The Hermeneutics of Holy Time
On the Ethical Role of Skepticism in Religion

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to elaborate the hermeneutics of holy time. The main thesis to be developed is that through an awareness of finitude the dialectic of holy and non-holy time leads to skepticism, which in turn serves to reduce religious violence. The holiness of a given time is therefore constituted on ethical rather than ontological grounds. The research aim here is not to describe some factual state of affairs connected with the notion of holy time, but rather to put forward in normative terms a certain interpretation of the latter that seeks to present it as a means for reducing violence and to reconcile it with the postmetaphysical account of (weak) religion.

Keywords holy time; philosophy of religion; postmetaphysics; skepticism; religion; violence

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of time, as it relates to religion, can be viewed from multiple perspectives. It is interesting to consider it in connection with God's omniscience and human freedom, or to reflect on the existential meaning of the eternity–worldliness duality; however, in the context of religion, time can also be perceived in purely religious terms—as holy time. Holiness is reserved exclusively for the sphere of religion, and gives ordinary things a deeper, more profound meaning: e.g., objects like a chalice acquire a whole new meaning when declared holy, because of their history or their purpose. The same applies to holy places, such as a church, mountain, or cemetery, to holy people like the Pope, to holy deeds such as sacrifice, to holy texts like the Bible or the Quran, and to holy times such as Ramadan, Passover, or Easter. Holy time as such, not reduced to any specific exemplification, is thus of great philosophical importance.

The main aim of this text is to answer the question of how we can understand or interpret the meaning of holy time in the contemporary world, and in the light of the postmetaphysical account of religion[1]—an account which underlines the violence of the latter, which it takes to be primarily connected with its claim to absolute truth.[2] In other words, what sort of understanding of such times as Easter, Passover, Ramadan, etc., will count as both existentially and philosophically productive and interesting? An interpretation already exists, which is ontological in character: it claims that holy time is holy because God is somehow more present in it (Ziemiński

1. I understand postmetaphysical philosophy as a contemporary philosophical current which draws consequences from metaphysical thinking, asserts the end of metanarratives, appreciates pluralism and moderate skepticism, and adopts an ethical and antitotalitarian attitude. Postmetaphysics is similar but not identical to postmodernism. I would recognize, amongst others, Marquard (2002; 2007), Blumenberg (1979; 1981), Rorty (1991; 1998) and Lyotard (1984; 1989) as postmetaphysical philosophers. In regard to religion, postmetaphysical philosophy tries to interpret this cultural phenomenon differently from the existing understanding—as non-violent, non-absolute, open, hospitable, weak, loving, as well as tolerant, and not as closed, exclusive, violent, absolute, strong and final. Attempts to develop this postmetaphysical account of religion have been undertaken to varying extents by, amongst others, Vattimo (1999; 2002), Kearney (2011), Caputo (2001; 2006), Zizek (2001) and Sloterdijk (2009).

2. The question of religious violence is very complex. I would argue that in essence, there is no such thing as religious violence *per se* and the violence connected with religion is in fact grounded in metaphysical thinking, which oscillates around an absolute and unitary truth. However, I would need a separate paper to be able to clarify and justify such a view. That is why, in this text, I understand violence broadly as an imposition of will (of an individual, or an institution, or even of a cultural and societal system of thinking) onto a person. Religious violence, in this sense, would be an imposition of the will of a religion (in most cases declared by the Church) onto particular individuals or whole societies.

2020, 58).[3] In contrast to this, I shall propose an ethical interpretation that focuses on the opportunity to deprive religion (and the believer) of any potential justification for religious violence.

Of course, one can raise the question of historical or factual inaccuracy, for there is a strong connection between holy time and bloody rituals performed for the deity, such as human and animal sacrifices, or mutilation of the human flesh. Even in a softer sense, holy time, such as Sunday for Christians, can involve a kind of violence consisting of forcing children to participate in the Holy Mass. However, the research aim of this article is not to describe some factual state of affairs connected with the notion of holy time, but rather to put forward in normative terms a certain interpretation of it—one that seeks to present it as a means for reducing violence and reconcile it with the postmetaphysical account of (weak) religion. In other words, to state the fact that holy time is connected to violence is the same as to state that religion as such is connected to violence. This presents the philosopher with a pair of alternatives: on the one hand, they can abandon religion altogether (if they want to abandon violence), or on the other (if they want to preserve religion), they can try to propose a different understanding of it, to reinterpret it in a way that breaks its connection to violence, and to present it as essentially non-violent (as, for example, Vattimo tries to do) (Vattimo 1999; 2002).[4] In the case of the text presented here, the goal is similar: to try to determine whether there is a possibility of not abandoning holy time as an element of violent religion, while nevertheless pointing to its postmetaphysical meaning as favoring non-violence.

The reasoning central to this article (namely, that the holiness of a certain time should be thought of as based on ethics, not ontology) is grounded in the belief that a human being participating in holy time, while "touching infinity," gains a certain distance from their everyday life and then, through the dialectic of holy and non-holy time (i.e. experiencing both

3. Ziemiński claims that the time in which God is absent is the opposite of holy time. Therefore, the holiness of time would be constituted by God's presence, or special presence. In other words, it would be a matter of an ontological difference between those times.

