The Secularization of the Church: Causes and Theological Remedies

Daniel G. Oprean
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania
daniaoprean@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore a few factors that contribute to the tendency towards secularization in the evangelical churches in Central and Eastern Europe. It further suggests theological remedies to address the causes of secularization. The thesis of this paper is that there are three causes for the tendency towards secularization. First is the secularization of theological education, second is the crisis of ecclesial identity, and third is the secularization of leadership. The first proposal of this paper is that the remedy for the secularization of theological education is redefining theology as communion, theological education as transformation, and theological formation as discipleship. Second, the remedy for the crisis of ecclesial identity that leads to negative identity markers is the replacement of the external conformation model of Christian life (which leads to social isolation, subculturality, and spiritual abuse) with the internal transformation model, which leads to a healthy spirituality and a meaningful theology of mission. Third and finally, the remedy for the secularization of leadership is the rediscovery of the kenotic model of Christian life and ministry.

Key words: secularization, theology, education, formation, spirituality

Introduction

In contemporary world, secularization is defined in many ways. Most definitions contain the idea that society is no longer led by Christian principles and values. These have been progressively replaced by principles and values that originate in

what some call the "new religions" of the contemporary world, namely welfare, human rights, and entertainment.

The thesis of this article is that contemporary evangelical churches are not immune to the process of secularization. It can be seen in the way theological education is conceived, in the way identity crises are addressed, and the way church governance is approached. Therefore, we will here attempt to diagnose a few symptoms of the tendency towards secularization in the church, specifically the replacement of biblical principles with secularized principles. The diagnosis focuses on three possible causes for this tendency, first in theological education, second, in an ecclesial identity crisis, and third, in leadership.

After diagnosing the three causes, we will propose three theological remedies. First: the secularization of theological education can be prevented and cured through a series of redefinitions. Theology must be redefined as communion. Theological education must be redefined as transformation. And theological formation must be redefined as discipleship. Second, the church faces a crisis of ecclesial identity because it defines the Christian life in terms of an externally-focused model of conformation, which leads to social isolation, subculturality, and spiritual abuse. This identity crisis can be prevented and cured by replacing the external conformation model with an internally-focused model of transformation, which leads to a healthy spirituality and a meaningful theology of mission. Third, the secularization of leadership can be prevented and cured through rediscovering the kenotic model of Christian life and ministry.

The Tendency Towards Secularization in Theological Education

The first cause of the increasing tendency towards secularization in the evangelical churches in Central and Eastern Europe is the approach to theological education. Two symptoms lead to this diagnosis. First, the growing separation of theological education from the church and its treatment as a mere academic discipline has weakened the immune system of the evangelical body. In many cases, to be theologian today is not to have a role in the life of the church as a teacher or thinker who will discover anew the principles that should govern the life of the church. Without a spiritual calling to the ministry, people who were supposed to enter a journey of continuous theological formation toward becoming the spiritual doctors of the evangelical churches rather became religious functionaries, delivering religious services. Because of this lack of spiritual growth, enhanced by this continuous theological formation, church leaders tend to imitate the example of worldly models of leadership and community. This *mimesis* (imitation) is in contrast with the imitation of the example of God in Christ that Apostle Paul commands believers to grow. Karl Barth (1936, xi) discusses a relevant example

of such a distortion of theological education in the prolegomena of his *Church Dogmatics,* where he describes and criticizes the secularization of the German Protestant Church of his days in terms of "the intoxication of their Nordic blood and in their political Fuhrer (Leader)."

As theological educators, we must properly recognize this tendency towards the demise of biblical principles and their replacement with secular ideological ideas, which should in turn constantly remind us that our students follow us not only in the positive but also in negative. Exactly here is the first dimension of the perennial task of theologians, namely, to *re-define the way we are doing theology*. Redefining the task is vital if we are to slow down the tendency towards secularization described above. In this context, there are three lessons we should always remember when we are speaking about theological education. First, theology is to speak with, for, and about God. Theology is not about us, about our knowledge, or our wisdom. Theology is and should always be a spiritual adventure of discovering the beauty of God in the unique relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, relationships into which we are embraced. Theology is therefore *communion*, a communion that is cruciform, the vertical dimension being our relationship with God, and the horizontal dimension being our relationship with God's creation.

