that here the perspective and the frame of reference change – sympathies are unequivocally on the side of the individual rather than on the side of the community, whose claims on the individual are consistently unmasked (Girard). The political dimension

is also not irrelevant here since this pole of religion is congruent with an open society, democracy, and – in its limit – a cosmopolitan, universal community (Bergson). Like the collective pole, the individual pole of religion has not disappeared and is still with us.

7 UNITY AND TENSION BETWEEN THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

When we distinguish the collective and individual poles in religion, we are not talking about two different kinds of religion but different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Accordingly, both poles can be found in each particular religious tradition (Bergson's "mixed religion"). An exception can be either very primitive tribal religions (completely devoid of individualism) or radical versions of, for example, Christianity, which completely break with the "sacred" collective aspect.

Throughout history, both dimensions of religion have coexisted. Despite the obvious tension, sometimes they even managed to reach equilibrium. For example, Taylor (2007, 43–45) describes Christendom as an example of such an equilibrium state – a multi-tiered phenomenon that accommodated both tribal archaic logic and religious virtuosi with their opposition to the values and traditions of the majority.

However, the subsequent development of civilisation is associated with the disintegration of this unity and sharpening of the contradictions between the two poles. This development can be interpreted as a shift from the collective to the individual pole. However, as Bellah (2005) wrote in this regard, "nothing is ever lost". The pole of the collective dimension of religion remains. Even those theologians who see the essence of Christianity in overcoming the logic of the archaic sacred cannot help but notice how easily religious traditions fall prey to such logic. As Palaver (2021: 9) put it:

there is […] not a linear success story […] that runs from closed societies supported by static religions in pre-Axial times toward an open society based on dynamic religion in the modern world. All the above-mentioned religious traditions are not without dangerous descendants in today's world.

Here, it makes sense to emphasise the gravitational power of the religious dimension of the social (Durkheim) – the power that often overcomes doctrinal differences between religions, turning them into "sacred" tribal religions that worship their own "tribal" gods. Resisting the gravitational force of this social dimension is the destiny of the "saints".

The tension between these two poles of religion is sometimes articulated as the tension between "the transnational claims of the world's major religions" and "specific, territorial allegiances promoted by nationalism" (Katzenstein/Byrnes 2006, cited in Soper/Fetzer 2018: 28). This contrast highlights religion as an expression of the logic of universality versus religion as an expression of connection to one's community – to one's nation, state, or tribe, for example.

Taylor wrote about the fragile, tense unity that characterised these two poles within Christendom. Today the disconnection – of the collective, parochial and the individual, universal – is increasingly manifest. In social theory, this disconnection is described as parting ways of religion and culture (Roy 2017: 194). The complex edifice of religion breaks down into "religion as culture" and "religion as faith", as Christian Joppke (2018: 3) describes:

> On the part of religious practice, […] there has been a "deculturalisation" of religion and the rise of "pure" religion (I). […] On the part of the state and other political actors, by contrast, there is an opposite trend of "culturalizing" religion, particularly (but not exclusively) majority religion (II).

Tobias Cremer (2023: 44–45) uses the same logic speaking about the "religion of God" versus the "religion of history".

It is important to emphasise that *both* dimensions are religious in the full sense of the word. While I agree with the constatations of the disintegration of religion into "religion as culture" and "religion as faith", I cannot agree with the thesis that only religion as faith is "real" religion, whereas religion as culture is only "artificial", an object of instrumentalist manipulation by politicians (on the relation between religion and culture, see in particular Tillich 1969: 56–100).

This analysis allows us to recognise the tension that exists today between these two dimensions and even two logics of religion. On the one hand, at its extreme, this tension is the tribal logic of the archaic sacred; on the other hand, again at its extreme, it is the post-Durkheimian religion of individual quests for salvation, unconnected with local tradition and culture and loyal only to the universalist logic of one or another great world religion.

