

Religion as Medium, by Boris Groys

In our present post-Enlightenment culture, religion is generally understood to mean a collection of certain opinions. Correspondingly, religion is usually discussed in the context of a demand for a freedom of opinion guaranteed by law. Religion is tolerated as an opinion so long as it remains tolerant and does not question the freedom of other opinions—that is to say, as long as it makes no exclusive, fundamentalist claim to its own truth. Thus religion seems to be in a quite comfortable situation. It is no longer, as it was in the dark times of the radical Enlightenment, criticized, ironized, or even combated in the name of scientific truth. Rather, scientific truth itself has since acquired the status of mere opinion. At least since Nietzsche, and especially thanks to Michel Foucault, we now know that the claim to scientific truth is dictated primarily by the will to power, and it must, therefore, be deconstructed and deterred. Scientific opinions circulate in the same media and in the same way as religious opinions. Opinions in both cases come to us as news that is disseminated by the mass media. Sometimes we read about a new apparition of the Mother of God; sometimes we read that the earth is getting warmer. Neither piece of information can be tested directly by those who hear it. The experts always disagree in such cases. Hence either bit of news can be believed or not.

Consequently our culture today knows no truths, be they of religious or scientific nature, but only opinions, whose dignity is, however, inviolable, because it is protected by law. The various opinions are either shared or rejected by autonomous citizens. Thus the value of an opinion can be measured precisely by determining how many people share it. The market of opinions is constantly being studied, and the results of this research tell us which opinions belong to the mainstream and which are marginal. This data offers a reliable basis for each individual's decision how he or she wishes to draw up the budget of his or her opinions. Those who wish to be compatible with the mainstream will adopt opinions that are either already part of the mainstream or have a chance to become so in the near future. Those who prefer to be thought of as representatives of a minority can seek out a suitable minority. Those who speak of a revival of religion today clearly do not mean anything like the second coming of the Messiah or even that new gods and new prophets have appeared. Rather, they mean that religious opinions have moved from marginal zones to the mainstream. If that is true, and statistics seem to confirm that assumption, then the question arises what could have caused religious opinions to become mainstream.

The survival and dissemination of opinions on the free market is regulated by a law that Darwin formulated: the survival of the fittest. The opinions that are best adapted to the conditions under which they are disseminated will automatically have the best odds of becoming mainstream. The market of opinions today, however, is clearly dominated by reproduction, repetition, and tautology. The standard diagnosis of today's civilization is that, over the course of the modern age, theology was replaced by philosophy, an orientation toward the past by an orientation toward the future, tradition by subjective evidence, fidelity to origins by innovation, and so on. In fact, however, the modern age was not the age in which the sacred was abolished but the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratization, its globalization. Once ritual, repetition, and reproduction were matters of religion; they were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, the entire culture. Everything reproduces itself—capital, commodities, technology, art. Even progress is ultimately reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively enough. People like to talk about innovation and change, but in fact they are referring almost exclusively to technological innovations.

Innovation in the realm of opinion can occur only if people not only believe it is possible to recognize the truth but also expect it, strive for it. As noted above, however, our post-Enlightenment culture does not believe in truth. Truth claims are seen as advertising gimmicks, as a pushy and hence disagreeable sales strategy, as deceptive packaging par excellence. Or worse: as totalitarian coercion, as an order to share an opinion even if one doesn't really want to, as an insidious attack on freedom and the dignity of the consumer. Under such conditions religion clearly has better odds to succeed on the market of opinions than philosophy or science does, for two reasons. First, the historical religions are established brands. For that reason alone they are more effective at reaching people than philosophical or scientific doctrines. Whatever people might say, Christ, Muhammad, and the Buddha are genuine superstars. Not even Plato or Descartes can measure up to them, to say nothing of today's philosophers. If you want to succeed on the market of opinions, you are thus well advised to appeal to the founders of religions. The universities still bristle at this, but it is only a matter of time before they abandon their resistance.

There is, however, another—if you will, deeper, weightier—reason to turn to religion. Religion can indeed be seen as a certain set of opinions, to the extent this refers to the role of religion in profane space. There religion is

associated with opinions about whether contraception should be permitted or women should wear headscarves. All religions, however, have another space: sacred space. And religions have a different attitude toward this space—namely, the view that it is the space of a lack of opinion, of opinionlessness. For the will of the gods or God is ultimately hidden to the opinions of mortals. And that means that while people in our culture are first and foremost holders of certain opinions, religion is a place where this task, this mediality of human beings is reflected on—and precisely because religion marks and describes the state of opinionlessness, the zero level of freedom of opinion. Just as Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* symbolized this for the medium of painting, because it caused all figuration to disappear, so the sacred places of religions are the places where the mediality of the human being can be thematized, precisely because they are places where people lose all their opinions and find themselves once again in a state without opinions. As men without opinions, they practice repetition tout court, that is, the kind of repetition that is no longer repetition of a certain opinion but rather a ritual of the opinionlessness. That is what the hero of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Nostalgia* does when he finds himself in a state of a total lack of opinion; he begins by going back and forth on the same path. This path does not by any means bring the hero forward—however “forward” might be meant here. Rather, by so doing the hero connects to the movement back and forth whose very radically solitary, inescapable repetitiveness marks him as a medium of this lack of opinion.