The second lesson that we should always remember is that theological education is a process that never stops in our lives. It is a process where we continue to unite *teoria* (contemplation of divine reality) with *praxis* (what we do) (Lossky 1967, 232). The order should always be first contemplation then praxis after the contemplative work is done, because we have nothing to offer in and from ourselves. As St. Paul said, "in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Therefore, theological education is not merely information, it is *transformation*. This process should see our lives continually being transformed in the image of Christ, in order for our ministries to be transformed continually by the power of the Spirit.

The third lesson is that theological formation means *discipleship*, not merely imitating the great and influential characters of our theological schools but progressing through and beyond all the temporal models until we embrace *the* Model that inspires all the models, our Lord Jesus Christ. Discipleship is a process in which we learn first the truth that only when we deeply contemplate the reality of God are we able to imitate him. As Paul urges the church in Ephesus through the synthesis of indicatives and imperatives of the Christian life, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1). This is the only way to stop the secularization of theological education, done by people who think and act as if they are qualified to do all the works of the

church, even though they have no call or gifts for all ministries. In so doing, they deny the manifestation of the Spirit in the diversity of gifts in the community!

In sum, if theology is thinking, speaking, and living with, for, and about God, then theological formation should be done by educators who embody *a biblical way of thinking*, which has been developed in *a biblical spirituality*, which is their foundation for *a biblical way of living*, expressed in a *biblical ministry*. In this way, theological education will be the context that produces BBC (Biblically Balanced Christianity), a concept that the late John Stott taught us through his words and ministry. We have three key words that express the truths that we should always remember: communion, transformation and imitation. Communion in God with each other, transformation in Christ for each other, and imitation of God in Christ, by the power of the Spirit for the entire world.

The Ecclesial Identity Crisis

The second cause for the tendency of secularization within the evangelical churches in Central and Eastern Europe is the crisis of ecclesial identity. The first symptom of this crisis is the symptom of *negative identity markers*. In many cases, evangelicals have been champions of the development of the negative identity markers. For a long period in their history, the evangelicals in this part of the world have defined themselves by what they do not do rather than by what they do as a result of what they are. In many churches, this can lead to promoting a process of external conformation, or "automaton conformity." Consequently, many individuals caught in this reality resort to a set of escape mechanisms: "renouncing his individual integrity, destroying others, withdrawal from the world so completely that it loses its threat, and the inflation of oneself psychologically to such extent that the world outside becomes small in comparison" (Fromm 1991, 159).

There is another way in which the symptoms of worldly mimesis are visible. When the goal is external conformation to a set of rules rather than the normal biblical process of transformation into the image (εἰκών) and example of Christ, then the *ecclesia* of Christ becomes a political group instead of a spiritual community characterized by a "conversion that transforms" (Sider 1993, 101). When conversion is regarded as a moment rather than a transformational process, tension arises between two opposite models, the *external conformation model* and the *internal transformation model*. If transformation is a life-long process, producing a transformation that affects positively and progressively all the domains of life, then the external conformation model requires a "holiness" of separation, isolation from the dirty world outside, based on the desire to remain pure. Although it is true that being pure in an impure world is clearly a biblical requirement, it is also equally clear that no one can achieve purity in any other way than the

way Christ himself was pure and holy. Michael Riddell (1998, 80) captures the uniqueness of Jesus' holiness:

> For Christ holiness was not only external but internal, grounded in his relationship with God. For Jesus separation is a "separation *to* rather than separation *from*." Jesus is holy not because he isolated himself from either people or the world, nor because of some elaborate system of ritual purification. He is holy because he is consumed with passion for both God and the world. Because the love of God is burning in his heart, Jesus is holy. And because he is holy, the entire world has become clean to him.

The social isolation produced by an external conformation model of transformation is dangerous, psychologically and spiritually. It also results in the phenomenon of subculturalization, namely the tendency to oppose Christ to the culture (cf. Niebuhr 1951, 45). This in turn results in the creation of a denominational subculture that leads to differences that the Bible does not require, to legalism, and to escapism (cf. Jurcă 2002, 9). When legalism passes the personal level and becomes the norm for spirituality, this excess sometimes leads to spiritual abuse, because it develops a "world of fantasy" disconnected from the reality of the present world (cf. Inch 1972, 30).

In this context, individuals are often converted to a denominational subculture instead of being converted to Christ. After all, Christ not only refused to create a subculture of his own but also confronted energetically those who attempted to do so, as exemplified in Matthew 23. Christ proclaimed from within a denominational subculture is often a caricatural Christ who looks more like the members of that denomination than the real Christ (biblical, contemporary, and eternal). John Stott 1979, 14) described the mission of such churches as "irresponsible escapism:"

> Too many of us evangelicals either have been, or maybe still are, irresponsible escapists. Fellowship with each other in the Church is much more congenital than service in an apathetic and even hostile environment outside. Of course we make occasional evangelistic raids into enemy territory (that is our evangelical specialty); but then we withdraw again, across the moat, into our Christian castle (the security of the evangelical fellowship), pull up the drawbridge, and even close our ears to the pleas of those who batter on the gate.