8 RELIGION AND CONTESTATIONS OF THE LIBERAL SCRIPT: SPACES OF TENSION

Finally, we are in a position to directly address the question of religion and contestations of the liberal script. I follow Börzel and Risse (2023: 10), who propose categorising contestations in terms of non-liberal and illiberal. They write:

> We distinguish between non-liberal and illiberal scripts. We define illiberalism as a script that, in an absolute sense, prioritises individual self-determination over collective self-determination or – vice versa – the collective over the individual. Scripts that neither recognise ISD nor CSD are non-liberal.

Thus, when talking about religion and contestations of the liberal script, we have at least three options. On the one hand, we can talk about non-liberal forms of religion. On the other hand, we can talk about its illiberal forms. This illiberal aspect, in turn, can be divided into the collective pole of religious illiberalism and the individualistic pole of religious illiberalism. To these three options I want to add fourth – that of "beyond liberal".

Non-liberal religion, to use the logic of Börzel and Risse, is that form of religion that tends to deny the idea of human self-determination, both individual and collective. It speaks of a holistic sacred order into which both the community and the separate individual are embedded ("paleo-Durkhemian" in Taylor's terminology). Such non-liberal religion is archaic religion in its purest form, functioning as an untouched sacred canopy (Berger 2011). Examples of this non-liberal religion, which may be more or less temporally close to us, include what Charles Taylor calls "baroque" Catholicism, that is, a multi-level comprehensive control of religion over society (Berger 2007: 412–413).

It is quite possible that this kind of non-liberal religion has disappeared due to secularisation. Such a religious model is probably impossible today. Some echoes of it can be seen in various radical ideological projects – for example, all sorts of theocratic models (for example, theocratic idea of dominionism) or the fantasies of esoteric traditionalists who believe that humanity took a wrong turn 500 or 1'000 years ago and that, in this regard, it is possible to demolish the entire edifice of modern civilisation and return to the cherished "eternal" tradition (Sedgwick 2009). All these musings resemble ideological fantasies rather than any real political positions.

If we assume that the liberal script – in its individual and collective dimensions – is a ubiquitous reality of the contemporary world, then the challenge to this liberal order by religion must also be predominantly of an illiberal nature (according to the interpretation of illiberalism found in Börzel/Risse 2023). Illiberal challenges to the liberal order can be examined from each side of religion we have highlighted (for other approaches to the issue of religion and illiberalism, see Hennig/Weiberg-Salzmann 2021). On the one hand, we can see challenge to the liberal script from the collective pole of religion. On the other hand, we can see challenge to the liberal script from the individual pole of religion.

8.1 ILLIBERAL RELIGION (THE COLLECTIVE POLE)

In the most general terms, the illiberal pole of religion can be described as a dominance of the collective dimension of religion, a foregrounding of its "tribal" nature. This pole manifests whenever the collective dimension of religion undermines its individualistic, dynamic, liberating aspect, that is, when we see that the gravitational force of the collective sacred is on the rise. Illiberal religion, from its collective side, is where the religious essence of the social gets the opportunity to unfold in its full power.

The collective pole of illiberal religion can take many different forms, depending on which facet of collective religion comes to the fore. On the one hand, religion expresses collective identity (Durkheim) and excludes social negativity (Girard). These two aspects can be seen as interrelated – the glorification of "us" (our identity) and the damnation of "them" (outsiders). On the other hand, religion is the transcendent guarantor of the system of distinctions that it defends in the face of chaos (Berger and Geertz). This threat of chaos is particularly epitomised by individual freedom, which threatens to undermine the existing system of distinctions and render the community defenceless against the forces of disintegration.

The *Durkheimian-Girardian* dimension of illiberal religion includes numerous examples where religion and identity are closely intertwined, for example, religious nationalism (Gorski/Perry 2022; Grzymala-Busse 2019; Omer/Lupo 2023) in its extreme forms. It also includes the patterns that Hennig (2023a) mentions: religious actors that "promote majoritarianism and neglect individual rights" or, conversely, secular actors that "rely on Christian-related narratives to mobilise populations for illiberal (identity) politics".