4. It is worth mentioning that from the postmetaphysical perspective adopted here, abandoning religion will not get rid of violence. It is not the case that only, or even primarily, religion is the main source of violence. Rather, it is rooted in a specific, metaphysical kind of thinking. That is why secular systems based on metaphysical thinking are also violent, sometimes inflicting more pain and suffering than religion. Some philosophers, such as Kołakowski, even suggest that religion can potentially be less violent than secular systems, because there are certain "skeptical breaks" included in it, which at the same time are not present in the secular systems. That is why, among other factors, religion—in its weak form—is worth preserving (see Kołakowski 2010, 91).

these timeframes), recognizes their own finitude. This awareness of one's finitude then leads to the arousal of a skeptical attitude, which in turn causes the elimination of religion's violent potential. In other words: placing oneself in the middle—between divine infinity and absolute temporality, and between knowledge and ignorance—renders them skeptical, which in turn refutes the argument for killing in the name of (religious) truth. *Ipso facto*, the presented reflections can be viewed as an attempt to interpret holy time in the light of the postmetaphysical account of religion, in which the ethical aspect of nonviolence plays the main role.

Given what has been said, the main thesis of this paper is that through an awareness of finitude, the dialectic of holy and non-holy time leads to skepticism, which in turn serves to reduce the violent potential of religion. Acknowledging the enormous difficulty, or even impossibility, of defining religion as such (Quinn 2005, 397), let me state that in this text, what I understand as religion is a set of cultural phenomena called "religion," between which there obtains a family resemblance.[5] Establishing the level of resemblance, and thus defining what can or cannot be counted as religion, can be accomplished by evoking an arbitrarily selected prototype of the latter—in this instance Christianity (particularly in its Catholic form).[6] That is why the interpretation of holy time developed here will apply primarily to Christianity, but also (to some extent) to the other two Abrahamic religions—Judaism and Islam. The application of that same interpretation to other religions—be they versions of polytheism, or atheistic religions—would be a task for another, separate article. The ensuing reflections fall into three parts: (1) the hermeneutics of holy time, (2) the dialectic of holy and non-holy time, and (3) the role of skepticism in religion.

1. The Hermeneutics of Holy Time

What is holy time? Well, it seems that one can differentiate between two main ways of understanding this notion: a narrow and a broad one. The former would present holy time in specifically religious terms as a particular period (with specified limits) of great religious importance, like Easter in Christianity or Ramadan in Islam. Holy time, on this narrow understanding, is therefore celebrated in a certain manner, lasts for a certain amount of time, and is always connected with past events or, as Eliade says, constitutes a mythical time understood as the eternal present (Eliade 1987, 69). The Romanian

5. Here, I follow some insights of Hick regarding the definition of religion (see Hick 2005, 4).

6. The notion of a prototype in the context of defining religion is explored by, for instance, Quinn (see 2005, 409).

thinker's account of holy (or "sacred," as he calls it) time underlines the mythical deed of gods, or a god who laid the foundation for the future distinguishing of a certain period: e.g., Christ's death on the cross is a source-event for the holy time later named and celebrated as Easter. What is more, holy time is recurrent,[7] often in a yearly scheme (Eliade 1987, 73): that is why Eliade speaks of the eternal present. Time is reduced to the period of one year, and it constantly repeats, as in the Nietzschean concept of eternal return (Eliade 1987, 70). So, the narrow understanding of holy time is closely related both to religion and to a founding event involving, in most cases, gods or a god, and in addition highlights the repetitiveness of the sacred period.

This narrow understanding of holy time can also be presented in relation to the secular. Holy times such as Independence Day, or various anniversaries, are constituted in a way similar to religious ones. The time is specified, lasts one day, is founded on a "mythical" deed from the past, and repeats every year. Hence, there are in fact two variants of the narrow understanding of holy time: the religious and the secular one.

The broad way of grasping the notion of holy time, meanwhile, departs from all these traits, because it presents holy time in a very general manner—along the same lines as any period not necessarily specified, not necessarily founded on a specific event, and not necessarily recurring. On this broad construal, holy time can be a celebration of recovery from an illness or finishing a project, etc. This way of understanding holy time, however, seems to be too inclusive, and not philosophically productive. That is why, in this paper, I will refer to holy time in relation to the first, narrow understanding, pertaining to the religious and non-secular meaning of holy time.[8] Some kind of a provisional definition of holy time could

7. Gadamer (1986, 41) also underlines the recuring character of the festival.

8. It is worth mentioning, however, that a certain question arises concerning holy time in its secular version: namely, what will be the status of non-religious people in the light of the considerations explored here? Is it possible for them to participate, just like religious people, in holy time, only in its secular version? Do they need to do so in order to sustain a morally good society? This is a difficult problem, because if the answer is positive—in the sense of "Yes, they can participate in holy time" and "Yes, they need to do this to preserve a good community"—then it reduces everything to religion of sorts. Being non-religious is not really possible, because regardless of one's convictions one is, up to a point, forced to participate in quasi-religious practices. If the answer is negative, on the other hand, the problem does not disappear, because this means that only a religious society can be a morally good one. This kind of belief, however, seems rightfully long gone. Thus, the problem calls for a different approach. I will not be asking here about the meaning of holy time in secular societies. I believe that there is a significant difference between religious and secular holy time, which mostly pertains to the transcendent character of the former, and the immanent nature of the latter. That is why participation in holy time in its secular form has different consequences

therefore go as follows: *holy time is a determinate period of specified duration, is repetitive, and is founded on a certain source-event which concerns the history of gods, or a god.* It could also be mentioned that certain forms of celebration, for example rituals, relate to holy time. In other words, holy time demands the engagement of a believer.

