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Human Depersonalization as a Symptom of the Postmodern Society

Abstract

Man is currently facing unprecedented experiences, some of them traumatic. The real world is dissolving, becoming coplanar with the many virtual worlds that people live simultaneously.

In this sense, postmodernism hides a danger and involves a huge defiance. It constitutes as such a challenge to Christianity. Some characteristics of postmodern phenomenon are social constructivism, cultural determinism, the rejection of individual identity, the rejection of humanism, the denial of the transcendent, the rejection of reason, and revolutionary critique of the existing order.

The antithesis between human personalization and depersonalization is a feature of the schizoid postmodern world. The effect of automation of life at any cost is fully felt in the desacralization phenomenon of



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human activities. Man becomes more and more depersonalized.

Keywords

Postmodernism, Humanism, Depersonalization,
Society, Christianity, Deification

1 Introduction

In the late '60s, the world has undergone visible changes to everyone. They were so powerful such that, despite all isolationist measures taken by various states and communities, they soon became a global phenomenon. From communism to Islamic world, from African authoritarian regimes until ultraconservative Asian companies, all worlds simultaneously felt some phenomena, closely related to one other, which soon led to the curdling of a new kind of international community, named by Marshall McLuhan as "Global village". These are firstly about the development of new types of technology (genetics, space robotics and especially electronic), and of economy, that turn the industrial world into a postindustrial one.

Due to electronic control and a much-improved management, labor productivity has grown so much that the Western world has experienced unprecedented prosperity. This created "consumption society", is one able to seek and absorb more sophisticated products. "Prophets" of the '60s and '70s, such as Alvin Toffler (*Future Shock* and in the following writings), Marshall McLuhan (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*), Herbert Marcuse (*Liberation from the Affluent Society*) etc., caught in nuce emergence, out of these essential conditions, of a different world: faster, more transient, more anarchic and more colorful.

A new and decisive element of the actual democracies, unimaginable in any other bygone era is the nature of today's informational society. Information explosion, both in the public, through television (cable TV), Internet and so on, as well as in the technical and scientific development by enormous computing techniques led, with a Gianni Vattimo's phrase, to today's world "transparency", characterized by nearly unlimited access to all information of each human individual.¹ The man is currently facing unprecedented psychic experiences, some serious and traumatic. Alvin Toffler noted, for example, since the late '60s, the shock of exponential acceleration pace of life, of the more frequent change of scenery, knowledge, and living environment and called all these *transience*.² Vattimo speaks of disorienting feeling, of man uprooting from the world, by dint of the gradual loss of common sense in a society of generalized communication. Real world is getting dissolved, becoming coplanar with many virtual worlds that man lives in simultaneously.³

¹ No real or ideological wall could withstand the bombardment of information, which, more effective than any propaganda spread democratic thinking and lifestyles around the world. Earth is now surrounded by an "informational cloud" as democratic as sunlight. V. Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc (Romanian Postmodernism)* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999), p. 11.

² Alvin Toffler, *Șocul viitorului (Future Shock)* (transl. Leontina Moșă and Gabriela Mantu, *Foreword* by Silviu Brucan, (Bucharest: Politică, 1973), pp. 56 ff.: "Transience is the new instability in everyday life. It is expressed by a feeling, a sense of impermanence".

³ The perspectivism of modern world, translated by disaggregating of any authority and relativization of values, may produce itself a feeling of disorientation and cultural perplexity. All the old human habits about life in a world relatively static and stable, with traditional values well established, with a clear division of social roles, seem to disintegrating into anarchic flow, of random and less real events. Life is something like a dream or a literary fiction. Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc*, p. 14.

These special features of the postmodern world raise a large number of very complex issues. The most difficult seem to be the moral and religious dilemmas of a world that programmatically disclaims any metaphysical foundation and any absolute value. Nihilism and anarchy of current world are concepts still repellent to the ordinary man, lover of sense and order at any cost, even that of his own freedom. And if the Western world already sat comfortably in postmodernity and is not too much bothering with these problems, however for many inhabitants of other worlds the opportunity to choose between totalitarianism and democracy may seem an option between two evils.⁴

2 Postmodern phenomenon: definition, causes, postulates

Until recently, Christianity was criticized in academic and scientific circles, because it was perceived as unscientific and, therefore, untrue. Today, however, Christianity is rejected simply because it claims the truth. It can be seen nowadays how both scientific circles and mass media condemn as intolerant and arrogant the man who claims to know an objective truth or a universal truth.

What accounts for this odd consensus today? First, it is the postmodernist spirit of our time. According to certain highly influential thinkers today, the truth is essentially political. Truth claims are created by “communities of belief” and not discovered by reason, observation or revelation.