Such churches often become spaces where people are rejected or accepted according with their performances, as required by the denominational subculture. Such churches are important candidates for the following judgment: "Churches where tired, wounded people are given formulas and advice to help in time of need, or are shamed for having a need, do not represent the true King" (Johnson & VanVonderen 1991, 206). At the very least, the result at a personal level tends to be perpetual immaturity and even deconversion. The Bible speaks clearly about this danger in 2 Peter 2:20-22.

The second symptom of the ecclesial identity crisis is that of unhealthy spirituality, as a result of the misuse of Scriptures. This results in imposing what the Bible does not require, or the reduction of spirituality to superficial practices. As Robert N. Nash, Jr (1997, 3) says: "spirituality has been reduced to the rote memorization of scripture and the defense of propositional truths about God. God is to be obeyed not experienced."

Many preachers and churches abuse the Scriptures in all sorts of ways. From the use of Scriptures as a "horoscope" for the personal devotional life to the kind of preaching that transforms the Scriptures into psychological "guns" or "swords" to scare or manipulate needy persons. The misuse of Scriptures is one of the most widespread tools in the promotion of spiritual abuse, well described by Robert E. Webber (1999, 118, 124):

> For most of us brought up in the evangelical branch of Christianity, spirituality has been defined almost exclusively in terms of a handy list of do's and don'ts. On the negative side, spirituality means abstinence from worldly habits such as drinking, smoking, dancing, and card playing; on the positive side, spirituality is defined in terms of church attendance, prayer, regular Bible reading, and witnessing. This formula is usually set forth as a sure way to grow spiritually. But for me it led to a spiritual legalism lacking authenticity and life. Spirituality, instead of being free to affirm what the Bible teaches and what the church has always affirmed is reduced to legalism. Spirituality is measured by a separation from definable 'worldly' practices. While these rules may produce a well-trained 'spiritual army', they often fail to bring a person into a deeper spiritual life.

In many cases, this results in the cultivation of an unhealthy spirituality that affects familial, church, and social life. One relevant example of this unhealthiness is explored by Eric Titus, an American theologian. In his penetrating paper, *Dispensational Hermeneutics in the United States: Their Origins and Implications of Their Role in International Policy,* Titus shows what happens when sound biblical theology is corrupted by political agenda and ideology (Titus 2009, 360). Churches today, tempted as they are to become tools in the corrupted political sphere, would be wise to consider his conclusion and resist the temptation. "Christian pastors, theologians, scholars and laity alike must speak out from the pulpit, pen and pew. We simply must insist upon an eschatology that is Christologically centered rather than catastrophically focused. One brings hope, grace and life. The other promises us a future of ashes" (Titus 2009, 366).

Secularization of Church Governance

The third factor pushing the evangelical churches in Central and Eastern Europe toward secularization is the adoption of secular concepts of leadership in

the governance of the Christian community. Ministers and churches replace the biblical principles of servanthood and faithfulness to the Kingdom with principles of leadership and marketing, which aim toward a different kind of success. The importation of secular principles to replace biblical principles creates a new understanding of the role of ministers in a Christian community, as well as a new set of expectations of him from the community. In the end, the minister is seen as a leader of the people rather than as a servant of the Lord. This places him in danger of becoming either abusive, or abused. Contemporary thinkers conclude that, "it is the human desire for power that leads to the abuse of other people" (Nash Jr 1997, 46). When a leader uses his position of authority to manipulate, to hurt others, consciously or unconsciously, this is spiritual abuse. Johnson & Van-Vonderen (1991, 65) argue, "In abusive spiritual systems, power is postured and authority is legislated. Obedience and submission are two important words often used." Jurcă (2002, 11) also describes well the mechanics of spiritual abuse, "There are undecided persons, sometimes with a psychic liability, with an immature personality that confuses spiritual obedience with a wormish conformity."

