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The Health/Salvation Nexus: Religion, New Forms of Spirituality, Medicine and the Problem of "Theodicy"

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Abstract: The health/salvation nexus can be better understood if analyzed through the transformations that have affected the social relationship with the sacred in Western society. These changes have caused relevant implications concerning the sphere of "ultimate meaning", in the words of Peter Berger. Today, we are witnessing a weakening of legitimized "theodicies" capable of promising—according to Max Weber—salvation and guaranteeing "just equalization", that is, compensation or metaphysical condemnation for worldly conduct. However, this occurs to different extents depending on whether we are in the field of Western religions or new forms of spirituality. Medicine deserves a separate discussion. The hypothesis is that the health/salvation nexus leans towards salvation in the case of Western religions; towards health in the case of medicine; and, in the case of new forms of spirituality it leans neither exactly towards health nor exactly towards salvation: new forms of spirituality promise more than the achievement of health, but less than the achievement of salvation. Ultimately, the health/salvation nexus is structured differently depending on how much Western religions, new forms of spirituality and medicine are able to respond, more or less effectively, to the questions of "theodicy" and of "ultimate meaning". I use the term of "theodicy" in the way Max Weber and Peter Berger conceived it: therefore, this concept can also be usefully applied to non-theistic and secular worldviews.

Keywords: salvation; health; "theodicy"; "ultimate meaning"; sacred; religion; new forms of spirituality; medicine

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1. Introduction

The extraordinary progress achieved by medicine in modern times has convinced people for centuries that no goal in this field was precluded: Zygmunt Bauman (1992) even argued that the symbolic power of modern medical science depended on an implicit promise of immortality. For some decades now, medicine, like science more generally, has no longer had the same legitimacy (Giddens 1996).

Above all, a certain dissatisfaction with medicine has emerged since it cannot gratify the "ultimate meaning"[1] (Berger 1970). With this concept, I indicate the symbolic shields that protect, in a more or less effective way, individuals from eschatological pressure: they draw, from different horizons of meaning (in this case, Western religions, new forms of spirituality, and medical science), the answers to the fundamental questions raised by the awareness of the mortal nature of the human being. In this sense, the success of alternative medicine is significant (Secondulfo 2009b): alternative medicine offers remedies that take the whole person into account. Nevertheless, it cannot answer the ultimate questions. The phenomenon of "return of the sacred" that we have been witnessing in Western societies for several decades responds precisely to this type of intense need (Bell 1978). The ongoing "desecularization" (Berger 1999) consists of the great revenge of "ultimate meaning": "ultimate meaning" actually falls under the exclusive magisterium of the sacred domain.

However, today, in Western society, the social relationship with the sacred is structured in a particular way. On the one hand, Western religions maintain a relationship with the

transcendent sphere: this relationship allows these religions to reveal scenarios of salvation. On the other hand, the new forms of spirituality exhaust their relationship with the sacred exclusively on the immanent level: this does not allow them to promise salvation but rather to promise spiritual enhancements of the earthly experience (Camorrino 2022). This is not to say that belief in reincarnation—the main scenario of the afterlife in the new forms of spirituality as I will clarify below—does not imply post mortem realms: what is crucial for the present discussion is that these scenarios do not promise the achievement of ultimate salvation. If on a *continuum*, Western religions guarantee salvation and medicine ensures health, postmodern spirituality promises results between these two poles: new forms of spirituality refer to something more than health and something less than salvation. It remains true that the new forms of spirituality promise lasting and profound inner changes that seem to enlighten the overall meaning of existence. From this point of view, they refer to a concept of health closer to that of holistic (physical/spiritual) "well-being" (Palmisano and Pannofino 2022) as I will explain later. This makes the promise of the meaning of new forms of spirituality capable of intensifying the sense of experience in a way superior to those offered by other cultural fields, beliefs and practices. In any case, today it is not uncommon for other domains of human activity—such as sport, especially those experienced in close connection with nature (Camorrino 2018; B. Taylor 2007)—to nurture spiritual meanings. For its part, medical science—although it may be based on an implicit promise of immortality—does not have a "theodicy" (Berger 1967; Weber 1976, 1980): it can cope with the causes that determine the onset of disease and death, but it cannot question the presence of evil, suffering and injustice in the world. At most it can try to explain these phenomena, but it cannot justify them. Religion, on the other hand, has a "theodicy": it can frame iniquities, suffering, illness and death into a superior matrix of meaning (Berger 1967). Nonetheless, as we will see, the "plausibility" of Christian "theodicy" (Berger 1967, 2004) has weakened. In the following reflection, I use the term "theodicy" in the way Max Weber and Peter Berger conceived it. In this article, this concept must not be understood, therefore, in its original connotation in which there is an explicit reference to God. This clarification is relevant because, in this sense, the concept of "theodicy" can also be usefully applied to non-theistic and secular worldviews.

