TEMPLUM IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND NIHILISM

TEMPLUM EN UN MUNDO GLOBALIZADO: ENTRE LA SECULARIZACIÓN Y EL NIHILISMO

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Abstract: The article deals with the concept and image of *templum* and its transformations in a globalized world. The starting point of the analysis is the ambiguity that could be disclosed in the functioning of the concept of *sacrum*. The concept of *profanation* is directly related with the negative aspect of the sacrum. Thus, the ambiguity of the act of profanation can be also seen in cases of the conversion of sanctuaries into «public institutions» in the Soviet period. The analysis will focus on the gesture of profanation, which will be elucidated through the case of the de-consecration and re-consecration of the Vilnius Cathedral.

Key Words: *templum*; *sacer*; *sacrum*; *profanum*; profanation.

Resumen: El artículo trata del concepto e imagen de *templum* y sus transformaciones en un mundo globalizado. El punto de arranque del análisis es la ambiguedad que puede ser revelada en el funcionamiento del concepto de lo *sacrum*. El concepto de *profanación* está directamente relacionado con el aspecto negativo de lo sacro. Así la ambiguedad del acto de profanación puede observarse en los casos de la conversión de los santuarios en «instituciones públicas» en el tiempo soviético. El análisis se centrará en el gesto de profanación, que será elucidado a través del caso de des-consagración y re-consagración de la catedral de Vilnius.

Key Words: *templum*; *sacer; sacrum; profanum;* profanación.

The article deals with the concept and the image of *the templum* and its transformations in a globalized post-soviet world. The starting point of the analysis is the ambiguity that could be disclosed in the functioning of the concept of *sacrum*. The analysis will focus on the gesture of profanation, which will be elucidated through the case of de-consecration and re-consecration of the Cathedral of Vilnius and other Lithuanian churches. In other words, the analysis will be aimed at highlighting

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not merely ideological basis but also the theoretical ontological foundation that enabled the functioning of several Lithuanian churches, Catholic shrines, during the Soviet period and later.

It is obvious that the concept of the *templum* is closely related with the concept of *sacrum*. However, their interrelation is not univocal. This ambiguity is determined by the same concept of sacrum: its negative and positive aspects are expressed through the oppositions between *sacer / sanctus* and *hieros / hagios*.

In E. Benveniste's opinion, the investigations of the Indo-European proto-language and a number of other concrete languages «make a guess that at the prehistory one concept had two forms: positive – «sacred presence of deity» and negative one – «something to which a person is prohibited to touch».[2]

As Benveniste points out, this difference implies the difference between «the implicit meaning of *sacrum* (sacer)» and its explicit meaning (sanctus)», where the implicit meaning of *sacrum* coincides with its negative meaning, whereas the explicit meaning is consistent with the positive one. Thus, we could paradoxically say, that something lying «invisibly» inside the nature of the *sacrum* is negative, while something that appears in one or another way, expresses itself externally, is positive.

It is noteworthy that the negative meaning of «the sacrum» is nihilistic *par excellence*: *sacer* represents neither divine nor human, while, at the same time, it is the opposite of *profanum*.

The conception of Giorgio Agamben *homo sacer* is precisely based on this negative meaning and at the same time implicit meaning of *sacred*, revealing its nihilistic character.

Agamben quotes Pompeius Festus[3] in his treatise *On the Significance of Words*, under the heading *sacer mons* preserved the memory of a figure of archaic Roman Law in which the character of sacredness is tied for the first time to a human life as such:

> The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunian law, in fact, it is noted that «if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.» This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.[4]

[2]   Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes.* T. 2: Pouvoir, droit, religion. Paris: Minuit, 1969, p.177.

[3]   Pompeius Festus (Sesto Pompeo Festo).

[4]   Quoted from: Giorgio Agamben. *Homo sacer*. Torino: Einaudi, 2005, p. 79.

The emergence of the ambivalence of the *homo sacer* state is obvious in a lemma, reminded to us by Agamben. In fact, this lemma has received wide arguments / controversy and diverse interpretations, where the ambiguity of the *homo sacer* state / stance is radically revealed / expressed. Thus, the singularity of *homo sacer* consists in impunity of his murder and at the same time – the prohibition of his sacrifice[5]. Agamben then recalls the approach of Benett who argues in his article of 1030 that Festo definition «seems to deny the very thing implicit in the term»[6], *i.e.* the definition of a sacred man – *homo sacer* – in this lemma, turns into the denial of what is implied by the same notion of a sacred / holy man. What is comprised by the denial of *homo sacer*?