Putting aside this definition, what is important from this text's standpoint is precisely that believer's perspective on holy time. How would they define it? Holy time needs to be understood on a kind of meta-level, in an abstract sense, as the period when the believer is focused on a religious, infinite, transcendental aspect of life, regardless of the meaning of any particular holy period. For example, it is of no importance to this research that Easter has its own specific meaning as the holy time of Jesus' death and resurrection, or that Passover evokes the exit of Israel from the slavery of Egypt. Both those times direct the believer to the godly aspect of reality, and that is exactly what is important from this text's perspective.[9]

Given these initial remarks, one can already pose the following truly important questions: what is the meaning of holy time as such, and what are the consequences of participating in it? There are many interpretational facets regarding the issue of holy time. Let me explore two of them. The proposed ethical interpretation would start by stating that it seems that holy time presents human beings with a certain opportunity. In the history of philosophy, one encounters a dualistic account of the human as a being suspended between two extremes, which can be referred to in a general manner as its animal (or natural) and divine (or supernatural) sides. The former is related to temporality, finitude, change, ignorance and passion. The latter to eternity, infinity, constancy, knowledge and reason. I do not wish to present a systematic reconstruction of the history of this dualistic conception here, but only to draw attention to the fact that it exists by evoking a few examples of prominent philosophers of different times and places. Pascal, for one, wrote:

> For, in fact, what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything . . . This is our true state; this is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge and of absolute ignorance. (Pascal 1944, 72)

and a different meaning from such participation conceived in religious terms. That is also why I will be focusing here on just the religious dimension of holy time.

9. Holy time conceived in secular terms (such as Independence Day) lacks this godly dimension.

Similarly, Plato, who in the *Symposium* reflected on Eros, understood him as a being in-between, especially "between ignorance and knowledge" (1892, 203). Of course, for Plato, Eros was a representation of a philosopher and therefore a man who is suspended between two extremes.

But how does holy time refer to those remarks? Well, the above-mentioned opportunity that holy time presents the human being with consists in its opening up the possibility of such a dualistic account.[10] In a certain way, without the possibility of participating in holy time, the human being would only be aware of their one, animal-natural side. The other one would be hidden from them. So, holy time introduces that second aspect—the infinite, divine perspective.[11] It enables the human being to escape their animality for a moment, to get in contact with the Holy—to use Otto's notion (Otto 1936). Participating in holy time can therefore be viewed as, at least partially, fulfilling humans' desire to transcend themselves, to get closer to the divine using their *sensus divinitatis*. "To reintegrate the sacred time of origin is equivalent to becoming contemporary with the gods, hence to living in their presence—even if their presence is mysterious in the sense that it is not always visible," writes Eliade (1987, 91). The religious person strives to exist in holy time, to participate in something beyond himself or herself; therefore, it is holy time and not everyday life that constitutes "actual" time for them. Ordinary periods are just a necessary pause between those during which one is participating in the festivity in question.

But what is this participation? When reflecting on the essence of happiness, Aristotle claimed that

> whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and

10. For Caputo, the opportunity provided by holy time is one for change, *metanoia*—something which can be inscribed into my own considerations here as escaping from one's animality and gaining distance in relation to one's life; furthermore, this can then grant one the possibility of a life-change, or could even amount to a significant change itself (see Caputo 2006, 150).

11. Of course, such dualistic anthropology can be questioned, given that there are also other accounts of the human condition: e.g., various monistic, or hierarchical, emanationist theories of being. However, my argument here adopts this dualism in the weak sense, as an interpretation, which is also strongly present in the history of philosophy, and not as a strong ontology. The same applies to the dualism of holy and non-holy time. One could say that there are multiple possibilities for understanding time on religious grounds: e.g., those according to which a believer should develop themselves by climbing the next steps on the ladder of time—from unholy, satanic time, through ordinary, worldly time, to holy time, which is considered eternity and heaven. In this text, however, I simply explore a certain possibility, a certain interpretation present in philosophy that is philosophically interesting, without making any pretense of having grasped the entire richness of the notion of holy time.

> divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said. (1999, 173)

Aristotle's reflections reveal some new traits that show contemplation as relying on reason, which is the most divine part of a human being. However, the Greek philosopher also claims that the happiest ones are the gods, so contemplating and therefore being happier is in essence getting closer to the gods, or in some sense a deification of man. In the light of my argument here, one might say that participation in holy time, understood as being in proximity to the infinite, is a form of reason-based contemplation. What is important is the rational character of participating in such time, which enables human beings to distance themselves from their everyday lives. The other crucial thing is that participation in it must be freely chosen by the believer. They cannot be forced into it, just as they cannot do it solely on the basis of some habit they have developed, or their origin, prejudices, education, etc. To truly grasp the meaning of such time one must choose it freely.

It can be noted that there are some simple binary oppositions at work in my reasoning. Pairings such as animality–divinity, reason–passion, infinity–finitude, etc., can be questioned as relics of metaphysical thinking and declared unproductive—much as Rorty argued in many epistemological contexts, when discussing such dichotomies as objectivism-relativism or true-false (Rorty 1979). My point here, however, is to interpret a small, selected piece of the history of philosophy in a way that will show that there were indeed philosophers (such as Plato, Aristotle, or Pascal) who sensed a certain tension or tear in the human condition that is always placed "in the middle," and to inscribe these reflections within the problem of holy time, which itself shows up as an important factor in the context of this "dualistic" human condition—in that the experience of holy time provides the needed perspective here, introducing as it does a third value between zero and one and so at the same time "breaking" that very dualism. Therefore, it can also be said that what holy time gives to those who participate in it is a kind of relativization—and this will constitute a second facet of the issue of holy time explored in this text.