The transformations that have affected the social relationship with the sacred both in Western religions and in new forms of spirituality have caused relevant implications concerning the sphere of "ultimate meaning". We are witnessing a weakening of legitimized "theodicies" capable of promising—according to Max Weber—salvation and guaranteeing the "just equalization" that is, compensation or metaphysical condemnation for worldly conduct (Weber 1980, p. 211). However, this occurs to different extents depending on whether we are in the field of religion or new forms of spirituality. The hypothesis is that the health/salvation nexus leans towards salvation in the case of Western religions; towards health in the case of medicine; and, in the case of new forms of spirituality it leans neither exactly towards health nor exactly towards salvation: new forms of spirituality promise more than the achievement of health, but less than the achievement of salvation. The health/salvation nexus is a particularly relevant conceptual dyad from a sociological point of view because through its analysis it is possible to highlight the changes that have affected the social relationship with the sacred. The meaning that individuals give to their experience changes remarkably if they believe in the existence of an afterlife where they can be saved, or if their highest aim is, for example, to live a healthy life. Furthermore, I suppose that the analysis of the health/salvation nexus can show whether the specific social relationship with the sacred ends in the immanent level or opens up to a relationship with transcendence.

After this brief introduction, in Section 2, I investigate the features of the relationship between Western religions and salvation: the persistence of transcendence is the key element that allows the "plausibility" of Christian "theodicy" to be preserved. However, the changes affecting the figure of God, and the belief in the afterlife will be the subject of particular interest. In Section 3, I briefly analyze the promise of meaning formulated

by medical science and why it cannot aspire to resolve questions concerning "ultimate meaning". In the fourth, I analyze the phenomenon of new forms of spirituality: they exhaust their relationship with the sacred exclusively in the immanent dimension. From this point of view, I focus on beliefs in the intrinsic goodness of human nature (human beings are born pure) and reincarnation in its postmodern form. Reincarnation is the imaginal core of the "theodicy" of the new forms of spirituality, that is the heart of the emotional constellation from which this "theodicy" draws its profound meaning and on which its symbolic architecture is built. In Section 5, I open up a brief discussion from which the main differences emerge between the "theodicy" of Western religions and that of new forms of spirituality (medicine does not have a "theodicy"). In Section 6, I conclude the reasoning, highlighting how the health/salvation nexus is differently structured depending on how much religion, new forms of spirituality, and medicine can respond to the questions of "theodicy" and "ultimate meaning".