After all, instead of the recognition or the sanctioning of somebody's sacredness is permitted to kill him. According to Agamben,

> The contradiction[7] is even more pronounced when one considers that the person whom anyone could kill with impunity was nevertheless not to be put to death according to ritual practices (*neque fas est eum immolari*; *immolari* indicates the act of sprinkling the *mola salsa* on the victim before killing him).[8]

Thus, Agamben, relying on the ancient authors' texts and their modern interpretations, asks again:

> In what, then, does the sacredness of the sacred man consist? And what does the expression *sacer esto* («May he be sacred»), which often figures in the royal laws and which already appears in the archaic inscription on the forums rectangular *cippus*, mean, if it implies at once the *impure occidi* (being killed with impunity) and an exclusion from sacrifice?[9]

In simple terms, how can it be *possible, allowed* to kill somebody with impunity and, at the same time, without sacrifice? Following an ordinary human (legal, based on the law), logic, it could be stated that such a category of behavior was possible in dealing with a criminal / offender. Why is he called sacred then? The contradiction and paradox, which lies in the state of *homo sacer* transcends also the Kierkegaardian logic of Abraham's sacrifice.

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[5] See Giorgio Agamben. *Homo sacer*. Torino: Einaudi, 2005, p. 81.

[6] Quoted from Giorgio Agamben. *Homo sacer*, p. 79.

[7] See: Giorgio Agamben. *Homo sacer*. , pp. 80-81.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 80.

[9] *Idem*, p. 80.

How does the state of *homo sacer*, exposed by Agamben, reveal the negativity and nihilistic character of the conception of *sacred / sacredness*?

To find this out, we should ask the following question – what does this «displacement outwards, outside the limits» «as sacred» mean? Is it not the same inscription in the Roman *foro*: *Sacer esto*? Is it not the same existence in the field of tension between the possibility of being killed with impunity and the impossibility of being sacrificed? This paradoxical «social» state of the displacement outside the limits of the «socium» – from our viewpoint, first of all, in its own way, *i.e.* negatively, reveals a human «misunderstandeness» and «unexplainedness» of sacredness, which, on the one hand, is beyond sacrifice, i.e. it is unable to meaningfully «consume» sacredness, on the other hand, sacredness is beyond any human (mediated) responsibility – in the face of pure Nothingness.

In the face of one who announces *Sacer esto*, the divinity is emerging as a higher or the highest, yet a negative instance. God as Nothingness corresponds to being in the field of tension between a destruction with impunity and the impossibility of sacrifice. Thus, *Sacer esto* presents the fleshly being in that *foro*, the field of tension framed by double, both sided «not».

It is obvious that, the negativity, which is namely implicitly concealed in the sacred as *sacer*, will appear to be particularly significant with regard to the concept of profanation, allowing to radically interpret the act of consecration. The negative meaning of a becoming *sacertas* focuses on the exclusion out of boundaries: one is sacred in the meaning of being excluded, of being thrown out the limits, of being *transcendent*, reached in the way of denying.

Thus, namely *sacer* as the opposite of *profanum* coincides with the «real», i.e. with negative sacredeness.

Furthermore, the positive meaning of sacredness —*sanctus*— emerges as the opposite of the same opposition *sacer / profanum*. *Sanctum* is not somebody / someone who belongs to gods because of setting a boundary from the profane; it is rather somebody who has been «constituted and fixed through *sanctio*.»

Although the «adjective *sanctus* is the derivative of the verb *sancire* (= to limit, to block, to close), which means on the religious grounds ongoing movement of the separation»[10], thus, also signals the boundary, however, that boundary does not mark the otherness or establish the relationship with the otherness, with the transcendence.

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[10] Tomas Sodeika «Šventybė sekuliarizacijos procese», in R. Šerpytytė (ed). *Sekuliarizacija ir dabarties kultūra*, Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2013, p. 229.

However, it should be noted that the emphasis laid on the negative meaning of *sacrum*, even the «establishment» of the temple is nothing less than a «consecration» of a specific location, i.e. its separation as *sacrum (sacer)* from *profanum*, drawing the line between the sacred and the profane, i.e. the manifestation of a negative sense of sacrum.

Although, as noted by many authors[11], the differences between these two meanings of the sacred will wear off and disappear in due time, or the significance of the sacred is gravitating toward the positive meaning which is including in itself also the negativity —it becomes «what is forbidden»,— the negative aspect of the functioning of sacred should be emphasized. Thus, on the basis of the insights suggested by Benveniste and Agamben, we will make an attempt to exploit the negative implications of the interpretation of the sacred and examine the functioning of *the temple*, of sanctuary in a globalized post-soviet world.

