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Ascendant and Descendant Types of Thinking and the Impact on Tolerance as an Educational Value

Doru Valentin CĂSTĂIAN[1]

[1] Associate Professor, Lecturer PhD, „Dunărea de Jos" University, Galati, Romania, doru.castaian@ugal.ro

Abstract: This article will explore the pattern of conflicts between secular thinking and religious beliefs from the perspective of critical thinking and analyse the potential that this conflict holds for increasing tolerance inside mixed society such as in Romania. It is often said that the ability of thinking critically deeply erodes the propensity towards religious faith and there are numerous study results that back up this assertion. This article tries to explain that religious faith becomes fully understandable only in some larger pattern that shapes morality, cognitive strategies and social practices and this is true for secular thinking as well. We can name this patterns ascendant, respectively descendant. Ascendant thinking derives and explains higher level practices beginning from lower level entities through progress and emergence and for this kind of thinking, morality and cognition are an open fields that can be indefinitely improved. This kind of thinking embraces novelty and creativity and aims at human beings becoming capable of managing this novelty. The descending model derives from and explains the lower levels through complex and immutable entities and will tend to see novelty as change capable of breaking their models and therefore act towards neutralizing novelty through interpretation. Information and practices that cannot be neutralized will be counted as abnormous. The article comes forward with a comparative analysis between these two opposing patterns, showing that this interpretative frame is valid in retrodiction and that it can fundament concrete predictions. It will also show that critical thinking is permitted and can fundament a space for compromise and dialogue between religious and secular people.

Keywords: *ascendant thinking, descendant thinking, education, education plicies, cultural conflict, secularization, religious thinking. tolerance, critical thinking, science.*

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Introduction

One of the most important problems in contemporary world (with a special touch in case of post-communist East European world) is related to the plethora of religious, quasi-religious or secular beliefs that often lead to cultural wars and polarization, that are phenomena that deeply affect the roots of democracy and the tendency towards tolerance and mutual respect on which democratic world is based on (Berend, 2007; Stanley, 2019, p.351; Bugaric, 2015, pp. 232-235). Traditional societies like Romanian society come to encounter postmodern patterns of thinking and action and face multiple dilemmas when it comes to globalization or dealing with alternative modes of thinking, alternative spiritualities or different world views that challenge traditional premises (Matei, 2021, pp. 334-337; Căstăian, 2016, 2018; Maci, 2020). Inside these complex cultural frames, an important and unique role is played by our systems of beliefs which often support conflicting values and ways of action which come to describe a deeply pluralistic social space. My article tries to apply cross-cultural analysis to this polymorphic social and cultural space, showing that these various conflicts come partly from accepting and involving two opposing general patterns to describe reality, which I shall call *the ascendant and the descendant types of thinking*. Understanding through critical thinking the difference between these two equally sustainable patterns of organizing reality may lead to increased tolerance and dialogue between the members of the same society.

We shall call ascendant systems of beliefs those positions that assume that high level metaphysical explanatory beliefs and the behaviours they imply are cultural infrastructures, instruments created by people as biological beings that have an evolutionary past and have undergone evolutionary development. Different metaphysical positions are different socio-cultural means that reflect and were made possible by various limitations of human beings and have the primary role of solving social issues that concern evolutionary ecology. Ascendant position is, as we shall see shortly, compatible with a kind of pluralism of moral positions that is not reducible to relativism (Berlin, 2013, pp. 115-117).

Descendant systems of morals affirm the immutability of certain metaphysical truths that are declared intangible and that cannot be in principle modified by mere facts. This implies a form of moral and epistemological realism that solves several problems that concern moral relativism and pluralism but nevertheless shows a kind of internal conditioning that opens doors to fundamentalism.

Ascendant thinking

The ascendant pattern comes with a general model that sustains that more complex comes from simpler elements through biological and cultural evolution and therefore there is no end to evolution and no privileged structures. The ascendant pattern sustains an ascendant type of morals.