2. Religion in Western Society: The Weakening of "Theodicy"

The health/salvation nexus can be better understood if analyzed through the transformations that have affected the social relationship with the sphere of the sacred. The promise of salvation is typical of religion that has preserved a relationship with transcendence. The persistence of a transcendent dimension allows us to imagine the afterlife as a place where human beings are given back what they have done on earth. This compensation can consist of a reward of eternal blessed life (in case the believer has observed conduct in line with the doctrine) or the condemnation of eternal damnation (in the case of dissolute conduct). Religion—in Bergerian terms—is able to guarantee believers the "plausibility" of "ultimate meaning". As long as the God of religion in Central and Northern Europe preserved His ambivalent nature, He reassured believers that in the afterlife, everything that seemed unfair or terribly painful in earthly life would find a definitive and bright meaning. All evils will find justification. The promise of salvation goes beyond the possibility of defeating death because it averts a meaningless life thanks to a symbolic compensation in the afterlife (Berger 1967). The God of religion in Central and Northern Europe has succeeded for centuries in ensuring these scenarios of redemption: this was made possible because the faithful had to earn God's forgiveness with their conduct, and this implied renunciations, restrictions and moral obligations. This happened as long as His traditional sacred nature was strong. That is, as long as His radically transcendent nature showed both the "tremendum" and "fascinans" sides (Otto 2009): God was seen as both the source of salvation and that of damnation. The coexistence of these two faces ensures the "plausibility" of otherworldly scenarios in which all the inequity of the world is resolved through a coherent system of rewards and punishments. The assumption by virtue of which the God of religion in Central and Northern Europe is fundamentally benevolent (C. Taylor 2012) does not coincide with the fact that He does not inflict punishments: indeed, the severity with which He has for centuries inflicted punishments on wicked people and sinners is the sign of its fairness and, therefore, of its intrinsic goodness. His nature, both terrible and helpful, is the sacred mark that intensifies the effectiveness of his soteriological power. The ambivalent nature of God—from this specific point of view—makes salvation scenarios plausible. The "theodicy" of religion in Central and Northern Europe retains an internal coherence that preserves its rationality in Weberian terms (Ferrara 1985). This does not mean that the belief system of religion in Central and Northern Europe does not have aporias, some of which are particularly problematic. However, the very fact that for centuries, the power of God has not been questioned despite these aporias, is precisely the indicator of the unquestionable nature of the "theodicy" of religion in Central and Northern Europe in the centuries going back at least to the late Middle Ages. Questioning God's action, that is, raising the question of the unde malum, is already proof of the weakening of this "theodicy" (Marquard 2008).

The solidity of the "theodicy" of religion in Central and Northern Europe has given stable meanings to the conduct of individuals for almost two millennia. Above all, coping

with the "eschatological anxiety" (Kermode 1967) produced by the awareness of death. Both death and illness—as Peter Berger observes—are placed within a broader matrix of meanings that mitigate the emotional load that they inevitably bring with them. Death and illness are transfigured in the light of Christian axiology: suffering does not appear as an exclusively negative event, but rather, it also appears as the privileged medium for the expiation of one's sins. As we will see later, human nature for Christian doctrine is intrinsically sinful beyond the sins that were actually committed. The exemplary model of Jesus Christ and the Passion on the cross indicates to all Christians that suffering is the main road to redemption (Berger 1967). This economy of meaning is made up of elements that relate to each other. The "theodicy" of religion in Central and Northern Europe is a very solid "building", as long as the bricks with which it is built remain in place. It is the deep-rooted belief in God as a Judge who simultaneously rewards the righteous and punishes sinners (in the name of His supreme good) that guarantees the stability of "theodicy". The apparent senseless cruelty of the world does not destabilize the "plausibility" of God's power, precisely by virtue of the solidity of the legitimacy that the "theodicy" of religion in Central and Northern Europe has had for centuries. This problem will arise with all its force only at a later time.