The same examples of "exclusivist collective identity" (Hennig 2023a), if seen from a slightly different angle, can illustrate the *Bergerian-Geertzian* dimension. Here, we are talking about identity as a certain way of life, a certain symbolic order sacralised for a given community. This symbolic order (system of differentiations or distinctions) is threatened by external "outsiders" or by excessive individualism, which undermines the collective norm, for example, through the excessive development of sexual freedoms, which break the accepted systems of distinctions and threaten – in the eyes of conservatives – the onset of moral chaos and the "crisis of undifferentiation". Here, individual freedom and equality are perceived as a threat to the socially accepted symbolic social order.

In general, this entire illiberal pole refers to, using the language of the sociology of religion, the domain of religion as culture or religion without faith ("culturalised religion"). This phenomenon is described in the literature as a striking example of today's manifestation of religion (Astor/Mayrl 2020). I would like to emphasise that we are talking about the manifestation of one of the essential aspects of religion, even if we do not like this aspect of religion and internally resist considering it an authentic manifestation of religion. I partly agree with Avi Astor and Damon Mayrl (2020: 211), who write:

Culturalized religion should therefore not be understood as a "diminished subtype" – a form of religion that is somehow lesser than "real" religion – as this would imply that religion could itself be defined in essentialist terms. Rather, the peculiar combination of attributes found in culturalized religion should be understood as a novel rearticulation of religious elements that affords new social and political uses.

The problem is not that people do not "really" believe in the tenets of a particular religious tradition (e.g. Christianity in Europe), but that they subordinate themselves to the logic of the sacred (see also Knott 2013; Lynch 2012; 2014), following the archaic logic of collective religion – the worship and defence of their shrines, pride in their identity, rejection of anything foreign simply because it is foreign and threatening, or acceptance of what is "theirs" simply because it is "their own". Religious tradition is not subjectivised (that is, it is not meaningfully internalised). Instead, it is simply accepted as "one's own" and lived as "one's own" tradition. The religious dimension of the social can take control of any religion, whatever its doctrine. Christianity becomes indistinguishable from Islam or the cult of the Australian tribes that Durkheim studied, who, in this respect, saw no essential difference between the religion of these tribes and the sacred elements of more "developed" religions.

In this sense, I repeat, there is nothing surprising in the paradox to which researchers of political manifestations of "culturalised religion" in Europe draw attention: active believers often avoid supporting right-wing parties and movements, even if these parties emphasise Christian identity. That is, those for whom religion is primarily faith are unwilling or unable to solidarise with those for whom religion is primarily identity (Cremer 2023).

Next, I would like to consider two cases that specifically illustrate these manifestations of illiberal religion: a) religion in the context of right-wing

populism and b) religion in the context of culture wars.

8.1.1 RELIGION AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

According to the standard approach, right-wing populism can be defined by two main ideas. First, it is the idea of the "people" as opposed to the "elites". Thus, populism can be considered as "anti-elite politics" carried out in the name of the sovereign "people" (Aslanidis 2016). Second, it is the idea of certain "others" (Marzouki/McDonnell 2016: 2) who are perceived as a threat to the "people". "Others" may be defined by categories such as migrants, Muslims, or other stigmatised groups. "Elites" are blamed for prioritising these "others" instead of helping the "people", thus betraying the "people" (DeHanas/Shterin 2021). Rogers Brubaker (2017a; 2017b), in this regard, speaks of two dimensions of right-wing populism: a vertical dimension – against elites – and a horizontal dimension – against outsiders.

Today religion plays a prominent role in this right-wing populism (for a literature review, see Yilmaz/Morieson 2021; comparison in different contexts: USA, Western, and Central Europe, Haynes 2020).