My major theoretical insight focuses on the fact that the negative aspect of the sacred is directly related with the notion of *profanation*, introduced in the theoretical circulation by Agamben, as a notion «opposite» to the move of «consecration» as well as a concept, triggering the certain ambiguity essential to the «sacred».

What does it mean *to profane*? In other words how does Agamben conceptualize a *profanation*, highlighting at the same time the negative aspect of the sacred?

Undoubtedly, the term of profanation (*profanare*) was introduced into circulation by Agamben as the term which designates an opposite to a movement of the consecration, the sacralization (*sacrare*), as characteristic of a move with an opposite direction rather than that of consecration.

However, in my opinion, Agamben employs an extraordinary meaning of the *profanation* term: he neither operates the meaning of everydayness circulation (*to profane* means to demonstrate ignorance when explaining something, to theoretically simplify something), nor he operates with a more sophisticated, religious meaning of this term (desecration or pollution of the sacred, profanation as pollution of sacred, return of something that is back to the use of men), — but, paradoxically, he operates the two meanings of profanation at once. The dual regime of the use of the meanings of profanation is possible on the basis of the focusing on the negativity of the move of sacralization / consecration, which is previous to the move of profanation. Providing the emphasis in sacredness is laid on *sacer* (the moment of separation, removal outside, delimitation from what is profane, becoming as transcendent to profane), rather than focusing on

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[11] Sodeika, «Šventybė sekuliarizacijos procese», p. 229.

sanctus (the same moment of the announcement, of the sanctioning), the ignorant distortion of the explanation of a certain subject in the everydayness thinking begins to overlap with the sacrilege and pollution of sacredness reflected in theoretical thinking.

> The Roman jurists knew perfectly well what it meant to «profane». Sacred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude. Any act that violated or transgressed this special unavailability, which reserved these things exclusively for the celestial gods (in which case they were properly called «sacred») or for the gods of underworld (in which case they were simply called «religious»), was sacrilegious. And «to consecrate» (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, «to profane» meant, conversaly, to return them to the free use of men. The great jurist Trebatius thus wrote, «In the strict sense, profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men.» And «pure» was the place that was no longer alloted to the gods of the dead and was now «neither sacred, nor holy, nor religious, freed from all names of this sort».[12]

The concept of *profanation* is directly related with the negative aspect of the sacrum. Agamben introduced a *profanation* as a concept, which expresses the ambiguous nature of sacrum and contains the meaning of the move opposite to the move of consecration. In the passage from *sacrum* to *profanum*, the essential role is played, by the caesura, which fundamentally divides *profanum* and *sacrum* into two spheres, threshold itself, altar, which must be overcome by the «victim» («sacrificio») in the act of sacrifice rather than by the same act of disbelief. Agamben considers that *religio* is derived from re*legere* but not from re*ligare*. He argues that *religio* is not something that unites people and gods, but it is something that allows keeping them separated. Thus, religion can be opposed not to disbelief or indifference, but to negligence.

> *Religio* is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct. It is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine, therefore, that stand in opposition to religion, but «negligence», that is a bahavior that is free and «distracted» (that is to say, released from *religio* of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning.[13]

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[12]   Giorgio Agamben. *Profanazioni.* Roma: nottetempo, 2005, p. 83; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations.* Transl. by Jeff Fort. New York: Zine Books, 2007, p. 73.

[13]   Giorgio Agamben. *Profanazioni.* Roma: nottetempo, 2005, p. 85; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations.* Transl. by Jeff Fort. New York: Zine Books, 2007, p. 75.

This meaning of *religio* is particularly significant in the act of profanation. Profanation refers to a specific form of negligence, which ignores the separation between profanum / sacrum spheres, and, at the same time, operates it in a particular way.

Thus, Agamben considers the movement of profanation to be ambiguous – it does not simply destroy and annihilate the sacred itself (the sacredness of an object, of some locations or the sacredness of a very temple), but destroys or annihilates it in a special way – i.e. by ignoring the limit / the threshold between the *sacrum / profanum* as difference.