Due to a gradual but inexorable process, conversely, the symbolic architecture of religion in Central and Northern Europe has begun to lose stability. This has caused—it is useful to underline it—a precarization of "ultimate meaning". God is increasingly perceived as a giver of infinite forgiveness, of unconditional mercy by virtue of His limitless compassion. That is, the punitive features of God are denied. It is a form of "disneyfication", to quote David Lyon (2000). God, during a long and gradual socio-historical process, has almost completely lost His ambivalent nature. This fact has significant implications. If God is experienced exclusively as an Entity that offers forgiveness to everyone, the question of the "just equalization" becomes very problematic (Weber 1980, p. 211). The coherence of "theodicy" is seriously undermined, and this coincides—as Peter Berger (1967) teaches—with a worsening of existential anxiety: the suffering, injustice and evil that human beings experience are not anchored to transcendent meanings. No longer being included in soteriological scenarios of compensation, they corrode the meaning of existence. The belief in a God who is a person and judge is increasingly weaker in favor of a figure with much more indulgent and abstract features: the Lord is assimilated to an energy, or something similar (Cipriani 2020, p. 220; Dobbelaere and Voyé 1990, pp. S5–S6).

It is no coincidence that the imagery of the afterlife is also increasingly fading (Cipriani 2020, pp. 194 ff.; Garelli 2020, p. 45; 2021; Pace 2020). If God as a person and judge vanishes, it is physiological that the place where His judgment takes effect also vanishes in turn. Some still believe in heaven, but fewer and fewer people believe in hell (Garelli 2020, pp. 39, 44–45). Individuals still believe in angels but less and less in luciferian interventions: that is, the otherworldly manifests itself less and less in the guise of the devil and more and more in the guise of benevolent and miraculous figures (Berzano 1995, p. 520). These aspects also highlight a "disneyfication", always according to Lyon (2000): the "fascinans" side of the sacred far prevails over the "tremendum" one. This God is deprived of his severe traits, an Entity who watches over an enchanted world in which human beings are sinners only to a limited extent, just as children could be. However, as I said before, the symbolic edifice of Christianity retains its stability only if the foundations that support its structure are not undermined. This phenomenon of "disneyfication" of God is the outcome of a long process that I cannot go over in full here. I will only point out, very briefly, some key moments. Already in the transition from the Old Testament to the Gospel, the severe and judgmental nature of God is significantly reduced in favor of the message of Christ which is much more based on salvation than on punishment (Parsons 1978, p. 271). Let us also think about original sin, a belief that is almost completely delegitimized today, but which for centuries was the cornerstone of Christian doctrine (Cavicchia Scalamonti 2001, pp. VII–VIII). A very small number of believers today share the idea that human beings are born sinners due to the fact that they descend, without exception, from the genealogical

tree at the top of which is Adam. Over the course of modernity, this belief has weakened greatly: the ascending bourgeoisie—as Bertrand Groethuysen states—did not intend to be condemned for an indelible stain inherited from a remote (and increasingly less plausible) progenitor. The bourgeois class instead wanted the right merits to be recognized in the afterlife for the extraordinary worldly endeavor of which it was the undisputed protagonist: it was inconceivable that a class capable of improving the conditions of the entire human community should burn in the flames of hell due to an original sin contracted by someone in a very distant time. Modern people wanted to be accountable exclusively for their actions: they accepted being responsible only for what they actually committed (Groethuysen 1975). This process of rejecting the Adamic sin already began in the Late Middle Ages because of people such as Abelard and William of Ockham: the sin from an ontological attribute gradually slipped into the interiority of the individual becoming a psychological issue (Cavicchia Scalamonti 2002). To be fair, sin was already previously internalized in the individual conscience: Saint Augustine—as Adam Seligman notes—fostered this dislocation. And Saint Paul, before him, had conceived sin no longer as the transgression of an external law by a community (as it was in the Jewish tradition) but as an individual dramatic event that took place entirely in the conscience of the person (Seligman 2000).