First, the very category of "people" can be considered a manifestation of the sacred. Daniel N. DeHanas and Marat Shterin (2021) even suggest defining populism through the lens of the sacred: "we define populism as a political style that sets 'sacred' people against two enemies: 'elites' and 'others'". The individual, in this context, dissolves into the "sacred people", and anything deviating from the "people" risks being categorised as "others" and stigmatised. Second, religious symbols are increasingly used as markers of the identity of these "people". Accordingly, the "others" are increasingly defined by belonging to a religion that symbolises otherness and foreignness. José Pedro Zúquete (2017) calls these two religious aspects of populism "covertly religious" ("sacralization of politics") and "overtly religious" ("politicization of religion").

In the case of right-wing populism, we can see how collective religion is perfectly woven into the populist logic of "us" versus "them". On the one hand, the very structure of populism resembles the manifestation of the collective pole of religion – the symbolic unity of the community and the exclusion of social negativity. On the other hand, this structure is increasingly filled with religious content and translated into the language of religious confrontation – "us", Christians, versus "them", Muslims (we can add to this the emotional intensity of these experiences (Salmela/von Scheve 2017; Yilmaz/Morieson 2021)). Both aspects reveal a Durkheimian-Girardian facet of illiberal collective religion.

We are seeing not simply the instrumentalisation of religion but the manifestation of one of the essential poles of religion. This pole is related to collective life and reflects the same conflict as that found between pre-Axial Age religion and the religion of the Axial Age. This tension has persisted since ancient times. Today, it is not even necessary to refer to a functional understanding of religion: to identify religious elements in outwardly secular forms (as it is often done in connection with Durkheim), as these forms themselves become explicitly religious – people themselves clothe them in the shell of religious symbols.

8.1.2 RELIGION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR TRADITIONAL VALUES

Another example of illiberal religion in its collective dimension is the culture wars and the participation of religious conservatives in them. Here, another facet of religion manifests itself – not only Durkheimian-Girardian but also Geertzian-Bergerian.

Due to secularisation, we can speak of the disintegration of religion as a "sacred canopy", a holistic "plausibility structure" (Berger 2011: 57). But there are still fragments of the symbolic order legitimised by religion, whose disintegration risks – in the view of the conservatives – undermining the order as such and plunging the community into the abyss of chaos. For many conservatives, "family values" remain such a valuable fragment.

According to conservatives, traditional family values, the idea of the "natural family," and the specific institutions that regulate human sexuality are rooted in a transcendent order. Herein lies another aspect of the collective dimension of religion. Behind the progressive liberal agenda stimulating individual emancipation, religious conservatives see the chaos of social disintegration and the prospect of plunging into chaos. Here, it is appropriate to quote Berger (2011: 51):

> [R]eligious legitimization [...] relates the disorder that is the antithesis of all socially constructed nomoi to that yawning abyss of chaos that is the oldest antagonist of the sacred. To go against the order of society is always to risk plunging into anomy.

As with right-wing populism and its Durkheimian-Girardian dimension, we do not see the use of religion to sacralise old prejudices but the manifestation of one of the facets of collective religion – religion as the guardian of order in the face of chaos. This dimension of religion becomes illiberal when conflict arises between elements of this order (systems of cultural distinctions) and individuals who attempt to change or undermine these systems because they experience them as oppressive or infringing upon their fundamental freedoms. At this point, religion, as the guardian of order, begins to see individuals or entire minority groups as threats to the community, as elements that undermine order and pose the risk of chaos. Muslims (Amir-Moazami 2022; Haynes 2020; Huq 2021; Sibgatullina 2024), sexual minorities, and

even liberals themselves (for example, in Russia or Hungary) may find themselves in this position.