⁴ This explains, perhaps, the return of totalitarian thinking in the countries of Eastern Europe after the euphoria of the first moments of freedom, the fleeing of many people into intolerance, religious fundamentalism, political fanaticism, nationalism etc. V. *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

Postmodernism is, however, more than a movement of intellectuals. It deeply affects our whole culture.⁵

In fact, of all the “isms” that Christianity has been facing in nearly two thousand years, postmodernism hides the greatest menaces. That is now the big defiance, the big challenge to Christianity and to the values the latter defends and promotes. On which ground is based such a categorical judgment? There are several reasons for which postmodernism can be considered, without exaggeration, as the current most formidable opponent – perhaps in the future too – of Christianity, out of which is firstly breaking away the “offer” postmodernism identifying with before people. This is briefly about the offer of freedom, of an unlimited tolerance. Nothing (or almost nothing) is forbidden, everything is allowed. Postmodernists claim total freedom and unlimited tolerance (tolerance is the main and perhaps the only value claimed by postmodernists of all kinds).⁶

Secondly, we notice how the exponents of this trend relate to Christianity. Postmodernists – at least the contemporary ones such as Gianni Vattimo or John D. Caputo – are not affirming that God is dead (Fr. Nietzsche) or God does not exist. On the contrary, they recognize that we are currently witnessing a resurgence of religion on a global scale, of the “triumph of God” (G. Vattimo). However, the interpretation they give to

⁵ For a demonstration of the effect the postmodernism has on every facet of contemporary society, see: Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong With Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996).

⁶ Compared with the austere morality of the Decalogue, especially of the Sermon on the Mount, postmodern morality, based on *light* happiness and narcissistic-hedonistic imperative seems, from the start, a more “advantageous” offer, however less severe, binding, limiting, “painful”. Cf. G. Lipovetsky, *Amurgul datoriei. Etica nedureroasă a noilor timpuri democratice (Twilight duty. The painless Ethics of the new democratic times)* (Bucharest: Babel, 1996), pp. 66 ff.

Christianity is as strange as insidious. Vattimo, for instance, perhaps the most important postmodern philosopher alive⁷, asserts the idea that Christianity has still a chance in the future only if agrees to become a “nonreligious Christianity”, in fact, a de-essentialized Christianity, emptied of its spiritual essence.⁸ Jesus Christ would be, rather, a story, *inter alia*, no more legitimate than any other.

Nevertheless, what is, in fact, *postmodernism*? It must be said that there is no such a single definition of postmodernism until now. In the first phase, the term has been used exclusively in the culture domain: in literary criticism, architecture, art, later extending to other areas of culture such as philosophy, social and human sciences, mass media, etc. As Linda Hutcheon observes, “of very few words is more used and abused in discussions on contemporary culture than that of postmodernism”⁹.

Some consider postmodernism simply a reaction to modernism and to Enlightenment, especially; others believe that it represents an advanced modernism, etc. According to Andreas Huyssen, postmodernism “is part of a cultural transformation that is emerging slowly but surely in Western societies, a change in sensitivity, for whom the term *postmodernism* is, for

⁷ Richard Rorty, another celebrated name, died in 2007.

⁸ Apud Vasile Boari, *Postmodernism și Creștinism (Postmodernism and Christianity)*. <http://www.studenticrestini.ro/tabara/> As David S. Dockery observes – the editor of *Challenge of Postmodernism* volume, that gathers between its covers some excellent essays and critical studies for analysis of postmodern phenomenon and the role of the Christian Church against this phenomenon – postmodernists attack Christianity from other sides. They claim that they do so in the name of freedom, tolerance and even of the benefit of Christianity itself, thereby saved on last minute from destruction by the very postmodernists themselves (sic!), its most dangerous opponents.

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *Politica postmodernismului (Postmodernism Policy)* (trans. by Mircea Deac, Bucharest: Univers, 1997), p. 5.

the time being, fully fit.¹⁰ Gene E. Veith, in turn, synthesizes the features of postmodern phenomenon as such: social constructivism, cultural determinism, rejection of individual identity, refusal of humanism, denial of the transcendent, rejection of reason, revolutionary critique of the existing order.¹¹

One can understand better the essence of postmodernism as a phenomenon, presenting the so-called postmodernist “postulates”.

1. First one is “the distrust of grand narratives”. He was made, illustrated and promoted by renowned philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his book “The Postmodern Condition”, paper that coined and consecrated the term “postmodern” in the area of social and human sciences. For postmodernists, all great narratives are but human constructions, language games, interpretations that can be easily deconstructed, discredited and, ultimately, annihilated. But, alas!, postmodernism is in itself a metanarrative, even if its doctrinaires would never admit it. Postmodernism tries to make us think in a certain way, the same way any metanarrative does, including the Bible.¹²

¹⁰ Jeffrey C. Alexander, Steven Seidman (eds.), *Cultură și societate. Dezbateri contemporane* (Culture and society. Contemporary debates), (transl. Simona Lebădă, Mihaela Sadovschi and Liliana Scărlătescu, Iași: Institutul European, 2001), p. 329.

¹¹ V. Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Illinois: Crossway Books, Wheaton), pp. 15 ff.