It is possible to glimpse in this shift of original sin from an ontological condition (participation in Adam's nature) to a psychological one (the interior intention of the individual: that is, the origin of modern conscience) a dislocation of the authoritative foundation from the outside (God) within (the Self): to put it in other words, the scenarios of salvation begin to weaken the more the individualization process advances (Cavicchia Scalamonti 2002, 2007). As long as the authority that rules social conduct is experienced as a reflection of an "integrally received order" (Gauchet 1985)—that is, the cultural conditions that found the "heteronomous" regime according to Marcel Gauchet—it escapes criticism: one must act this way because it is always this way one has acted, and one has always acted this way because it is right to replicate the exemplary model transmitted by an immemorial tradition (Hervieu-Léger 1993). The belief in this irrefutable justice, both earthly and transcendent, derives from God: the source from which authority emanates, placed beyond the sphere of the power of human beings, cannot be questioned. The solidity of what is right on earth reflects the stability of "theodicy": if you behave badly on earth, you will be punished in the afterlife, if you behave well, you will be rewarded. The authority that rules both the mundane and the transcendent dimension is the same: God, escaping human manipulation, manages to ensure the stability of His own soteriological promise (Berger 1967; Weber 1976, 1980). That is, it is the stability of the "heteronomous" regime—to quote Gauchet—that guarantees the "plausibility" of the salvation scenarios and therefore, the solidity of the "ultimate meaning". Due to the progressive shift of the authoritative foundation from an external source (God) to an internal one (the Self)—that is, with the passage from "heteronomy" to "autonomy"—individuals have increasingly questioned the divine nature of social order (Gauchet 1985). The Totality that previously embraced the entirety of individual and collective existence is fragmented, and what one must be is no longer deducible from the plane of Being (Dumont 1993, p. 264).

The attention of individuals increasingly shifts from otherworldly to worldly goals: individuals gradually become disinterested in soteriological issues and increasingly focus on the achievement of material objectives. It is a gradual process which is not at all foreign, at least initially, to the sphere of religion in Central and Northern Europe. The weakening of the authoritative foundation that occurs at the dawn of modernity causes a corresponding weakening of the "ultimate meaning": if God is no longer so omnipotent as to escape the doubt and criticism of human beings, how can He guarantee the solidity of the horizons of salvation? This question wears down with its corrosive charge the existential certainties hitherto guaranteed by an immutable soteriological perspective that counteracted any "eschatological anxiety" (Kermode 1967).

The Protestant Reformation seeks—according to John Carroll—to restore the absolute transcendence of God by reinforcing His inscrutable nature. Luther declared any magi-

cal means to gain salvation outlawed. The Reformation wants to restore God's original omnipotence: it is not possible to intervene in His design in any way. Human beings must bend to His will, and never doubt the perfection of His plans. Even in the face of injustices and the most apparently inexplicable suffering, they must never suspect the absence of a higher meaning. The indecipherability of the Protestant God is the emblem of his inviolable majesty: the unfathomable mystery of Him is the key to His radical transcendence. Paradoxical as it may appear, it is—continues Carroll—the intrinsic "contradiction" between the impossibility of influencing one's post mortem destiny in any way and the moral obligations descended from free will, which supports the solid structure of the Lutheran "theodicy": salvation depends on an intricate relationship between "sola fide" and hope in Grace. Calvin will strengthen this "contradiction" even further, taking the doctrine of predestination to its extreme consequences (Carroll 2004). The price to pay for this renewed "ontological security" (Giddens 2006) is quite onerous. Calvinist "theodicy" is based on the doctrine of predestination. Individuals, to mitigate the anguish caused by the weakening of the "heteronomous" authoritative foundation (Gauchet 1985), accept that their otherworldly fate is decided before their birth: this means that their possible salvation does not depend in any way from their actions. Disorientation caused by the disintegration of the feudal-Christian cosmos is placated by a God capable of healing this fracture only if individuals give themselves entirely into His hands (Fromm 1941). The omnipotence of the Calvinist God, together with His inscrutability and the related doctrine of predestination, determine intolerable psychological pressure. Believers have no way of knowing the otherworldly fate that God has reserved for them. They also cannot influence it as they were predestined before birth. This state of affairs proves unbearable in the long run. As Max Weber (2006) teaches, Protestants (especially Calvinists) convince themselves that they can trace the signs of probable salvation in worldly success. Providing for the good of one's family and the community through methodical, sober and rational conduct becomes the ultimate purpose of existence. Everyday life thus becomes the stage of redemption: the Calvinist, through work, consecrates his life to God. What was previously achieved in the isolated silence of the monasteries now must be achieved in the world: the entrepreneur is a monk in other robes. The fruits of work—profit and success—are not valid as such: they instead demonstrate their supreme value when they signal a probable benevolence of God towards the individual's otherworldly fate. As long as the latter—Weber continues—undertakes to reinvest the money in the business, rather than wasting it in a dissolute life. The rational nature of this conduct, by virtue of which any luxury is a cause for sin, profoundly structures the personality of the individual to the point that, as the rationalization process advances, the capitalist's activity gradually becomes detached from any transcendent foundation: he pursues profit no longer as a sign of divine grace but as mere gain in itself. That is, the inscrutability of the God of the Reformation (especially in its Calvinistic form) finally caused—in a completely unintentional way—the "disenchantment of the world" (Weber 2006). This has enormous implications in terms of "ultimate meaning". The presence of evil, suffering and inequity in the world no longer finds a solid justification in an unquestionable "theodicy" capable of best counteracting its corrosive action.