The general conclusion is the following: the collective pole of religion is a necessary and essential dimension. It begins to acquire illiberal features the moment it crosses certain limits and begins to suppress, erase, or negate the individual, dissolving them into the "social", into the collective "we". This negation can follow either a Durkheimian-Girardian or a Geertzian-Bergerian path, depending on which aspect of the collective pole of religion is most actualised at a given time and place.

8.2   ILLIBERAL RELIGION (THE INDIVIDUAL POLE)

The reverse side of collective illiberal religion – its individualistic counterpart – seems extremely paradoxical. The individual dimension of religion, as described in Section 6.2, is associated with ideas of dynamics, development, and overcoming the logic of "tribal" or "archaic" religion. The individual pole of religion is about the personal destiny of a human being in relation to higher powers. Moreover, this form of religion was directly linked (for example, by Bergson) to democracy, open society, cosmopolitanism etc. In this sense, it might seem that illiberal religion is impossible within the individual pole. However, despite the obvious parallels between this dimension of religion and the liberal script itself, it still makes sense to say that this pole can also be associated with manifestations of illiberalism.

Illiberal religion (the individual pole) in its ultimate expressions implies the negation of the collective. It is the triumph of what Taylor calls a "post-Durkheimian" form of religion – an analogy to "extreme forms of libertarianism" if we draw a parallel with Börzel and Risse's (2023: 11) conceptualisation. This pole of illiberal religion can best be conveyed through the idea of "religion

without culture", or "religion as faith" taken to the extreme. Robert N. Bellah (2007) summarises this "post-Durkheimian" dimension in the following way:

> [R]adical individualism no longer relates to a social form. Individuals are oriented to their own very diverse forms of spirituality and no longer think of their religion in terms of overarching social formations.

The extremity of the individual pole of religion (as a kind of uncompromised search for salvation), if this pole becomes a mass phenomenon, can become a threat to the collective dimension as such. This potential separation can, in turn, give rise to the logical question posed by Bellah (2008) in response to Taylor's "post-Durkheimian" reflections: "What holds us together?" Radical religious individualism gives birth to the threat of disintegration. This disintegration not only threatens the collective side of the liberal script, but also risks creating a "backlash" from these centrifugal tendencies in a reverse centripetal movement. Thus, the archaic religion of the sacred, which seemed to have retreated under the onslaught of the individual, will reassert itself as the force that ensures the community, the collective "we" against disintegration, and that establishes and re-establishes the people's bond, in particular at the expense of scapegoats (Girard).

If we talk about specific illiberal forms of religion in its individual dimension, we can mention, for example, persons for whom their own religious choice and relationship with the higher power are not only connected to an individual life trajectory, followed far away from others, but also involve an active denial of the traditions, lifestyles, and sacred objects of the majority, with attempts to impose their vision on others. This path is the way of prophets, preachers, missionaries, reformers, and founders of new religions. Often, such manifestations of the individual pole led to conflicts and unpleasant consequences for the religious

seekers themselves. Moreover, such a path cannot become a mass phenomenon – otherwise, it threatens the collective dimension and gives rise to opposite trends (for example, the resistance in many countries to proselytising new religious movements in the last third of the 20th century).

This illiberal religion is not necessarily limited to the actions of one person. Religious minorities can also have illiberal traits – for example, if they decline to compromise with the culture, lifestyle, or traditions of the majority, if they isolate themselves and oppose the majority, or if they place their own laws above the generally accepted laws (for example, considering the religious laws of their faith above the secular laws of the state of which they are citizens).

In the same logic, fundamentalism can be seen as a "pure religion" that breaks with tradition (Roy 2017). It is a "religion without culture" and represents the extreme of pure faith on the part of a minority that does not accept the collective rules established by the majority during the historical development of a given society (even if this majority formally belongs to the same religion as the fundamentalist minority). In particular, such a fundamentalist minority refuses to accept the concessions and compromises that their own religious tradition has had to make under the pressure of the "reality principle" (these concessions and compromises are seen as departures from "pure faith").