¹² As metanarratives both Postmodernism and the Bible have something to say about the way we should think and live. They share a common background, but in other areas their orientation is completely different. If postmodernism seeks to determine us to give up any metanarrative, for us Christians, the Bible is the metanarrative par excellence, our absolute guide. Cf. Bryn MacPhail, *În căutarea adevărului. Un răspuns creștin la postmodernism* (In searching for truth. A Christian response to Postmodernism). <http://www.studenticrestini.ro/tabara/>

2. The second postulate relates to the disputed issue of “objective truth”. For advocates of postmodernism, there is no objective truth. What we call objective truth is merely fiction. According to Vattimo, there is no experience of the truth that is not interpretative. Apparently more concessive, American philosopher Richard Rorty believes that: “The concept of truth is like the concept of God: some need it, while some others are doing very well without him.”¹³

3. The third postulate can be formulated as follows: All that was built by man (or God) can be deconstructed. Deconstructivism or deconstructivist postmodernism, inspired by Nietzsche, but related to the name and work of Jacques Derrida, is the great contribution of postmodernism in terms of culture.¹⁴

4. The fourth postulate aims at the denial of metaphysics (postmodernism is post metaphysical) and radicalization of hermeneutics, as science of interpretation.¹⁵ According to postmodernist’s conception, the death of metaphysics is closely

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers I*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 46 ff.

¹⁴ Instead of trying to discover the true meaning, a consistent view or unifying message in a certain work, deconstructive interpretation carefully dissolves “the contradictory forces of significance” which are at work and waiting to be deciphered in the context of what may be called textual unconscious. In addition, its strategy is also interventionist thus, despite contrary assurances, deconstruction is political. And this is due not only to the ways in which deconstructive interpretation can transform even the logic of a text from the text itself, by revealing the way its logic of language may differ from- and act against logic of the author’s assertions, but also because the deconstructors tend to notice inconsistencies, inequalities and hierarchies displayed or interpreted either by text or by an entire speech or by a whole system of beliefs. Vasile Boari, *Termeni pentru Postmodernism (Terms for Postmodernism)*. <http://www.studenti.crestini.ro/tabara/>.

¹⁵ Gianni Vattimo was a student of Georg Gadamer, considered along with Dilthey, one of the founders of the science of hermeneutics interpretation. But as it is known, metaphysics had already been called into question by Fr. Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.

related to death of metaphysics' God, of the sovereign and almighty God.

5. In the postmodernists view, all religions are human constructs, interpretations and therefore interpretable. In terms of the existence of a (real) religious pluralism, no religion – the adherents believe – is more justified than another and therefore none can lay claim superiority or universality in relation to others.

6. Things and events have no intrinsic meaning. There is only a continuous interpretation of the world. Continuing examination of the world requires a contextual examination, we being part of a historical, cultural context. In case of literary texts, for example, the interpretation does not depend on external text or its author, but relative vision and the particular values of the interpreter.¹⁶ Moreover, once there are plenty of interpreters, there are therefore many interpretations.

7. Language is not neutral, but relative and values-loaded. Language conveys ideology.

8. There are no absolutes; everything is relative, in all levels, from knowledge (cognitive relativism) to moral (ethical and moral relativism) and culture (cultural relativism).¹⁷

Strictly speaking, we cannot understand what is postmodernism and much the less how we would have to answer it unless we don't firstly understand that it represents a response to modernity. However, modernity is characterized as a movement that "revels with the natural"¹⁸, as opposed to the supernatural. It is a movement that emphasized the "individual"

¹⁶ See at the Christian American writer James W. Sire, in his famous work: *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, Downers Groves, 5th ed., 2009), p. 124.

¹⁷ In the last decades of the 20-th century, postmodernism has been associated with relativism and cultural anthropology, supporting each other. Cf. Vasile Boari, *Termeni pentru Postmodernism*, see n. 14.

¹⁸ Richard J. Middleton, Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 22.

and the “power” which reason possesses to arrive at truth. Finally yet importantly, it is a movement that established the idea that progress is measured in our ability to “subdue” the forces of nature and use them for our benefit.¹⁹

Thus, postmodernism abandons modernism, embodied by humanistic philosophy of the European Enlightenment, emerged with the idea of René Descartes, of the autonomous man, i.e. one who starts from his own thoughts (the famous saying “I think, therefore I am”), excluding any necessity of God or revelation. Modernists assumed that the mind is a “mirror of nature,” in other words, that our perceptions of reality correspond to the world as it is. From this assumption, modernists have coined their own vision of progress, praising technological discoveries and human mastery over nature.

Meanwhile, modernism sowed the seeds of its own extinguishment. The problem of modernity is denoted by “myth of progress losing ground” noema. It is argued, therefore, that the “myth of progress” began to disintegrate with the first bombs launched in World War I, in order that afterwards, the Great Depression of the 1930s brings its contribution to this process.