Religions in Western society, however, still maintain a relationship with the transcendent sphere today: it can counter the anxiety produced by the question of "ultimate meaning" through its "theodicy" albeit in a less stable way than in the past. On the one hand, the spread of a growing "therapeutic culture" (Bellah et al. 1985) has changed the relationship with the domain of the sacred: now the transcendent world is inhabited by a God increasingly called by individuals to offer endless forgiveness and exercise His infinite mercy (Martin 2012, p. 312). At the same time, He is no longer allowed, thanks to interdicts, to limit the opportunities for individual "self-realization" (Bellah et al. 1985; Rieff 1987). On the other hand, the dynamics activated by "pluralism"—as stated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann—have relativized the authoritative sources of collective and individual constellations of beliefs, weakening the "taken-for-granted" truths at the foundation of

Western religions (Berger and Luckmann 1967): this is highlighted—as we have seen—for example in the weakening of belief in sin and in the existence of the afterlife, but not only. These processes of the delegitimization of fundamental beliefs for Christianity cause a weakening of "theodicy" which, in turn, produces a precarization of "ultimate meaning". The imagery of salvation—once its symbolic architecture has been undermined—falters. The current success of religions that demand strict observance of their own precepts, as well as the spread of fundamentalism, represent, in many respects, a reaction to this state of affairs (Berger 2014).

3. Medical Science: The Absence of "Theodicy"

The original success of science—and above all, of medical science—can in part be considered the result of the promise of meaning that it has formulated in the course of modernity: the scenarios envisaged by science are not in fact limited to extraordinary technical and material achievements. First of all, we have to highlight that modern science, especially in its initial phase, seems to operate in an alliance with God (Webster 1994). The first scientists (natural philosophers) were convinced—as Robert Merton claims—that through their discoveries they would reveal, together with the perfection of the laws of nature, the perfection of the God who is the Creator of these laws. Scientists collected discovery after discovery. New theories and innovations were put into service for the progressive improvement of the human condition. Scientists were certain that they acted for the greater glory of God. Furthermore, to be a scientist, it was necessary to consecrate one's life to ideals of rationality, methodicality, self-constraint, reflexivity, all typical qualities of the Protestant ethos and which gave the right to significant "psychological rewards" (Merton 1938). Individuals thus became convinced that the material progress produced through science fulfilled the commandments of divine will (Farrington 1949). Science even served to restore to human beings the qualities lost due to the Fall (Shapin 1996).

Medical science was the flagship of modern science. Through medicine—as Zygmunt Bauman states—it would have been possible, day after day, to identify and eradicate all the causes of diseases until, ultimately, defeating death itself. Modern society, imbued with the ideology of progress, was convinced that it was headed along a path of growing and unstoppable perfectibility. There were no obstacles so great as to be considered insurmountable. In short, no challenge that could not be won in the future. In the eyes of medicine, therefore, even disease and death did not appear to be enemies impossible to overcome. Medical science has thus, for three centuries, hindered the corrosive action of illness and death, promising health and (implicitly) immortality (Bauman 1992).