Contact with the divine makes a human being question the existing world order and their beliefs, in a sense throwing them off balance, because it makes them aware that the familiar is not everything. One's sense of stability is crushed by the experience of the Holy. If there is an infinite reality, of which I just receive a glimpse, what makes me think that my finite

cognition and constitution can grasp anything as it is? So, the strong beliefs one might have are weakened in the face of the divine.[12]

This disintegration of the current structure of beliefs connects the experience of holy time with the anthropological notion of liminality addressed by van Gennep and Turner,[13] who reflected on rituals (in most cases of a religious sort) in primitive societies. Their thesis was that there is a specific kind of ritual, namely the rite of passage, which oscillates around change (van Gennep 1960, 10). This change can refer to an alteration in social status (e.g., from a citizen into a leader), in age (e.g., from a boy into a man), in place (e.g., from outside of the house to the inside), in time (e.g., arrival of the New Year), etc. Holy time, seen from this perspective, can be viewed as a rite of passage between an ordinary time t^1 and an ordinary time t^2, in which a change occurs. Both van Gennep and Turner claimed that there is a threefold structure to those rituals: first, there is a preliminal phase, in which the person involved is separated from their current situation, such as the society they live in, then a liminal phase—the middle point when the change happens—and finally, a postliminal phase when the person is incorporated back into their situation (van Gennep 1960, 11; Turner 1977, 94).

What is interesting from the perspective I am seeking to introduce here is the meaning of the liminal phase of the ritual in the context of holy time: in particular, the concept of being pulled out from one's everyday life in a rite of passage entails several important points noted by Turner. The liminal situation affects both the person directly involved in the ritual, and the society. The Scottish anthropologist claimed that

> liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. . . . Their behavior is normally passive or humble . . . It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew. (Turner 1977, 95)

12. Of course, there can also be a different interpretation of contact with the divine which highlights not the arousal of skepticism, as in the ethical understanding of holy time proposed here, but rather gaining the sense of certainty provided by God, or even being able to participate partially in divine knowledge. Many people who have claimed they were truly in connection with the infinite being, heard its voice, etc., have acted with great zeal and conviction based on their experience of God and their belief that they know his will. When it comes to people who acted without hesitation and doubt as executors of God's will, we might mention, e.g., Girolamo Savonarola or Joan of Arc. However, this understanding of holy time presupposes its absolutization (as the only significant and meaningful time), which I will examine in the later part of this article.

13. For a synthetic and critical study of liminality and its reception in contemporary anthropology, see Thomassen 2009.

Liminal beings are without properties, they dissolve in a sense into something bigger than themselves, are submissive, uncertain and humble (Turner 1977, 103–5).[14] Contemporary commentators discussing van Gennep and Turner write, also, that

> liminality refers to in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes. (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2009, 3)

Where holy time is concerned, it can be said that participating in it is similar to becoming a liminal entity that dissolves into divinity and infinity.[15] So, in fact, holy time is a liminal event that evokes weakening, humility, and finally skepticism—understood as a resignation from strong beliefs.

If one were to significantly broaden the understanding of holy time and treat it metaphorically, in isolation from the religious dimension, one could place it in the context of philosophy or theory as such. The Greek ideal of *theorein* expressed in the view of a philosopher as a disengaged and distanced observer of reality collapses when one takes note of the activeness and engagement, the participation of the human being in holy time that Aristotle associates with our making use of our reason. Diogenes Laertius, while describing the views of Pythagoras, wrote that

> he compared life to the Great Games, where some went to compete for the prize and others went with wares to sell, but the best as spectators; for similarly, in life, some grow up with servile natures, greedy for fame and gain, but the philosopher seeks for truth. (Laertius 1925, 327–29)

Identifying the games Laertius speaks of with holy time creates an interesting field for interpretation. For if the philosopher is the one who uses reason, they are no longer a distanced spectator but a participant in holy time. An apparent paradox occurs: in Pythagoras' view, the philosophical distance was obtained through observation without participation, whereas

14. We might also mention that a similar set of feelings is associated with liminality in the arts. One example is photography dealing with liminal architectural spaces, which "are a type of emotional space that conveys a sense of nostalgia, lostness, and uncertainty. They often lack activity and purpose either because they lay unused or because they are spaces of transition—of becoming instead of being" (Koch 2020).

15. This dissolution brings to mind the idea of *henosis* developed by Neoplatonist thinkers, especially Plotinus (2005, 6.9.11).

in the proposed interpretation, a philosopher can gain the needed perspective and distance only through participation. So, the Pythagorean spectator is in fact not distanced (even though they think they are), and the engaged participant gains true distance thanks to the appropriate use of their reason—such distance (and philosophy as such) is possible through participation and not separation. Of course, this distance is not meant to be understood as absolute, but only as partial, because—as many contemporary philosophers, such as Vattimo, Rorty or Marquard show—an absolute shedding of all prejudice is simply not possible (Vattimo 2003, 34; Rorty 1989, 47; Marquard 1989, 116).

An interesting point made by Gadamer may be added to the above reasoning. Considering the temporality of a work of art, the German philosopher uses the metaphor of sacred time—a festival—to describe the experience that accompanies being in contact with art. Setting purely aesthetic reflections aside, he says that

> a festival exists only in being celebrated. . . . the being of the spectator is determined by his 'being there present.' Being present does not simply mean being there along with something else that is there at the same time. To be present means to participate. (Gadamer 2004, 121)[16]

Therefore, being present is not understood in the Pythagorean manner as just observing from a distance, but is conceived of as being engaged in an event of holy time. Gadamer's conception is close to Aristotle's, because it shows the participating "nature" of reason-based contemplation.