Postmodernists affirm that modern rationalism and technological proliferation brought us to the brink of disaster. The myth of “modern progress” ends up in a nightmare of violence, both for those it marginalizes, and for the whole earth, as well. Therefore, we see nowadays so many people who show a special interest in primitive cultures and in those views on life and world that promote unity between humanity and nature

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 14. The authors describe these characteristics of modernity in terms of different “layers”. The first of these layers, *scientism*, provides authorized knowledge to humanity. *Technicism*, the second layer refers to the effective transfer of scientific knowledge in the control exerted over creation. The third layer, *economism*, supports the idea that a high standard of living is the culmination of human life.

and which no longer consider humanity more important than nature.²⁰

3 Human depersonalization, consequence of involved postmodernist vectors

Postmodern world draws last consequences of the knowledge effort relativization and even getting atheist of the world, in that it fully abandons everything is untranslatable in its means of communication. Information no more creates person, but the relationship between providers and receivers of information tends to be purely commercial. The information is sold to anyone and can be bought not for its own sake, but to be harnessed in a new production.²¹

Technology spreads fragmenting human knowledge issues and disvaluing life standard of people imposing to postmodernity to relearn the world through technology vocabulary of all kinds. We are therefore required a certain amount of technological expertise and information that Zigmunt Polish sociologist Bauman calls it a learning process “compact”, “that comes with the tacit acceptance or declared collective competence and authority conception world, seen as a collection of fragments conception that all the experts, despite the diversity of views, maintain and promote unanimously”.²²

Thus, all of us who are forced to “get literate again”, we lose the ability to see the world and man as wholes that coexist in favor

²⁰ See, inter alia: Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum, *Postmodern Impact: Religion*, pp. 200-214.

²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Condiția postmodernă. Raport asupra cunoașterii* (The Postmodern Condition. Report on Knowledge) (transl. and foreword Ciprian Mihali, 2nd ed., Cluj: Ideea Design & Print, 2003), p. 15. See also, first edition: *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

²² Zigmunt Bauman, *Etica postmodernă (Postmodern Ethics)* (transl. Doina Lica, Timișoara: Amarcord, 2000), p. 214.

of a fragmentary concept, which requires depersonalizing questioning.

The antithesis between man's personalization and depersonalization is a schizoid feature of postmodern world. Depersonalized man is a man without refuge in soul or faith whatsoever, so that his only escape, his only illusory outlet is the sin.²³

It is interesting how famous Swiss Protestant theologian Emil Brunner had seen at the middle of last century that the true root of all social disorder is the massification or depersonalization of people in the economic world, that is, man has become or is becoming increasingly more like a dependent and senseless wheel of a huge impersonal machines. Moreover, massification, depersonalization of human life in the political and economic world are issues that directly and immediately concern the Church. And Church, by what she did not rather than by what she did is also responsible for this social malady.²⁴ The modern cutting edge technology is often blamed for the process of depersonalization as if technology would work as an inevitable fate of humanity. Although the connection between modern technology and depersonalization of human life is undeniable, their causal relationship is superficial. In fact, it should be said that it confuses cause and effect. Ultimately, man's depersonalization is not the effect, but rather the cause of modern technological progress or, in any case, the main source of its depersonalizing results. Technology is not an inevitable destiny, but a product of people's plans and values. However, the deepest cause of the depersonalization of man is the

²³ See Dorin Octavian Picioruș, *Lumea postmodernă și depersonalizarea omului* (Postmodern world and human depersonalization) (Bucharest: Teologie pentru azi, 2005), p. 312.

²⁴ Emil Brunner, *Communism, Capitalism and Christianity* (transl. Norman P. Goldhawk, London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), cited in *Communism, capitalism and Christianity* (transl. Mircea Platon, *Convorbiri literare*, August 2010). See also: <http://cumpana-o-viziune-ortodoxa.blogspot.com/>

progressive secularization of his thought and will, his alienation from that faith which constitutes the basis of sovereign value of personality and community.²⁵

The idea that the mechanical technique system produces – in the field of individual and social life – a depersonalization and leveling phenomenon to create a standard type with the ability to reproduce in the series, was reinforced by other Brunner's contemporary thinkers. Thus, the Russian thinker Nicholas Berdyaev categorically asserts that "technical civilization, by its very principle is impersonalist"²⁶; impersonalism represents its natural and even necessary condition. But person is opposed to machine through a particular something that makes out of everyone the image of God, an autonomous center of energy, feeling and thinking, a free being.

Therefore, human feels suffocated in this "electrified and radioactive atmosphere", in this "cold and metal reality." Technical formulation destroys the beauty of the old culture, consisting of individual and unique human life. Now everything is getting uniform and collective; it is "the series production era" as the same N. Berdyaev names it.²⁷

The life's automation and robotization effect, at any cost, is fully felt in desacralization of human activities phenomenon. If at the most archaic levels of culture, to live as a human being was in itself a religious act – as often used to emphasize Mircea Eliade

²⁵ In modern times this depersonalization, which is identical with the destruction of the community, took two forms, which at first glance appear to be opposites, but have both increased in the same strain: individualistic liberalism, which we know as capitalism in the economic sphere, and deterministic collectivism, that we know as totalitarian communism.