Ascendant systems of morals are only a part of a larger pattern that we can call ascendant type of thinking. All forms of ascendant thinking propose a form of epistemological realism (scientific realism being only a form) as it assumes that is possible to truly understand and describe reality at a fundamental level. For them there is access to the world factually, being it natural, psychological or social. Inside the present scientific orthodoxy, man can be understood as a biological species that evolved and coevolved with the rest of biological environment and created group adaptations such as religions, moral or political systems. These systems will therefore reflect group biological, psychological and sociological characteristics, even if there are ethological universalia that are to be found in all human cultures (de Waal, 2017, pp. 257-276; 2019, pp.309-320; Zhabaikhan & Raushan, 2020, pp. 81-83). For example, there are studies that show that intense need for cooperation are one of the main reasons for which oriental cultures are rather collectivist than individualistic (Furtună, 2018, pp. 110-116). There is also an well established fact that the presence of some genes, associated with aggressive behavior can influence the cultural niche these groups create and their cultural and moral systems of belief as well. (Furtună, 2018, pp. 271-284) To these it also contributes the Baldwin effect that refers to the fact that various changes in the environment will select some cultural adaptations that tend to stabilize that environment (Le, 2019, pp. 518-522). Adopting this kind of position implies accepting the fact that in the same cultural space there exist various systems of beliefs that can contradict one another and generate cultural conflict that cannot be solved by rational argumentation, as each system of belief reflects endemic community problems and a particular cultural history. Therefore we can affirm that ascendant type of thing is intrinsically open to tolerance as a metavalue that informs and makes dialogue possible, compromise and even political competition among different perspectives towards reality. Thinking in ascendant terms also implies using a weaker, postmodern notion of truth and adopting a lasting position that paradoxically means abandoning a hard notion of theoretical founding of truth since truth is always derived and historically produced. *Therefore what we call "the founding problem" of ascendant thinking can be described as follows: how can we inhabit and use a system of belief*

knowing that it only has an ethologically based instrumental value and that it will be all the same de-structured and abandoned during human evolution?

Descendant thinking

Through *descendant thinking* I understand those systems of thinking that assume the immutability of a metaphysical truth that explains everything that stands of lower levels in a platonic fashion. Any sort of a metaphysical truth as such is intrinsically ineffable, impossible to be fully structured by language or thinking. It only has concrete appearances that never exhausts its full inexprimable essence. This ineffability is not a negative function but a positive function that uses negativity to produce and explain meaning and ontological substance. That is to say that descendant thinking uses other intrinsic mechanisms than ascendant thinking in explain history and becoming at an ontological and epistemological level. Descendant thinking relies on a blind spot that is absence that shapes and makes possible all presence and that cannot be exhausted by facts or events. Religion is of course a classic type of descendant thinking, especially in its monotheistic semitic forms. So, any metaphysical truth shows itself primarily through cultural memes that form memetic networks. Memetic networks are complex adaptive networks that can assimilate indefinitely natural and cultural facts and translate them through complex cultural coding in elements of meaning that either sustain, go against or are neutral in relation towards the premises of the system. I`m using here the concept of a *complex adaptive network* taking it from philosopher Mark Taylor work. In his book, *After God*, Taylor defines religion in terms of *a complex adaptive network* (Taylor, 2009, p.12): „religion is an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure." Emergent complex adaptive networks present several characteristics:

a) Emergent complex adaptive networks (ECANs) are comprised of many different parts that are not autonomous but are connected in multiple ways. These connections or relations determine the specific identity and charcteristics of the members and components of the network;
b) ECANs display spontaneous self-organzation which complicates the relationship between interiority and exteriority in such a way that the line that is supposed to separate them becomes porous. In otherwords, ECANs are open rather than closed. Like the individuals

that comprise them, the networks that make up complex webs are codependent and coevolve through mutual interactions.

c) In ECANs, the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Whole and parts are co-emergent, that is, neither can be itself apart from the other and each becomes itself in and through the other.
d) The whole emerges from but is not reducible to its parts;
e) Individual agents, elements or components always act within parameters of constraint;
f) Since webs comprised on interrelated networks evolve over time, each configuration is also conditioned by the history of the network. ECANs therefore have a memory;
g) Diverse components can interact both serially and in parallel;
h) The complexity of the relationships among the members of a network creates positive feed back loops that move away from equilibrium;
i) As positive feed back accelerates, ECANsapproach a condition of self organized critacality or the tipping point where a minor event can have a catastrophic systemic effect;
j) Catastrofic effects are notcaused by external exogenous factors;
k) Since disruptions are systemic and therefore unavoidable, development is not continous, periods of stability are punctuated by periods of instability (Taylor, 2014, pp. 249-250)