> Theoria is not to be conceived primarily as subjective conduct, as a self--determination of the subject, but in terms of what it is contemplating. Theoria is a true participation

writes Gadamer (2004, 122). Of course, the above-mentioned distance is necessary in order to be a theorist, a philosopher, but it is obtainable only through participation. The German philosopher makes an interesting comment, saying that being present as being engaged is a kind of being outside oneself, based on self-forgetfulness (Gadamer 2004, 122). A person

16. Apart from in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer also reflects on festivals in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, where he again stresses the participatory character of festivities: "It is characteristic of festive celebration that it is meaningful only for those actually taking part. As such, it represents a unique kind of presence that must be fully appreciated" (Gadamer 1986, 49).

involved in holy time, as I said, dissolves into something bigger, forgets themselves, and gains distance. So theory in general, and philosophy in particular, consists in "transcending" oneself through participation in holy time broadly understood.

To summarize the preceding reflections, it can be said that holy time has various facets, of which I have discussed two. The first one relates to the dualistic account of human nature, the second to the epistemic dimension of the experience of divinity. Thus, holy time in the aforementioned contexts presents itself as a diverse opportunity: it grants humans a perspective on the infinite and makes them aware of their own finitude, helps them escape their animality and discover a "divine element" in themselves, provides them with distance and relativizes existing structures, and, finally, makes them humble and uncertain. Holy time constitutes one pole of the binary scheme I mentioned before. On its own, however, it would just be an extreme, and those opportunities would not be possible. Should we follow Plato, Aristotle and Pascal, then we would need the other extreme as well, if we are to place the human being between them. Holy time, therefore needs to be contrasted with everyday life (ordinary, non-holy time) in order to extract the true meaning hidden in the dialectic of holy and non-holy time.

2. The Dialectic of Holy and Non-Holy Time

Despite the fact that non-holy time is opposed to holy time, its features do not simply stand in a contrastive relationship to those of the latter. In fact, in a way they are very similar: just as participating in holy time does not itself grant the human being involved in it a sense of distance and perspective—for as long as they are engaged, they, too, are immersed—similarly, non-holy time does not by itself give anyone a separate point of view. Rather, a new quality reveals only in dialectical transitions between holy and non-holy time. However, before addressing this issue a brief characterization of everyday life should be offered.

Non-holy time (just like that to which it stands opposed) demands a kind of participation that rests on one's dissolving oneself in finite life without being aware of this finitude. Everyday life is characterized by a rush, and an unreflective attitude focused only on things that are near, that seem familiar.[17] The vantage point of a participant in non-holy time is severely

17. I do not wish to claim that without religion (holy time), there is only unreflective, superficial and shallow life. Just like in the context of holy time, in this text I am deploying the notion of non-holy time as a specific attitude one adopts towards life, not as a description

limited and deprived of distance. The sphere of everyday life is dominated by hustle and bustle, constant noise and chatter, or—as Heidegger claimed—by idle talk. This last notion can serve to broaden out the reflections presented here, in that it represents the "apparent" or "provisional" character of non-holy time, as well as its "speed."[18] What I mean is that in everyday life there is no time for reflection or in-depth considerations: everything seems deprived of foundation and ground. As Heidegger himself writes, "the groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its becoming public; instead it encourages this. Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own" (Heidegger 1962, 213). There is no need to familiarize oneself with anything—that is, to get to know it, to study it. Everything is provisional and superficial in the sphere of ordinary being. That is why Aristotle claimed that philosophical activity "depends on leisure" (Aristotle 1999, 174). Everyday life or political activity—as the Greek philosopher referred to it—makes a human being too busy to reflect and contemplate. For that, he or she needs holy time.

So, what does the aforementioned dialectic of holy and non-holy time consist in? Well, firstly, there is the temporal and a finite aspect of holy time—despite one's needs and desires, one cannot stay in such time permanently,[19] but has to return to everyday life. Therefore, holy time is just a—shorter or longer, but nevertheless finite—break in-between stretches of ordinary life; it is understood as a special event occurring from time to time, something exciting and not normal or common, whereas non-holy time constitutes the "ground," the "normality" of the human position, which one can at times escape. Secondly, what matters is the possibility of experiencing both holy and non-holy time, thanks to which human beings gain distance. So, thirdly, the dialectic of holy and non-holy time is about

of any factual state of affairs. From the nonreligious perspective, the religious holy time I described earlier is not a means to escape from such an attitude; rather it is, for example, the aforementioned activities that Gadamer wrote about, as well as scientific activity, meditation, reflection, etc. So, once again, the non-holy time I am writing about here signifies a specific attitude strongly present in contemporary society and not a description of a life without religion. My considerations pertaining to non-holy time are undertaken with the assumption in place that the religious dimension of life is important, and that the holy time connected to it is meaningful.

18. I do not want to delve into the notions of speed and acceleration in the context of everyday life; however, it is worth mentioning that these are becoming more and more popular in contemporary philosophy of culture (see Virilio 2006).