²⁶ Nikolai Berdiaev, *L'homme et la machine (Man and machine)* (Paris: „Je sers”, 1933), p. 43, apud Constantin C. Pavel, *Tragedia omului în cultura modernă (Human tragedy in modern culture)* (collection “Impasuri și semen”, coord. Christos Yannaras, Bucharest: Anastasia, 1997), p. 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

– since food, sexual life and work were sacramental values,²⁸ today we're moved by the leaders of the society to a desacralization of work, which lead to human depersonalization and build robots scheduled to blindly execute a program, lest this work bring people near to each other, on the contrary, reaching mutual rejection under the pretext of assumed competence. Jesus Christ's words: "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for fishing." (Luke 5, 4), by which he called Peter and his companions to normal everyday activity, give expression to the sacredness of ordinary work, being an important step towards building Christian personality. This theme is more actual than ever once working, emptied of its sacred meaning, no longer brings people together than to utter strike slogans, in order to highlight the unfulfillment of feelings, frustration etc. In the absence of anchoring and reporting human activity to the God-Man, Jesus Christ, both success and failure are confined with spiritual bankruptcy. This happens because if, on one hand, success at work is haunted by pride and kidnaps the value that imprints Christian personality to man on earth, ensuring heavenly treasure, on the other hand, work failure is waylaid by discouraging, leading to faith, hope and love decrease, ultimately leading to alienation of man from God and his neighbor.

However, human depersonalization phenomenon has its roots earlier to 60's and 70's of 20th century, since when it is conceded that humankind stepped into postmodern stage. Humanist sciences began this "erosion" phenomenon, just by replacing the theological mystery of the *human persona* with mathematical finding. Person is now perceived as a simple number along with countless others, possible to replace at any time.

²⁸ See Mircea Eliade, *Nostalgia originilor. Istorie și semnificație în religie (The Quest. History and meaning in Religion)* (transl. Cezar Baltag, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), p. 6.

At the Christian theological level, the human persona is an apophatic existence that can never be captured in its complexity. Christianity can correctly pronounce on human not because it claims his definition and conceptual exhaustion, but merely emphasizing his uniqueness and un-repeatability, his ecclesiastical mode of existence, which distinguishes and not the separation between personal and communitarian aspect.

The separation between the personal and communitarian plan, leads – at the society level – to either individualistic capitalism or to socialism addressing humanity at global scale. “In our time, we felt that what interests man primarily is the mystery of persona and the communion among persons, as opposed to individualistic ideologies and philosophies that perceive human as an amorphous mass,” remarked Father Dumitru Stăniloae.

The fundamental mistake of these ideological systems lies in two aspects: on the one hand, in the failure to report human persona to God, and on the other hand, as a consequence of the former, in ignoring the unique and irreplaceable quality of the man and his growth in authentic communion.

However, the man of ideologies is not the concrete man, with his needs, desires, ideals, but the man suppressed in the collective consciousness. He turns into some indistinct part of the cosmic crowd, where people are alike by what everyone wants to be different. This is the dissolving experience of massification that accredits the furious idea of human self-sufficiency. The person proposed by ideologies is the man tired and bored of him.²⁹ “Removing the concrete human in the name of humanity or, in general, on behalf of humanism – said Professor G. Mantsaridis – is inhuman and anti-Christian.”³⁰

²⁹ Viorel I. Coman, *Depersonalizarea ideologiilor umaniste (Depersonalization of humanistic ideologies)*, *Ziarul Lumina* (Monday, January, 18, 2010).

³⁰ In this way, as N. Berdyaev writes, “for the greatness of superman, for the happiness of mankind in the distant future, for the world revolution, for infinite and boundless freedom of the individual or

In Christianity, the community does not destroy the persona because there is a tension between individual and community. The Church neither “personalizes” the laws or institutions, nor converts people into mechanisms, but seeks enhancement of individuals and institutions within the laws of society and beyond. Problems are solved based on concrete persona. The crisis of either institution or community can be dissipated through suppressing the crisis of the people underlying the specific institution. Man remains a tangible value in himself, by the very dignity bestowed upon him by God. Revelation of human personality, which Jesus Christ has entrusted us, finds expression in its unity with the community. It is a fundamental duty for a Christian not to let himself corrupted by the secularizing offers or alternatives of the world that has forgotten God, whether they are called communism, capitalism, consumerism or New Age-ism, because all stem from the same error, and in different degrees or ways, are denials of personality and community.³¹

Because we referred to New Age, let us say, in passing, that any human endeavor subsumed to so insidious a spirituality is centered precisely on the cancellation of the mystery of the human persona, that stands in a living and personal connection with God.³² This explains better by listing the defining features

equality of all, it is allowed to murder man or group of men, to transform every human being into simple instrument at the service of a higher ideal or high end. All are prerequisites for boundless freedom of superman (*extreme individualism*) or for infinite equality of mankind (*extreme collectivism*.”

³¹ “The community is only where there is a real consciousness of personality and a true, spontaneous sense of union people, both pointing to the religious sphere.” Emil Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order* (transl. Mary Hottinger, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), p. 280.