One of the roots of authority abuse is the *narcissism of the so-called leaders* (cf. McIntosh & Rima, 1997, 94–103). These authors list narcissism as one of several pathological leadership styles: the compulsive leader (cf. 1997, 85–93); the paranoid leader (cf. 1997, 104–113); the codependent leader (cf. 1997, 114–127); the passive-aggressive leader (cf. 1997, 128–137). Narcissism presents real dangers for people in positions with almost unlimited power. One of the dangers they describe is *moral hypochondriasis* (the fear of being guilty). A person driven by this fear is preoccupied with himself, does not listen to others, is very sensitive to any critique, and can hide weaknesses under an artificial attitude of modesty and humility (cf. Fromm 1965, 66–70). Unfortunately, in many cases such tendencies are cultivated in theological colleges where the future leaders get an inflated view of their importance, combined many times with "skilled incompetence," namely, "the ability to do well what should not be done at all" (cf. Thomas 1999, 160).

Moreover, many communities are structured in such a way that decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of one man or a few men. Many churches are structured as a pyramid, with the person at the top who is "called" to do ministry—the pastor, the priest, the leader or a group of leaders. In many cases, holding a theological degree is the only necessary and sufficient condition to be "called" to this authority. While not minimizing the importance and the necessity of the divine call in ministry, we argue that the vertical internal call should always be balanced by a real horizontal qualification and acceptance of this call within the community.

In such pyramidally structured communities, all members are looking towards the top for the solutions for all their problems. In fortunate cases where the leader has vocation matching his ministry, the ministry will progress for a while,

with the price being that this leader will be exhausted emotionally and spiritually. When the person in the top has no vocation for his ministry and is not equipped accordingly (the degree does not confer the required expertise!), the danger is that he will (paradoxically) create a system where everyone is dependent on what he says and does, in order to maintain his position. All the while, nobody else but this leader does enough in order for the "ministry to work," and the institution becomes more important than the people (cf. Warner 1999, 123).

In such communities the result is fellowship without relationships; a compartimentalistic view of life that leads to poisoned relationships based on the induction of such feelings as guilt and shame (cf. Hurding 1992, 252) instead of leading to helping relationships (cf. Brammer 1973, 25) and to the acceptance of "appropriate behavior" and not of persons. Communities whose relationships are pathological often propose high aims for their members. When those aims are not reached, the members of the community are manipulated through guilt. Consequently, the fear of failure not only paralyzes any creativity, but also leads to resentments and anxiety. The faith and life of such people could become toxic, leading to alienation from themselves and from others. Those people become more in touch with their religious ideas than with God (cf. Arterburn & Felton 1991, 31). Such people could end up in a personality cult, becoming egocentric, jealous, proud, even developing "the infallibility syndrome," (Sanders 1993, 211–216), and end up worshiping power. The antidote for such a disaster is described well by Erich Fromm (1965, 53): "To understand realistically and soberly how limited our power is, is an essential part of wisdom and of maturity; to worship it is masochistic and self-destructive. The one is humility, the other is self-humiliation."

By contrast, abusive leaders promote spiritual malnutrition. They can be described in the words of God in Jeremiah as broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jer. 2:13). In the process of their unhealthy growth, these people replaced biblical, expository preaching with sermonizing. They betrayed spiritual preaching for "successful" preaching, preaching that attracts because it offers illusions and impresses because it does not require repentance. Therefore, we have people who "experience" conversion without repentance, change without transformation, and salvation without sanctification, people who are perpetual travelers on the path of initiation in the Christian life, who never become disciples of Jesus. When such "successful" community grows, it is at risk of becoming a crowd rather than a church.

A second root for the authoritarian structuring of our churches is the *unseen underground dialogue with the traditional historical (state) churches,* which promotes a hierarchical view of the church and of ministry that is very improper for the evangelical ethos. The situation that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 1 is a reality in churches today: they had become worldly because they pursued the world's definitions of success, the world's priorities. For Paul, the church of God

is formed from people that do not think of themselves as being eternal on the earth, or of building their own kingdoms here. Instead, they see themselves as temporary residents on the earth who live in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2).

We offer the third theological task of our generation as a solution to these problems caused by secular definitions and approaches to leadership. In order to arrest the tendency towards the secularization of leadership, we must *rediscover the kenotic dimension of the Christian life and ministry,* as supremely exemplified in the life and ministry of Christ:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on the cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

For Christ, *kenosis* was not a renunciation to the divine prerogatives (cf. Barth 1962, 62; Martin 1983, 100). It was rather his acceptance of the plan of God (cf. Dunn 1989, 117; Wright 1991, 84), even though this plan meant taking the image of a servant. Paul contrasts the image ("form") of God in Christ, his ontological dimension, with the image of a slave that Christ embraced in order to fulfill the plan of salvation. This is the model for Christians and Christian leaders, according to Paul's theology. Like Christ, who was ontologically in the form (μορφή) of God, and emptied himself and took the form of a slave and suffered, even to death on the cross, the Christian, who is now in Christ, is to enter this *kenotic* dimension, which means participation in Christ and walking on the way of Christ. Or in the words of George Eldon Ladd (1974, 516): "Christ is however to be imitated in his self-effacing love and in the giving of himself in suffering and death."