19. Eliade's category of the archaic man fits very well with the reflections presented here on the subject of the need or desire for holy (sacred) time. Such a figure wants to free themself from history by participating in holy time, where this then gives them a sense of power (see Barth 2013, 62).

transitions from one time to another, without the possibility of remaining in one of them permanently. This breaks the dualism of holy and non-holy time, introducing a third, "liminal" timeframe. The greatest significance is born by precisely those transitions themselves, rather than by the experience of a single time—whether it be holy or non-holy. Those experiences, however, enable a human being to reflectively confront different perspectives—yet only in transition, as participating in holy time means dissolution into infinity and self-forgetfulness relative to the divine perspective. Participating in non-holy time, on the other hand, means dissolution into the emptiness of everyday hustle and bustle (Gadamer 1986, 42)—self-forgetfulness in the context of the rush of things. Having experienced both times, the human being can also find themselves in-between, and here they will be able to understand their situation as finite.[20]

I have reiterated at several points that people cannot stay in just one of those times, and have to move back and forth between them. Well, this matter needs some clarification. The word "cannot" is, in this context, used in a postulative sense which signifies the ethical need not to limit oneself to just one time. What happens when this postulate is not realized? There are two extremes. The first one relates to an absolutization of holy time, and results in religious hegemony, tyranny, or fanaticism.[21] Paying attention only to holy time, only to divine infinity, leads to the destruction of everyday life and to declaring it to be meaningless and redundant, which in turn causes fundamentalism, zeal and violence.[22] The second extreme has to do with the absolutization of non-holy time, and results in a purely secular, or even antireligious "order" which, when pushed to the limit, can turn into totalitarianism.[23] The appreciation of non-holy time alone constitutes the end of holy time, along with its celebration.[24] The lack of the infinite

20. This is similar to Welsch's concept of a transversal reason possessing such power as to enable the transition between different kinds of rationality, different incommensurable discourses. Holy time is, from this perspective, a kind of discourse focused on infinity and divinity, and non-holy time a different one, oscillating around finitude and lack of distance (see Welsch 2008).

21. Absolutism is one of the criteria to which Cavanaugh points in his reflections on religious violence (see Cavanaugh 2004, 518).

22. One naïve and popular argument used to justify killing in the name of God is to say that we should kill everyone and leave judgement of them to God, as the innocent will be saved and the guilty condemned.

23. One such antireligious totalitarian system was communism.

24. A highly interesting thesis concerning this issue is put forward by Fishley (2017, 48), who claims that in Charles Taylor's philosophy "one of modern society's 'forgettings' is how to encounter religious time in a deep and fulfilling manner." Indeed, it can be asserted that

perspective furnished by the latter can have catastrophic consequences when it comes to our attitude towards our fellow humans, and so on. Therefore, having only one perspective, participating only in one time, and not having access to pluralism, is connected to some dangerous political results in the form of either religious absolutism or secular totalitarianism.[25] The dialectic of holy and non-holy time presents itself in this context as an essential factor of "social health," so to speak, because it keeps the society in the middle, between two extremes, by making it aware of its finitude.

Let me be clear: I do not wish to say that without religion, violence cannot be overcome. There are purely secular ways of arriving at an awareness of finitude and becoming a skeptic of sorts (which is what I am claiming is essential to reducing violence). However, from the religious perspective (if one is seeking to preserve religion), the dialectic of holy and non-holy time, interpreted as making the believer aware of their finitude, is nevertheless important. On such a view, violence can be reduced both on secular and on religious grounds. So, why should religion not be abandoned entirely—if the goal of reducing violence can be met without it? For one thing, I am not certain that this is its one and only aim. Moreover, there are many positive factors present in religion, such as community formation, giving hope, providing meaning, as well as shaping morality. And what is more, religion exists in the world, and is strongly present in everyday social and cultural practice. Following the rule of conservatives everywhere, one may say that if one does not have a good reason to change something, it should be preserved. Because of the violent potential of (metaphysical) religion, one should intervene and propose a nonviolent interpretation—postmetaphysical, weak religion—but not abandon religion entirely. I do not want to elaborate on this further here, but it is important to mention that there are many reasons why religion should not be ruled out.

The awareness of finitude aroused by the dialectic of holy and non-holy time is crucial to my reasoning, as it connects my reflections on time with skepticism. Absolute knowledge, absolute truth, is unavailable to human beings, given that their condition is a finite one. First principles and stable epistemological foundations are something of a "myth," because they could

when it comes to true participation in holy time, an "unconscious" process of social forgetting is taking place: either they do not participate in it at all, or they do not understand the meaning of it—one which, on the interpretation I am proposing, is about the reduction of violence.

25. Cavanaugh also draws attention to the question of whether there is any difference between religion and secular systems when it comes to violence—both being based on absolutization (see Cavanaugh 2004, 521; 2016, 18).

be achievable only from an infinite, "godly" perspective.[26] One has to be skeptic, because there is simply not enough time not to be. This is similar to the claims of Marquard, who sees skepticism as a philosophy of finitude (Marquard 1989, 14) and writes that

> the absolute—perfect and extraordinary—is beyond the limits of human powers, for humans are finite. In practice they should not follow the motto "everything or nothing": what is human lies "in between," truth is half (Marquard 1995, 9).

The finite condition of human beings, and our being aware of it, leads to a skeptical attitude, which does not mean that "nothing is true." Rather, it is expressed in a Socratic motto that "we know that we do not know anything"—however, with a slight modification, which is that "we know that we do not know anything absolute" or, as Marquard puts it, "skeptics are not those who as a matter of principle know nothing; it is just that they do not know anything that is a matter of principle" (Marquard 1989, 15). In the context of the dialectic of holy and non-holy time it can be said that this movement between times provides the perspective needed to escape from one-sidedness, from what Marquard called "everything or nothing," and to move towards a middle-ground which expresses itself in a skeptical attitude.