The experience of a lack of opinions, which is a genuinely religious experience, is not necessarily tied to certain places, however. This situation of a lack of opinions is much more common and more ordinary experience than is usually assumed. Such an experience occurs, for example, when people are confronted with a situation in which all existing opinions fail. The same situation can, however, also arise when people no longer want to have opinions, when they have definitely had enough of opinions as such, the market of opinions, and the creation and dissemination of opinions. When they suddenly notice that all existing opinions cancel one another out. Then they find themselves on the zero level of freedom of opinion again—and become conscious of their own mediality. The freedom of opinion becomes the abandonment of opinion: people are equally free of all opinions, all opinions equally abandoned. What are they to do then? How are they to react to this state of the complete abandonment of opinion. Religion and philosophy offer different answers to this question, or so it seems at first. Philosophy believes that in such cases people have to invent a new opinion, a new truth, to lead them out of the state of opinionlessness. Religion, by contrast, considers such a reaction too superficial and optimistic, because a person who thinks in religious terms anticipates from the outset the next step in which the new truth is absorbed by the market of opinions. Instead, religion offers another solution: insisting on this lack of opinion, connecting to the long history of the absence of opinions that is, ultimately, the history of religion. Religious people are not people of opinions, representatives or producers of opinions; rather, they are media people, people as media.

Caring for the lack of opinion—whether of individuals or a collective—demands a special place, a heterotopia, as Foucault called it. This is a place outside the space of opinion, outside the market of opinions. There the distinction between true and false and between good and evil is neutralized. But that is precisely what makes so distinct the line between the quotidian market of opinions and a sacred lack of opinions. Those who advocate certain opinions can easily position themselves in public space. Those who insist on a lack of opinions, however, need a different space, namely, a sacred space, and another time, the repetitive time of ritual. Thus it is also inevitable that they connect to certain places in rituals that in the past were defined as other, sacred places, as heterotopias. Those who enter such spaces and participate in such rituals leave their opinions at the coatroom by the door. The space of the temporary suspension of all opinions needs an outer boundary in order to guarantee its freedom *from* opinion.

Hence this lack of opinion is first and foremost conservative. It remains the same through time, whereas opinions change with time. The resulting aversion to all possible opinions often seems intolerant and even irrational, because it is difficult to justify rationally. The question is often asked what it really means to want to be religious. What objectives are set, what opinions does one want to assert? The answer is: to finally be rid of objectives and opinions altogether. Or, to put it another way, to find oneself, to free oneself from the obligation to have opinions, the servitude to opinions and objectives—to celebrate one's pure mediality, one's pure ability to reproduce and be reproduced. Now, however, it gets difficult when the traditional sacred places are lost, when the reflection on one's own mediality no longer has a place or time. At that moment the effect of the religious impulse is no longer conservative but instead extremist. Because when sacred spaces are lost or go unprotected, they have to be created by force. A piece of territory has to be reclaimed from the global market of opinions in order to create another space, a heterotopia. Then one subjects oneself to violence and transforms one's own body into a site of the sacred, a place of the silent, repetitive martyrdom, as happens, for example, in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion*. Or the cross is used as a weapon, as in Roberto Rodriguez's film *From Dusk till Dawn*, to defend the human body, which is also shown

as a silent body, as a place of indifference and boredom with respect to all conviction or ideology—as a body beyond all opinion.

Thus to the extent that religion is the site of a revelation of the mediality of humanity, religion can be understood as the avant-garde of our present world, determined as it is by the mass media, just as the artistic avant-garde functioned as the revelation of the mediality of art. Yet the interest of the mass media in religion is not simply a theoretical one, for the revelation of the mediality of human beings is also an event, a piece of news, that can and should be communicated. Without the mass media this news would be suppressed; the revelation would remain secret. Sites of the sacred are by definition closed, hidden, dark places. And there are still such places in our globalized world. First, they include the still well protected sites of traditional religions. Second, ever new sites are emerging: of secret conspiracies, violent separations from the general public, places of dark individual and collective ecstasies.

These places incessantly draw the attention of the media, because it is precisely the hidden, closed, dark, and marginal that interests today's media. The media are quite naturally striving to bring the hidden and marginal to the light of the general audience. That is why the media are repeatedly fascinated and provoked by the inaccessibility of sacred rituals. For decades there have been novels written and films made about the secret love affairs of priests. Today it seems the da Vinci code has been cracked once and for all, finally making Christ himself a star, a celebrity, who of course cannot be thought of as such without a disclosure. The mass media are constantly to outdo revelation by disclosure—and in doing so they demonstrate their essential repetitiveness. The greatest opportunity open to the mass media is a new good message, a new good news, which is that things are announced to the mainstream that were once marginal and hidden. It is constantly writing a new Gospel that may perhaps contradict the old gospel on the level of opinion but nonetheless repeats the familiar ritual of revelation. The machinery of disclosure in the mass media today is merely the technical reproduction of the religious ritual of revelation. Religion is an *urmedium* that always celebrates its return when news is disseminated and believed.