³² For details, see, *inter alia*, Alexandru Arion, *Influența sectelor de origine hindusă în Europa și America* (The influence of Hindu originating sects in Europe and America), *Studii Teologice*, Series II, 1-2 (2003) pp. 243-246 (pp. 223-246); Francoise Champion, *Spirit difuz*,

of New Age spirituality: 1) the depersonalization of God; 2) pantheistic deification of man; 3) derealization of the world, i.e. objective reality being declared an illusion and a temporary place to play of the pure spirit; 4) preaching redemption, actually self-redemption by different techniques and rituals to acquire the enlightenment state; 5) identification of evil with non-enlightenment spiritual state.³³

Canceling the personality character of man is a natural consequence of depersonalization of God through cosmoteandric pantheistic model, advocated by many scientists, led by Albert Einstein, in which God himself is seen in the manner of digest pantheism for space.³⁴ Theologically speaking, we cannot conceive God Himself, in His essence, in His mystery. This is equivalent with reducing to silence, because neither thought nor speech can contain the infinite in those concepts, which attempting to defining, do nothing but limiting. Therefore, the Greek Fathers have resorted to knowing God to the negative way. The negative way (apophatic) is an attempt to know God not in what He is (i.e. according to our experience as created beings), but in what He is not. It proceeds through a series of negations.³⁵ Outside of Christianity, however, that ends up in the depersonalization of both God and man, the latter looking for the former. Therefore, a Gregory of Nyssa, a Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, do not perceive the apophatism as revelation, but the revelation receiver. They

eclectism și sincretism (Spirit diffuse, eclectism and syncretism), Jean Delumeau (ed.), *Religiile lumii (World Religions)* (transl. Carmen Stoean, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), pp. 700-728.

³³ Hermann Schulze-Berndt, apud Daniela Damian, *Castaneda - a promoter of New Age Movement*. <http://www.phantasma.ro/caiete/caiete/caiete8/11.html>.

³⁴ V. Alexandru Arion, *Influența sectelor de origine hindusă în Europa și America*, p. 245.

³⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *Introducere în Teologia Ortodoxă (Introduction to Orthodox Theology)* (transl. Lidia & Remus Rus, Collection "Spiritual Horizons", Bucharest: Enciclopedică, 1993), pp. 37-38.

realize the personal presence of a hidden God. As such, the negative way does not lead to a vacuum in which subject and object are resorbed, as according to the pantheistic model, which postulates an existential identity between cosmos, man and God. For the Eastern Fathers, the *human persona* is not getting dissolved, but has the chance of a face-to-face encounter with God, a union without confusion, due to uncreated divine grace.³⁶

4 Globalization, desacralization, depersonalization in postmodernism

Eastern Area entered willy-nilly, the globalization algorithm, revealing the different ways to be charged in actuality. Thus, Greek theologian George Mantsaridis sees globalization as a challenge in that confrontation, out of which the Church could revive motivation for a common understanding of ecclesiology. The author opposes globalization to Christian universality, whose premise is abandoning selfishness. This universality is built inside the world, at the person's level, "within man and history, through effort and self-sacrifice."³⁷ If the human person will not fight against the epidemic of globalization, then this impersonal system will lead to the destruction of the personal character of the Christian life, placing at risk the very real and tangible human community. Starting from here, Mantsaridis affirms the belief that a global society is not built on the homogenization of men, but by raising them at the dignity of *persona*.³⁸

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 38.

³⁷ Georgios Mantsaridis, *Globalizare și universalitate, himeră și adevăr (Globalization and universality, illusion and truth)* (transl. Vasile Răducă, Bucharest: Bizantină, 2002), p. 29.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 19. For details: Leon Arion, Alexandru L. Arion, *Globalizarea, gigantică mutație civilizațională (Globalization, gigantic civilizational mutation), Religion in society at the beginning of the 20th century.*

Breaking away from God, modern man refers to himself, to his mind manifested in different moral codes and cultural-religious ideologies, while remaining in complete unstable equilibrium. Globalization comes to offer fulcrum by making an identity belonging to a category or group identity, a collective consciousness, behind which hides confused man. The new professional, cultural or techno-electronic identities (in which man is a digital code in a network,) come to replace both religious and cultural identity of the traditional man, and the national-political one of modern man. We are witnessing thus the depersonalization of consciousness in which personal moral act will be the result of impersonal decisions taken by a simulacrum of collective consciousness that man is reported at. The vacancy left by the ouster of God from consciousness is taken by someone or something called demon in theology or autonomous scientific knowledge in postmodern culture.

As the Church is the ark (suggested by its physical form of vessel) that can lead man safely on the sea of life to the finality of salvation, the cyber-lifestyle (surfing as dependency), the computer may be the "piece of plank" that catches him in the endless surfing through the vast virtual life (i.e. the Internet), for the purpose of ultimate depersonalization and dehumanization. We emphasize the phrase "may be", because in many cases it does not fortunately so happen. Used sparingly and taken as any part of human life, the Internet is very useful. One can enjoy its benefits without developing addiction to it, but this is today - especially among adolescents and young people - increasingly difficult. Similar to a trend in art, literature and fashion, the Internet shapes consciousness, leading to moral implications at both the individual and group level. One cannot speak clearly about an ethics network yet, or a cyber-ethics, but as we talk of cyber-space, or cyber-relationship,

there is only one step up to a cyber-moral literally observed by all Internet users.³⁹