Let me note that if an individual or a minority manages to impose its vision on the majority (and this happens sometimes), then, over time, this new belief of the majority inevitably falls into the gravitational field of the religious dimension of the social. This shift inevitably moves it into another register – the collective dimension of religion – where it can again take on illiberal (or even non-liberal) features, but this time in the opposite direction (suppression of the individual).

9 TRANSFORMED COMMUNITY OR BEYOND THE COLLECTIVE SACRED: CHALLENGING THE LIBERAL SCRIPT FROM ABOVE

When I was writing about individual religion in Section 6.2, I mentioned that some of those who wrote about it also referred to another dimension, the dimension of "transformed collectivity". Bergson, for example, wrote about divine humanity and the unity of all humans as a consequence of the full realisation of the mystical impulse he saw behind the words and deeds of great mystics (Palaver 2020, 2021). It was to this unity that "dynamic religion" led. This dimension was even more clearly outlined by Girard, who, in connection with the Judeo-Christian tradition, discussed the unmasking of the scapegoat mechanism and the undermining of the functioning of the archaic religion of the sacred. This interpretation leads to an opportunity for humanity to create a community based on new principles – solidarity with the victim and non-violence.

This means that besides non-liberal and illiberal religion (with its collective and individual dimensions) one can talk about the fourth dimension of religion's contestation of the liberal script – the dimension of transformed collectivity. This dimension takes us to the level of utopia. This level – if we search for secular analogues – reflects communist and socialist projects, it challenges the liberal script, as it were, "from above".

The following questions can be posed: Can collective religion, with its logic of the sacred, be overcome in principle, or is it doomed to persist until the end of time? Perhaps Bellah (2005) is right to say that "nothing is ever lost". Could it be that the best we can hope for is simply to individually not join the "lynch mob"? Could it be that transformed collectivity is the province of special individuals ("saints" or "righteous") and their small groups of followers ("positive type of mimesis", Palaver 2020: 45)? Could a transformed collectivity

be conceivable only in the eschatological perspective of fulfilling messianic promises? Or are the leftist utopians who still insist on the possibility of a different kind of community – without capitalism, nationalism, tribalism, and so on – right? However, even these utopians often realise the theological underpinnings of their expectation. It is no coincidence that one can talk about a theopolitical turn on the left (Harink 2010). These questions do not have any simple answer and require separate detailed consideration.

10 CONCLUSION

My reflections on the spaces of tension between religion and the liberal script can be visualised in the diagram (see next page).

The scope of this study is limited to my reflections concerning only one aspect of the problem of the relationship between religion and the liberal script. I speak of religion as a contestation of the liberal script, where exactly and for what reasons this contestation may manifest itself. I discuss religion as such (as an ideal-type), not specific religious actors and their specific positions on specific issues. I understand that this problem has other facets: religion as a breeding ground for liberalism (Pally 2022), the treatment of religion by the liberal tradition itself (Laborde 2017; Laborde/Bardon 2017), and much more. In this sense, my work is only part of a huge jigsaw puzzle of immense complexity and scope.