For Christian religion, theology is such a network of networks that has partial immunity to facts. In order to have a better understanding of this immunity, we must have a closer look at things, we will have to place ourselves right at the core of this rich phenomenon. Not to ramble on the discussion more than it is possible, I will tackle only the case of Christianity. What is striking to the historical approach is the diversity of forms of expression, feeling and thinking of this rich realm. Is there a connection between hesychasm and the business exuberance of the contemporary Neo-Protestants? Or between the small Jewish Adventist denomination founded right after the death of Christ and the glamour of the Byzantine emperors? Or between the hierarchs advising Charles V regarding his new American subjects and the vendors selling Bibles on the avenues of big American cities? Or between the fervor of the conquistadors, mixing business interests with piety and the outright rejection of technology of nowadays fundamentalists? Or between the women's rights movements (supposedly founded by Christianity) and Tertullian's apophthegms for women as devil

sent temptations, between mediaeval advice on how to avoid masturbation through prayer and the aggressive and inflamed piety of the most American republicans? Or between the half-mystical, half-political movements such as fascism, and the distribution of digital icons on **Facebook**? Could we single out a nonnegotiable Christian core throughout the historical span to help us estimate the deviation from the right belief? Or is it more likely that we are dealing with a series of similarities made possible by an incessant multi-levelled branching of an initial set of practices, ideas and concepts?

My hermeneutical presupposition claims that it is impossible to account for the large variety of expression that fall under the name of Christianity, other than that of a network type of display and map-wise development.

Therefore, Christianity is first of all *pathos*, a core of sensibility that became ever more meaningful by having set an initial theological conceptual framework that got extended during the coming eras. Paul the Apostle, as the first to start the conceptual (memetic) network of Christianity known as *theology*, giving meaning to that nutshell of initial maelstrom. If we accept the theory of the network aspect of theology, we have to also make up the characteristics of a conceptual network. All liv*ing memetic/conceptual networks* have a core, a certain sense of the world and their main purpose is to reinterpret the original symbols in the light of the new "facts" of nature.

Accordingly, the task and imperative of any theological network is to bring meaning to reality as a whole. A shift on the point of view upon reality can rarely be a fatal blow to a theological system but an extension of the factual reality beyond the capacity of the theological network can bring about deep crises. The spread of heretic ideas can have the same outcome.

G.K. Chesterton claimed that the dogmas are firmly set but they set the boundaries of the game field (Chesterton, 2002, p. 82). The game is the one taking in the toughest blows and proves to have a bewildering diversity. But the deepest crisis a theology can go through is the forbidden extension of the game field. But we have already taken this insight too far. The most important purpose of this article is to bring understanding of the fact that learning new things about the world, the shifting of the viewpoint about nature or resurrection of old institutions cannot cancel or "deny' a theology, a religious doctrine and does not necessarily lead to giving up faith altogether.

If we are to admit Taylor`s analysis of religion, we will have to simultaneously admit that:

- Christian religion is a complex dispositive of a branching kind which correlates different networks (theological, economical, comunitary) that has as main function coding knowledge, behavior, feelings and moral intuition. Functionally, it represents itself as a mechanism that has the power to face becoming, to ofer useful codes and stable landmark points that are imunne to anything that could possibly occur inside the evenimential field.
- As a complex structure (a structure of structures), religion hides precisely the dynamics that is aimed to stabilize. By presenting an anhistorical model and by promising that there is no dynamics that can destabilize it fatally or render it obsolete, religion hides the nature of becoming as becoming and hides the very fact that constitutes its meaning: that there is no structure that can resist indefinitely to dynamics of processes and to the becoming that eventually destructures anything.
- Christian religion is a network of networks that interacts to external fluxes that it decodes and configures and lets itself to be configured by them within certain limits. This is why we can stipulate that fluxes always create lower or higher pressures on the religious network of networks, pressures that can in principle destructure the network or render it effectless towards what it pretends to structure.
- Any structure that pretends that is immune to processes and becoming is meant to function in a "logic of heresy". It operates a selection work in which permanently produced forms -political, economical, social and so on – are seen as errors. The permanent and ongoing accretion of these kind of forms, that are effective in the real sociopolitical spaces but interpreted as erros and heresies by religion, *de facto* extends the social and cultural space that is out of the memetic and hermeneutic control of that particular religion. To take one example, homosexual marriage is a sociological, legal and cultural form that cannot be positively taken and valued inside the Christian memetic network of networks.