From the Orthodox point of view, the challenge of the Internet cannot be treated but in the same manner as any other challenge. “Nothing new,” says Ecclesiastes (1:10). Elder Paisios the Athonite summarizes in accessible language the spiritual approach of intellectual things, out of which category Internet is a part: “and when the work is complex and mind must be slightly absorbed, but the heart does not (...), do not give your heart to the affairs; but only give hands and mind (...); when the heart is in Christ then chores are sanctified, there is a continuous inner spiritual rest. When the heart is given to God, meditation will also be to God, and the mind to work.”⁴⁰ Living only on the utility level, or even on that of a necessity (actually a conditioning of the same usefulness) of external order, the Internet will not affect personal freedom, will not make changes in human consciousness and will not leave marks on the moral level.⁴¹

Refusing to accept as rational any act of separating man from God, as some postmodernist spirits claim, pompously self-called “post-Christian”, Christos Yannaras states that one cannot speak of the possibility of deciphering the mystery of man and being otherwise than theologically. “In the tradition of the undivided Church and in its orthodox historical continuity we find out the truth about man searching the revelation of truth about God. This is so because a descriptive anthropology does

³⁹ For details: Radu Trifon, *Creștinism și globalizare. Omul modern între progresul digital și deriva morală (Christianity and globalization. Modern man between digital progress and moral drift)*. See: http://www.nistea.com/media/internet/crestinism_si_globalizare/globalizarea-implicatii.htm#_ftnref70

⁴⁰ Venerable Paisios the Athonite, *Cu dragoste și durere pentru omul contemporan (With love and grief for the contemporary man)* (Mount Athos: Annunciation Cell, Hermitage Lacu, 2000), pp. 174-175.

⁴¹ Radu Trifon, *Creștinism și globalizare. Omul modern între progresul digital și deriva morală*, see note 39.

not suffices us (which the so-called “human sciences” can provide us as well), but look for an explanation of the event that is human existence, the enlightenment of those human side that remain inaccessible to the objective causality”⁴². However, basic for this Christian anthropology is that man wears a divine imprint, through which we understand both his relationship with God and the manner man exists, as a persona. It is a comprehensive evaluation of man without the reductions of secular anthropology and without exhibition of some aspects over others; it is a complex perspective that holds together two levels of human existence: nature and persona.⁴³

The effects of desacralization or secularization and, subsequently, of globalization - this “gigantic mutation of Civilization” (Ioan I. Ică jr.) -, is ineluctably reflected on all psychical and spiritual human compartments. Thus, secularization of mind has made its presence felt in the immediate thinking about human situation. The paradox of any self-exaltation (desire of self-determination without communion) is that inevitably ends in a dramatic fall: wanting to be more than he was ever since, man managed to become much less than he was. As Mircea Eliade observes, it is about the impoverishment brought by the secularization of a religious behavior.⁴⁴

⁴² Christos Yannaras, *Abecedar al credinței. Introducere în teologia ortodoxă (Primer of faith. Introduction to Orthodox Theology)* (transl. Constantin Coman, Bucharest: Bizantină, 1996), p. 71.

⁴³ Doru Costache, Antropocentrismul modern și oferta antropologiei eclesiale. Elemente pentru misiunea Bisericii (Modern anthropocentrism and ecclesiastical Anthropology offer. Items for the Church's Mission), *Annals, University of Craiova, Theology Series*, 10 (2002), p. 231. It is a perspective, which reflected in the “human sciences”, from biology to psychology, and from genetics to sociology, appears like a lot of fragments of a broken mirror, mirror so difficult to reconstitute, given the fact that some of these fragments were lost.

⁴⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul (The Sacred and the Profane)* (transl. Brândușa Prelipceanu, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995), p. 8.

The naturalized man, depersonalized, reduced to the status of nature, could not be assessed but only as an individual of a species, of a species that seemed – and that impression did not disappear during the twentieth century, on the contrary – not to know solidarity, unable to survive under the frame of community. The moment he began to no longer define himself as “supernatural”, the man has lost any sense of his verticality and greatness, despite the proposed flattering portrait of the Renaissance, reducing himself to a set of automatisms, inspired by mathematical-mechanical image of Galilean universe.⁴⁵

This naturalized, modern areligious man assumes a tragic existence, and it must be said, his existential choice is not without certain grandeur. He descended however, as Eliade points out, from *homo religiosus* and is, whether he wants it or not, the latter’s work, that means he was formed due to the assumed conditions of his ancestors, being ultimately the result of a process of desacralization. As “Nature” is a product of gradual secularization of the cosmos, the work of God, the result of a profane man desacralization human existence.

As “Nature” is a product of gradual secularization of the cosmos, being the work of God, the profane man is the result of human existence desacralization. This means that areligious man has created himself, unlike his predecessor, striving to “empty” oneself of any hint of religiosity and transhuman meaning. He recognizes himself to the extent that gets free and “purified” of the “superstitions” of his ancestors. In other words, profane man, whether he wants it or not, retains traces of human religious behavior, but devoid of any religious significance.