There is another point I would like to make. Talking about illiberal religion is not the same as talking about "bad" and "good" or "true" and "false" religion. Illiberal religion is not "bad" or "good" in and of itself. It is "bad" or "good" in relation to the liberal script, which itself cannot be considered the absolute measure of all truth. In this sense, illiberal religion, in its own logic, in its own frame of reference, may well be "good" (or "bad").
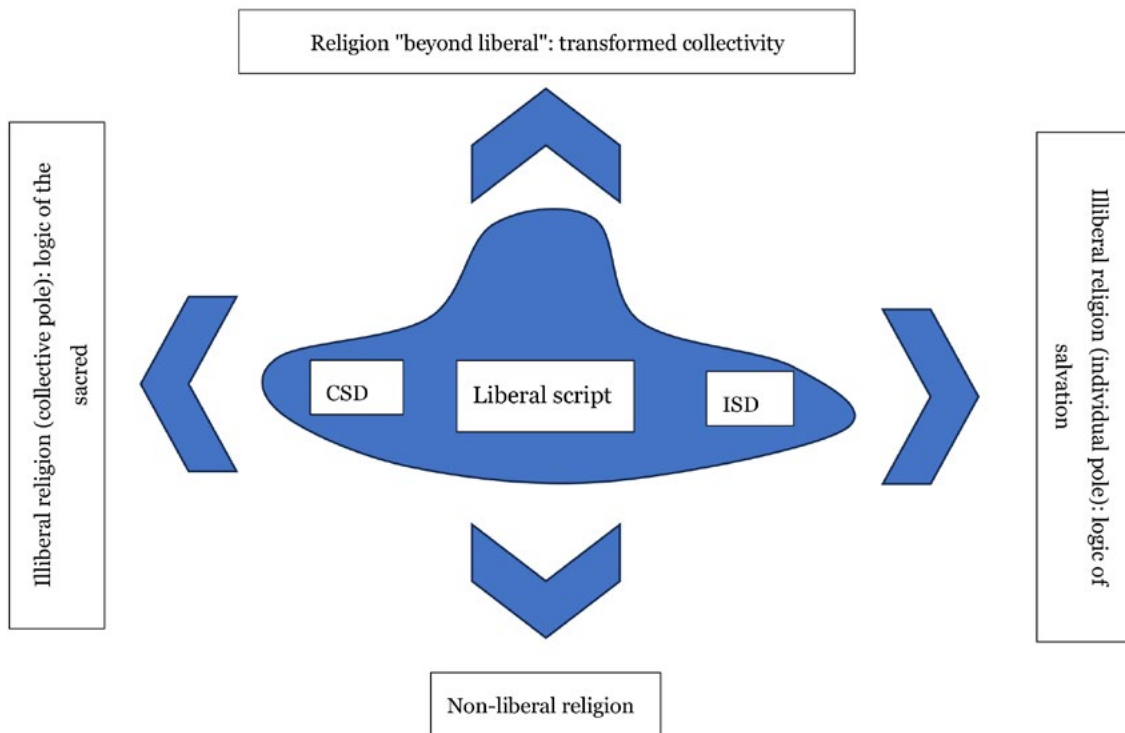
Source: Author's own work
Note: ISD means individual self-determination; CSD means collective self-determination.

The extreme of individual religion (uncompromised search for salvation), which we attribute to the individualistic pole of illiberal religion, is the way of prophets or founders of new religions. These figures undermine the existing order and overthrow the idols and values of the majority, thereby disrupting social order and public morality while preventing others from believing as they see fit (in other words, acting illiberally). But perhaps, as history has demonstrated many times, such actions may lay the foundations for a new order, perhaps a more just order. It is possible that history, hundreds or even thousands of years from now, may justify these illiberal actions.

Conversely, the collective pole of illiberal religion, if it remains within reasonable limits and does not erupt into violence, may also be appropriate when a community has gone too far down the path of individualism. The collective religion of the sacred is a necessary mechanism for establishing and re-establishing a community, maintaining its boundaries and symbolic order. People are divided by borders – a tragic dimension of an imperfect world (the "fallen world", as Christians would put it). The collective pole of religion protects these border-divided communities, thus insuring them against possible disintegration, which would probably involve more chaos and violence.

The conclusion I draw from my consideration may seem quite conservative. Barring eschatological visions of a transformed collectivity – with all its implications for the individual and the community – it can only be stated that both the dimension of collective religion and the dimension of individual religion will remain with us in one form or another. The only thing we can hope is to find the "golden mean", maintaining a tense balance between the individual and collective poles without going to one extreme or the other. This balance should avoid both the extreme of "tribal", archaic religion and the extreme of individualistic religion, which does not recognise any concessions to the "collective" pole.

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