We can therefore that different systems of belief always appear inside complex adaptive networks and are not independent in relation to those. On the other hand, an adaptive network functions either assuming that there is no end of becoming (the secular, ascendant solution) or assumes by dogma that there is an end of becoming. As the form that puts an end to becoming is beyond any historically becomed form and

expression, any religious system of this kind can, when assaulted, withdraw inside an apophatic position, although this is not sustenable on long term.

Tolerance and education

One of the most important features of modern democracy is tolerance as a central value (Dunn & Singh, 2014, pp. 24-31). I strongly believe that this critical perspective that differentiates between ascendant and descendant types of thinking can throw light on the deep divide between religious and secular thinking by treating them as different ways of explaining the dynamics and the structure of becoming and reality. In our analysis ascendant and descendant thinking can be shown as different adaptive strategies for different cultural groups under different endemic conditions. We are thinking in a descendant manner every time we are living inside a system of beliefs that presupposes the existence of unhistorical truths that cannot be destructured by the ongoing and permanent becoming. We are thinking in an ascendant manner every time we consider that higher cultural and metaphysical truths are adaptive constructs that should and can change in response to facts, but not by being falsified by facts (as they cannot be falsified) but when they are no longer capable of sustaining, as adaptive networks, the dynamics of the ever changing field of knowable phenomena. Our suggestion is that common ground can be found in an ethological perspective that comprises both these general patterns of thinking. The ascendant or descendant types are hard to be found in pure forms as concrete thinking actions usually use both. But we can grasp this structural difference when we deal with the most general maps in which we represent reality. Taking this perspective into educational policies can serve as a basis for increased tolerance into pluralistic societies (Almond, 2010).

Conclusions

First of all, we can conclude that the existence of these two opposing patterns that can be understood as two different strategies for integrating and signifying becoming will generate axiological conflicts that will be translated into political conflicts as every group will seek to formalize legally its own intuitions and expand their influence inside human groups. That is why we are positive that integrating this perspective into education policies and cultural approaches is likely to increase tolerance between different groups and individuals.

Secondly, understanding the two opposing strategies as part of a common ethological repertoire can bring forth a larger concept of humanity,

one that holds places both for religious and secular manifestations. Nevertheless, we must point out that ascendant thinking has countless descendant moves and viceversa. For example, descendant thinking can become fully ascendant in apophatic traditions where becoming is kept dependent both ontologically and epistemologically on a transcendental source, but all values and cultural forms can be seen as historical and surmountable.

Both ascendant and descendant thinking allow shaping and understanding experience, but their intrinsical mechanisms are quite different. Descendant thinking is dogmatic in that it considers certain truths to be eternal. It usually creates complex cognitive, sociological and axiological system that have the power to map all social and natural reality and act both in epistemic and normative ways. Such a system cannot be falsified by experience. It usually becomes obsolete in several ways, mainly by being replaced by other more fit systems. The fitness of a system can be understood referring to its capacity to bring fluence and coherence to social life. Ascendant thinking nevertheless creates systems that can be slowly shaped and revised by facts. Systems can be replaced by others that can prove more fit in explaining reality and regularizing social life.

Religions are mainly systems of descendant thinking. They are active at several levels, so we can say that they are complex systems of systems that allow multiple adaptations to ever changing reality. In a way, they act like biological organisms that can cope with reality by integrating it in stable structures and that die when they cease to be able to do that.

Science is mainly a system of ascendant thinking that is aware that all its cognitive and sociological instruments and maps of reality are constructed and sensible to change and permanent reconfiguration. Descendant religions can accept science and scientific discovery as long as their dogmas are safe, but dogmatic descendant thinking is more or less intolerant to the ascendant structure of scientific thinking. Science is in principle experimental and therefore can deliver facts and claims about reality indefinitely, therefore tensioning dogmatic descendant systems (Modood, 2019, p

We firmly believe that tendencies towards ascendant or descendant patterns of thinking inside societies can be measured and used for implementing policies aimed at increasing tolerance. Characteristics of both these two general patterns of thinking can be further discovered, they can be used as content inside curricula or as background knowledge for implementing school policies.

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