To summarize: on one hand, the human being is submerged in everyday life, and because of their lack of distance they cannot notice their own finitude. On the other hand, through participation in holy time they acquire a sense of distance and begin to perceive everyday life in a skeptical manner, arriving at the quasi-Socratic conclusion that they know that they know nothing absolute. Still, they cannot reside in holy time forever—but also cannot forget about this infinite perspective. This distancing of the human being from their everyday life expresses itself in the skeptical attitude. Therefore, it can be said that the dialectic of holy and non-holy time causes an awareness of finitude, which results in skepticism.

3. The Role of Skepticism in Religion

It seems that a change is beginning to be visible in some parts of contemporary philosophy in regard to the perception of skepticism in the context of religion. From a religious perspective, the main way of understanding

26. As Blumenberg puts it in regard to Plato's philosophy, the probable is due to humans, certainty to God (2010, 82–83).

skepticism has been to connect it both with agnosticism and with distrust for the Church, where this in turn was viewed as a threat to religion or, at best, as an attempt to weaken it in favor of doubt and secular points of view. Moreover, this perspective treats skepticism as heresy (how can one doubt the truths revealed by God in the holy text?), as a way of moving away from religion, as secularization. In the context of the culture of obedience strongly present in, for instance, the Catholic Church, skepticism is viewed as particularly threatening, because it tears down the existing hierarchy. Skepticism is therefore understood as an anti-religious factor. However, today this is changing, in both the continental and analytical traditions (Wilczewska 2022). Philosophers such as Gianni Vattimo, who define themselves as essentially pro-religious, claim that it is not only good for a believer to be a skeptic, but even that the religious message implies a skeptical attitude.[27] What is important, skepticism is understood here in the abovementioned Marquardian sense: not in extreme terms, but in moderate ones, as a lack of knowledge about knowledge and a relinquishing of pretensions towards knowledge strongly construed as a system of absolutely certain beliefs. Vattimo is not isolated in his views—other philosophers, like Richard Kearney on the one hand and John Schellenberg on the other, do also highlight the positive role of skepticism in religion. Kearney does so from a pro-religious perspective, in the context of the "death of God" and the notion of hospitality (Kearney 2011), while Schellenberg is more ambivalent and says that religion should not be seen as a finished project along with its set of beliefs, but rather (given its cosmic "youth") as a still ongoing and formative process (Schellenberg 2019). In short, they all assert that the absoluteness of religious beliefs is (for various reasons) not justified, and that it is not a bad thing for religion to do without strong beliefs.

Given the above, skepticism is coming to be understood in a more positive way, especially from a religious perspective. However, the most important trait associated with skepticism in religion expresses itself in skepticism's ethical vocation—and that is its role in religion: precisely to enhance ethical awareness. This kind of approach is visible particularly in postmetaphysical philosophy.[28] Closely connected to, but not identical with, postmodernism,

27. The process of secularization initiated by the event of *kenosis* and then confirmed by Jesus' death on the cross is a process of weakening that primarily affects strongly held beliefs; hence, it is an incorporation of doubt into religion, which is considered entirely positive (see Vattimo 2002, 24; 1999, 52).

28. Philosophers such as Vattimo, Rorty, Marquard and Sloterdijk are all advocates of pluralism—where there is only one, there is violence; skepticism, meanwhile, is a means to introduce and preserve pluralism, so it has a profound ethical significance.

it adopts ethics as a "first philosophy" of sorts, and derives other philosophical beliefs from the postulate of nonviolence. Many postmetaphysical philosophers, such as Marquard, Sloterdijk, Vattimo, or Lyotard, argued that the "nature" of strong schemes which explain everything (metanarratives, or monomyths) is that they inflict violence, furnishing a justification for killing in the name of truth (Marquard 1989, 93; Sloterdijk 2009, 96; Vattimo 2002, 114; Lyotard 1992, 16). Sadly, there are all too many historical examples of such a connection. It is visible not only in the religious context of crusades and witch-hunts,[29] but also—or even above all—in the deeds of secular regimes such as that of the communist Soviet Union, or the crimes related to colonialism (Cavanaugh 2016, 13).[30] The believers kill in the name of God, his commandments and other "truths" revealed by him, while comrades and other followers of totalitarian secular orders kill in the name of equality, freedom, safety, etc. These are all beautiful and profound values; however, when absolutized, they are used as a justification for inflicting violence on others who do not share one's own beliefs.

That is why skepticism is so important. Weakening strongly held beliefs and not letting metanarratives appear ensures that there is no total justification for violence. In the context of religion this means that by introducing skepticism, religion is not being deprived of its existential value for human beings, but only losing its violence.[31] If a believer remains skeptical, and does not absolutize any of their beliefs, then they cannot, for instance, say that God demands that they go forth and kill heretics. In short, skepticism enhances tolerance and reduces violence.[32]

29. For an extensive study of the history of religious violence, see (Armstrong 2000; 2001).

30. Also, democratic systems, which are viewed primarily as a nonviolent reservoir of freedom and dialogue, are distinguished essentially by having no less zeal against their opponents than many totalitarian systems. Democracy is forced—as a universally optimal social system—on communities that have not asked for it; various atrocities have been committed in the name of democracy and virtue, such as the torturing of prisoners by the CIA in numerous prisons across the world (e.g., Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib) (see Delsol 2020; Rejali 2009).

31. Of course, this only means that religion can no longer be used as a justification for violence, and that it loses its violent potential as an absolute and total system. Violence as such can still be present for many other reasons, such as hatred, desire for power or money, etc., but in cases where skepticism has been introduced it cannot be (so to speak) ideologically supported by religion.