Speaking of this parallel between Christ and the Christian, we can conclude that the *kenosis* of the Christian is to be oriented not only to his internal attitude towards God, but also to his attitude towards the others. That means that participating in Christ's suffering is part of the individual identification with Christ. To Paul, therefore, participation in Christ means participating in his death and resurrection as externally expressed in baptism, and participating in his suffering as expressed in a *kenotic* way of living. For "Christ offers not so much an example to be followed, as a pattern of life and a lordship to be entered" (Ziesler 1983, 45). This pattern will encompass not only the internal life (cf. Schweitzer 1968, 142) but also relationships with the others in the Body of Christ (cf. Banks 1994, 26).

As the church follows this kenotic way of living, based on the example of Christ, it is itself transformed into an example. By proclaiming the reality of its members' heavenly citizenship, the church, according to Pauline theology, illustrates and reminds the people of the world around it of the limitedness and ephemerality of human beings in the world and universe. Neil Elliott argues that

Paul opposes "imperial theology" with its "realized eschatology," its "crisis of legitimation," and its hunger for success and victory, materialized in *Pax Romana* (cf. 1997, 184–185). With the apocalyptic theology of the church (cf. 1997, 182), with its eschatological "already and not yet" (cf. Wright 1992, 406), with a new identity in Christ, and a new paradigm of victory, through suffering to glory, with the peace of God. That is to be found not in spite of all enmities and enemies but in the midst of them, embracing all in the love of Christ. Accordingly, the primary opposition that Paul proposes is to the claim of Caesar of being divine. Paul then sets in opposition the real Lord, Jesus Christ. Or in the words of N.T. Wright (2000, 164), "Paul was not opposed to Caesar's empire primarily because it was an empire, with all the unpleasant things we have learned to associate with that word, but because it was Caesar's, and because Caesar was claiming divine status and honors, which belonged only to the one God."

Conclusion

We argued in this paper that the evangelical churches in Central and Eastern Europe are in the danger of secularization. This tendency is rooted in three causes: the secularization of theology, seen in the schizoid separation of *teoria* and *praxis*; the ecclesial identity crisis, seen in the development of negative identity markers leading to unhealthy spirituality and escapism; and the secularization of leadership seen in the authority abuse rooted in leaders' narcissism.

We have further argued that, in order to cure and prevent these problems in evangelical thought and life, we should pursue three theological solutions. First, redefine theology as thinking, living, speaking *with*, *for*, and *about* God and re-conceptualize theological education as a life-long process of transformation and discipleship. Second, recapture the centrality of Christ as the model. Third, rediscover the kenotic way of living inspired by the Spirit, in the likeness of Christ.

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Daniel G. Oprean

Sekularizacija Crkve: uzroci i teološka rješenja

Sažetak

Cilj je ovog rada istražiti nekoliko čimbenika koji pridonose tendenciji sekularizacije u evanđeoskim crkvama u Srednjoj i Istočnoj Europi. Nadalje, predlažu se teološka rješenja uzroka sekularizacije. Teza ovog rada jest postojanje triju uzroka za sklonost sekularizaciji. Prvi je sekularizacija teološkog obrazovanja, drugi je kriza identiteta Crkve, a treći je sekularizacija vodstva. Kao prvo rješenje, rješenje sekularizacije teološkog obrazovanja, u ovom se radu predlaže redefiniranje teologije kao zajedništva, teološkog obrazovanja kao preobrazbe, a teološke formacije kao učeništva. Drugo, rješenje, rješenje krize crkvenog identiteta, koja dovodi do negativnih obilježja identiteta, jest zamjena modela kršćanskog življenja koji se svodi na izvanjsko suobličavanje (što vodi u socijalnu izolaciju, supkulturalnost i duhovno zlostavljanje) modelom unutarnje preobrazbe, koji vodi do zdrave duhovnosti i smislene teologije poslanja. Treće i konačno, rješenje za sekularizaciju vodstva, jest ponovno otkrivanje kenotičkog modela kršćanskog življenja i službe.