However, medical science has been unable to do anything on the level of "ultimate meaning" that is the specific domain of the sacred: medicine cannot rely on any "theodicy". Medicine can explain the physical mechanisms underlying illness and death but is forced to remain silent in the face of their mystery. That is, medical science can provide an explanation but not a justification—this is the phenomenological key to understanding the function of "theodicy": it offers justifications and not just explanations (Berger and Luckmann 1991)—of the presence of evil, suffering and injustice in the world, since it shares the fate of science more generally: that is, science cannot pronounce on the ultimate questions (Weber 2004). Nonetheless, science and medicine were strongly legitimized institutions until a few decades ago, above all thanks to the extraordinary concrete results achieved. Since the second half of the twentieth century, however, their authority has begun to weaken. First, with the tragic events that occurred during the Second World War. Many authoritative scholars indicate the atomic bomb and the Shoah as the moments in which trust in science, understood as an enterprise in the service of humanity's progress, is fatally undermined (Anders 1962; Bauman 1989). Science, but also medicine understood as the spearhead of Western science, is no longer able to function as a "grand narrative": there is more and more suspicion that scientific activity hides huge economic and political interests and that it is no longer a neutral enterprise solely serving the "emancipation" of human beings from poverty, disease and ignorance (Lyotard 1984). Therefore, more generally,

skepticism is spreading towards the institutions that have organized and given meaning to social life for three centuries. Many values fostered by Western society are delegitimized as they are seen as carriers of potential damage, both material and moral. The ideology of progress from this point of view is overturned: we fully enter postmodern society.

4. New Forms of Spirituality: An Eccentric "Theodicy"[2]

Due to this growing delegitimization, the scientific institution—but more generally the entire Western tradition—is seriously stripped of its authority: a shadow of suspicion is cast over it. The extraordinary objectives flaunted by the ideology of progress are perceived—by increasingly numerous human groups—as a *bluff*, indeed as the prelude of an increasingly possible (and looming) planetary catastrophe (Beck 1992).

It is no coincidence that starting from the 1960s, an "expressive revolution"—according to Talcott Parsons—occurred: individuals wished to free themselves from any authority that does not coincide with their own Self. They want to fully realize their emotional potential within supportive communities held together under the banner of "cosmic love": the social bond must be exclusively based on love and usually extends beyond the human sphere. These human groups, animated by a countercultural ethos, rise up against the capitalist regime in the name of an antagonistic hierarchy of values (Parsons 1984). In many ways, these changes resemble the "silent revolution" described by Ronald Inglehart. The degree of economic prosperity achieved by Western societies causes individuals to lose interest in strictly material objectives and instead turn to "post-bourgeois" goals: they now primarily seek self-realization through the cultivation of aesthetic, political and existential feelings (Inglehart 1971). The shift of the authoritative foundation into the depth of the Self causes individuals to increasingly recognize in their inner forum the ultimate seat of the "authenticity" of existence, the very source of the Being (C. Taylor 1989, 1991). To facilitate inner dialogue, that is, to preserve or recover the authenticity of this dialogue, adequate tools are needed. "Therapeutic culture" comes to the aid of individuals whose supreme goal is to achieve self-realization that goes beyond the material sphere (Giordan 2016; Rieff 1966; Roof 2000). Material achievements can in some way reflect successful self-realization, therefore, an advancement of the Self, but alone they are not enough to indicate the fulfillment of a profound and lasting inner transformation. There are, at least superficially, some similarities in this sense with the Protestant ethos (Luckmann and Berger 1964). However, Calvinism emphasized the maniacal control of impulses and deferral of gratifications. Antithetically, postmodern spirituality is based on the primacy of immediate satisfaction and free experimentation of bodily practices, especially through consumption and forms of "hedonism" (Bell 1972). Furthermore, the features that in contemporary society structure the professional field promote—argue Bellah et al.—the spread of a "therapeutic attitude": due to the transformations that have affected the world of work, people are encouraged to strengthen empathetic and flexible relational skills, attributes necessary for the professional career. Individuals improve these qualities through an inner reshaping process: what becomes decisive is not necessarily the actual psychotherapeutic treatment but an attitude to reflexively turn towards the Self in accordance with the therapeutic horizon of meaning (Bellah et al. 1985). The therapeutic ethos replaces the Calvinistic one: for the latter, through entrepreneurial work, the world becomes an object of transformation, while for the former, the inner world becomes an object of transformation due to changes in the professional field (Sennett 2002).