⁴⁵ Doru Costache, *Antropocentrismul modern și oferta antropologiei eclesiale. Elemente pentru misiunea Bisericii* p. 218. Vladimir Lossky notes that the way modern man has become accustomed to seeing the world, i.e. without shape, devoid of center and theological significance, a model of dissolution, was passed onto the man himself; basically, he has become today what he thought about the world to be. Cf. *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit (Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church)* (transl. Vasile Răducă, Bucharest: Anastasia, 1993), pp. 153-154.

Whatever he might do, carries a legacy and cannot abolish the past, being himself its product.

5 Conclusions

Postmodernism is the new challenge both for the Church and Christian society. Postmodern world is characterized by two main landmarks: disbelief in objective truth and a deep feeling that morality is relative.

Orthodox theologian Constantin Pavel emphasizes that Christian morality circumvent and unlimited trust towards technical progress have a number of tragic consequences about existence. Despite the optimism of the modern man, the goal pursued with such consistency – happiness – has not been achieved, and in the first half of the 20th century it's become evident that material progress has not enticed a moral or spiritual one. Man reaches an automatization of his own life, is getting depersonalised, and becomes a “blasé man”, a “robot man”. Informations disseminated by the media tend to become a new spiritual food for humans, substituting an authentic life. Yet the game of gratuity and transiency proves to be perhaps the most poignant, says C. Pavel, in the arts, which are no longer presenting more than a “caricature” of reality in general.⁴⁶

Father Justin Popovich, the great Serbian theologian, characterizing the man brought about by humanism, says:

“Deserted is the humanist man, frighteningly desolate because consciousness and feeling of personal immortality were banished from him. And without it, can man be fully human? Oh, so limited is European man, tremendously finite and pygmy and narrowed (...). Aged, atrophied, bordered to the matter, degenerated man of humanism was right when he testified by the mouth of the wise, that

⁴⁶ Marilena Andrei, in: *Preface to Constantin C. Pavel, Tragedia omului în cultura modernă*, p. 7.

he descended from monkeys. Reaching at the likeness of animals regarding ancestry why not also reaches and come to the same morale with them? Nothing could be more suitable for the humanist man than the dictum: *Homo homini lupus est!*"⁴⁷

According to Orthodox anthropology, man not only *is*, but *becomes*, because is called for to be above himself, to be more than himself, to unite with a nature beyond himself and all creation: to unite with God and, to a certain extent and in a certain sense, to become "god". Apophatism of persona is a phrase to be interpreted in the light of the latter assertion. Language negation is more appropriate when you propose to talk about something that always makes himself and beyond himself, in union with something greater than himself. But this call and peculiarity of persona do not refer to a unique path, as all is discussed within the limits of identity, of unrepeatable and uniqueness.⁴⁸ There are only real people and actual experience, unique and unrepeatable of each of them.

"Becoming into persona" of human or actualizing of his divine image translates in fact more fully with perfection or *deification*. In Orthodoxy, it can no longer be about ineffable ecstatic merging, for example Plotinus was referring to, or are talking about the New-Age pantheistic ideologies, but a *personal* relationship that, far from decreasing the Absolute, reveals that as the "other"; in other words, to be always new, inexhaustible. This is the relationship between the persona of God, a nature

⁴⁷ Justin Popovici, *Biserica Ortodoxă și Ecumenismul (Orthodox Church and Ecumenism)* (transl. from Serbian Adrian Tănăsescu, Petru Vodă: St. Archangels Monastery, 2002), p. 68. Source Edition: Apologeticum 2003. See: http://www.doxolog.ro/web/apologetica/Sf. Justin Popovici/Biserica_Ortodoxa_si_ecumen.htm

⁴⁸ Alexandru L. Arion, *Taina Persoanei. Considerații teologice privind valoarea persoanei umane (Mystery of Persona. Theological considerations regarding the value of the human person)*, (*Mărturie comună. Credință și știință în dialog - Common Testimony. Faith and Science in Dialogue*, 1(4), Târgoviște, 2009), p. 183 (pp. 187-200).

inaccessible in itself, and the human persona, the man's nothingness itself, which in this union, is not self-canceling, but transfigures and remains or, more precisely, becomes in the true meaning of the word, a persona.⁴⁹

In the spirit of Eastern personalism, Father Stăniloae emphasizes the intrinsic link between persona and communion:

“The persona of other is the source of my life, it's my own life when communicates to me with total love; the joy for me to be able to communicate to that, to get it as to communicate to it is also my life. Perhaps this is the most peculiar persona's own definition: source of life for the other and joy of life received from another.”⁵⁰

We live in a world that is becoming every day more postmodern in thought. A world we are bombarded in every day with all kinds of “offers” for happiness. A world where, postmodernists say, truth does not exist and that everything or almost everything is allowed. Nietzsche expressed the best way the postmodernist perspective: “God is dead”, “Nothing is true and everything is permitted.” In contrast, another great creator, Dostoevsky, warns: “If Almighty God does not exist”, then “neither virtue exists” and “everything is permitted.” A truth that the postmodern world we live in begins to feel increasingly more.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *Introducere în Teologia Ortodoxă (Introduction to Orthodox Theology)*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu (Immortal image of God)* (Craiova: Metropolitan of Oltenia Publisher, 1987), p. 130.