32. This kind of argument is often evoked in debates about tolerance. In the Enlightenment, Locke (and then, e.g., Voltaire) repeatedly said that the basis of tolerance is the impossibility of our ever knowing which of the ways proposed by different religions can lead to salvation. In other words, we do not know the absolute truth, so we have to be at least somewhat skeptical, and this leads to tolerance (see Locke 1796, 29). This thread of skepticism is also explored by Vattimo, who claims that secularization is itself the fulfilment of the Christian

As I said before, skepticism in religion is introduced through an awareness of finitude, which is a result of the dialectic of holy and non-holy time. The absence of one or other of these two temporal dimensions could engender an absolutization of one "way of life"—be it purely secular or purely religious—and this could in turn lead to violence. One cannot become a religious skeptic without having had an opportunity to gain the necessary distance, which becomes possible if and when one "goes out" from one of the mentioned timeframes. In other words, given the interpretation proposed and developed here, it seems impossible to be a religious skeptic without constantly going back and forth between holy and non-holy time. Skepticism happens in transitions. On the other hand, when one looks at skepticism in isolation from religion, one can observe purely secular means for gaining distance and becoming a skeptic, such as the perspective of deep time explored by Schellenberg (Schellenberg 2019, 19). My thesis, then, is not that in order to reduce violence, religion (and holy time) is necessary, but only that where religion serves as a basis for other things, the believer should move between holy and non-holy time, understanding their condition as finite and thus becoming skeptical. That just means that religion can abandon its connection to violence—not that it is the only medium for introducing non-violence into society. Thus, a person who inflicts violence on religious grounds, an absolutistic believer, is not really a "true" believer, for they do not understand the meaning of participating in holy time on one hand and non-holy time on the other. They lack distance and perspective. They are either trapped exclusively in holy time, or they have never truly participated in the latter. If they had, they would have become aware of their own finitude, and therefore become skeptical. So, to truly participate in holy time, according to the ethical interpretation being proposed, is to understand its significance as a postulate of nonviolence. Only skeptically inclined believers will grasp that. What is important is for them to make use of the encounter with infinity and arrive at the conclusion that given their own finitude, they cannot treat their own beliefs as final. That is why they cannot force other people to agree with them and share their beliefs, or kill them. Skeptical believers are, in a way, similar to Rorty's liberal ironists, who are aware of both their own contingency and that of their dictionaries (Rorty 1989, 61).[33]

message understood as Christ's commandment of love, in that secularization in the end leads to skepticism and deprives religion of its metaphysical elements, which are not essential to it but are related to violence (see Vattimo 1999; 2002).

33. In spite of some readers of Rorty, I do not treat his works as antireligious. Of course, he contradicts the given form of religion, but—and this is visible clearly in the book he wrote with Vattimo—at the same time paves a way for a new, postmetaphysical understanding of it

SUMMARY

In the context of religion, the notion of time can be addressed in the form of a hermeneutics of holy time. The ethical interpretation I have sought to develop in this paper presents holy time as an opportunity to gain a different point of view related to the experience of infinity, to escape human animality, and to dissolve in the divine. Participation in holy time, captured as a liminal event, relativizes the structure that is already in place, and provides human beings with a distance from their lives. However, engagement solely in holy time constitutes just one extreme, and human beings are—as was mentioned—in the middle. That is why the true meaning of holy time is eventually revealed via the contrast with non-holy time, as a dialectical movement.

Non-holy time presents itself as a time of rush, dissolution in finitude, and lack of distance. However, it is not something one should reject. What can be seen when contrasting those two time-frames is a certain dialectic. Through the participation in both holy and non-holy time, humans can reflect on themselves with the distance they need to have, and this reflection happens in the transition between holy and non-holy time. And what do these considerations on the part of human beings engender? They produce an awareness of finitude: the conviction that they are finite, and that because of this they cannot be certain of their own beliefs. In short, it makes them skeptical.

What is important in this context is the ethical role of skepticism in religion.[34] Relating this to postmetaphysical thought, I have claimed here that religious violence is caused by a belief in the absoluteness of religious truths: if one is sure that God is ordering one to kill the infidels, and that a reward awaits one for doing so, then one will kill them. So, the principal way to reduce the violent potential of religion is to weaken the beliefs it propagates, and this can be done by introducing skepticism into religion itself.

(see Rorty and Vattimo 2005). So, when Rorty describes religion as a conversation-stopper, he refers to the absolutist, metaphysical religion, which is certain about its beliefs, but the notion of the conversation-stopper really fits any metanarrative system—be it religious or secular—which is not capable of doubting its own beliefs and therefore is not capable of a true dialogue. That is why a skeptical kind of religion, a postmetaphysical one, cannot be regarded as a conversation-stopper. Moreover, Rorty does not seem to oppose it (see Rorty 1999).

34. I should stress that despite highlighting the ethical importance of skepticism in religion, and the ethical dimension of religion more generally, this is not a continuation of the Kantian project of equating religion with morality (see Kant 1998). There is not enough space in this paper to elaborate on this, but I would claim that apart from ethics there are other important aspects of religion, such as ritual, prayer, sets of beliefs, etc.—albeit interpreted in a postmetaphysical, weak sense.

The thesis I set out in the introduction to this paper—that the dialectic of holy and non-holy time leads via an awareness of finitude to skepticism, which in turn reduces religious violence—seems justified in the light of the considerations presented here. I also claimed there that the holiness of a particular time is a matter of ethics, not ontology. It now seems clear what significance this holds for us: the proposed understanding of holy time leads to non-violence, and that is why such time is truly holy—in that it contributes to the reduction of suffering, and not because God has a special kind of presence in it.

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