«To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which *ignores separation* or, rather, puts it to a particular use».[14]

Originating from the negative meaning of sacredness, the ambiguity of the act of profanation could be reconstructed in examining the soviet-time cases of conversion of the sanctuaries into «public institutions» aimed for the use of the general public. They represent a special model of transition from *sacrum* into *profanum* by exploiting the sanctuaries in a totally unacceptable manner. The Archcathedral Basilica of Vilnius was converted into a museum – art gallery (1956–1989), where the organ concerts were held. Seemingly, the soviet «fate» was «nobler» in this case, compared to that of Saint Kazimieras Church converted into a museum of atheism or Kaunas Resurrection Church, which, still under construction, was converted to a radio plant as a towering landmark and Kaunas' symbol visible from afar. After regaining the Independence, all those churches were «re-consecrated».
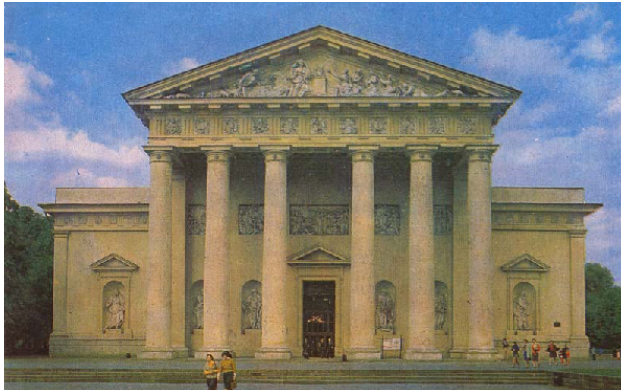
Vilnius Cathedral (Art Gallery), photo by D. Mackonis, 1977

[14]   *Idem.*

However, what is this dual dynamic of de-consecration and re-consecration is really about?

> The things that is returned to the common use of men is pure, profane, free of sacred names. But use does not appear here as something natural: rather, one arrives at it only by means of profanation. There seems to be a peculiar relationship between «using» and «profaning» that must clarify.[15]

The fact, that the act of returning of the temples, of the sanctuaries to the people «use» deals with the profanation, may not seem to be a theoretical problem. Yet, in depth, it is crucial because it contains in itself a certain irreversibility of this motion.

> Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to comon use the spaces that power had seized.[16]

Vilnius Cathedral.

Photo by Jan Bułhak, 1931

Vilnius Cathedral (Art Gallery),
photo by unknown author

[15]   Giorgio Agamben. *Profanazioni.* Roma: nottetempo, 2005, pp. 83-84; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations.* Transl. by Jeff Fort. New York: Zine Books, 2007, pp.73-74.

[16]   Giorgio Agamben. *Profanazioni.* Roma: nottetempo, 2005, p. 88; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations.* Transl. by Jeff Fort. New York: Zine Books, 2007, p. 77.

On the other hand, the irreversibility of the act of profanation implies that profanation lies in any act of reconsecration. In other words, the standpoint of Agamben enables us to see the move of profanation not only in closing the churches during the Soviet regime, but also in their return to the believers.

It can be argued that the acts of deconsecration and reconsecration should not be considered as just the formal sanctioning of *profanum / sacrum*; by the extinguishing of the boundaries between the *sacrum* and *profanum*, they represent the fundamental profanation of the temple / fane. Re-consecration as a profanation is a gesture that transcends the operation of ideologies and even the act of secularization.

Vilnius Cathedral (Art Gallery), photo by unknown author

After returning the Cathedral to the believers, the same pictures are hanging there, the same organ is being played. If at the Soviet time many people were visiting the Art Gallery as if going to church, at present, a person who neither experienced the soviet regime nor visited the «art gallery» in the soviet times, appearing in the re-consecrated Cathedral, is unable to feel like being only *in God's home*. The proof is an eclectic feeling, experienced by confessors-church visitors, a chance offered for a visitor of any confession to see there a sacred place and a temple of any faith.

However, this ambiguity of the motion of profanation is no misunderstanding, according to Agamben.

> The ambiguity at issue [...] is, so to speak, constitutive of the profanatory operation – or, inversely, of the consecratory one. Insofar as these operations refer to a single object that must pass from the profane to the sacred and from the sacred to profane, they must every time reckon with something like a residue of profanity in every consecrated thing and a remnant of sacredness in every profaned object.[17]

Naturally, does this mean that the Soviet era is almost the universally lost time —the time of universally lost *templum* sacredness? What alternative do we have – to be content with the settle the sacred residues of re-consecrated churches or build new temples— redrawing the boundaries of *sacrum* / *profanum* anew?

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[17] Giorgio Agamben. *Profanazioni.* Roma: nottetempo, 2005, p. 89; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations.* Transl. by Jeff Fort. New York: Zine Books, 2007, pp. 77-78.