A crucial element of "therapeutic culture" is psychoanalysis: increasingly social relationships and the individual's self-understanding are interpreted in the light of psychoanalytic grammar. People thus begin to increasingly lose interest in issues related to salvation in favor of their own psychological well-being (Rieff 1966). One of the key moments of the health/salvation nexus occurs in this phase. It is useful to underline how the widespread diffusion of "therapeutic culture" is influenced not so much by European psychoanalysis but rather by that of the United States: if European psychoanalysis is more centered on the issue of conflicts and guilt, American psychoanalysis is instead mainly aimed at personal

self-realization (Ehrenberg 1998; Lasch 1984). In the following decades, especially through the influence of the media, the US version of psychoanalysis (at least in popular culture) has increasingly spread throughout Western society.

In this cultural atmosphere, new forms of spirituality have begun to spread. In postmodern spirituality, anti-institutional tensions converge together with the desire to recompose the Totality shattered by modernity and the yearning to experience again the existence of "ultimate meaning". The new forms of spirituality are fueled by dissatisfaction relating, on the one hand, to Western religions understood as a monolithic and inadmissible set of incomprehensible dogmas (Berzano 2016) and, on the other, by the presumed limits of official medicine understood as a Trojan horse of the scientistic tradition and dualism typical of the modern West. It is true that in recent years, in some branches of science (especially those of "new physics"), more monistic visions of the cosmos are spreading (King 1996, p. 346). However, postmodern spirituality—whose original matrix is the New Age (Heelas 1996)—bases its constellation of beliefs and practices on imagery that dismantles, stone by stone, the hierarchy of values and symbols typical of the Western and Christian tradition. First of all, the new forms of spirituality reject—as Colin Campbell observes—any dualistic conception: they are based entirely on monist–holistic imagery where the typical splits of modern metaphysics are challenged and recomposed into a new Whole. To do this they draw fully on the symbolic heritage of the East: Asian cultural traditions are one of the most relevant imaginal reservoirs of new forms of spirituality (Campbell 2010). Indeed, Asian traditions based on a monistic conception are those that have had the greatest impact on postmodern Western spirituality.

Again, due to this *great refusal*, so to speak, the body becomes one of the main symbolic theaters of this ontological revolution. It is no longer perceived—according to Giuseppe Giordan—as the seat of sin in contrast to the soul which is instead the seat of the spiritually superior part of the human being. Indeed, the body is precisely the medium through which individuals have to reconnect with the cosmos: a renewed awareness of the body is the first necessary step to access spiritual experiences. From Christian denial and mortification, we move on to a striking valorization of the role of the body (Giordan 2009). However, the body should not be understood within a dualistic universe. What opens the doors of a spiritual experience—as stated by Stefania Palmisano and Nicola Pannofino—is the newfound harmony of the body and mind, understood as inseparable parts. In the new forms of spirituality, sensitivity to health issues is paramount, but in a more overall sense of "well-being": individuals interpret the mind–body relationship holistically, and healing is understood first and foremost as the outcome of achieved inner balance (Palmisano and Pannofino 2022). The state of stillness reached by the individual between the external and internal world, despite all the inevitable suffering of life, empowers spiritual growth. What the new forms of spirituality promise is certainly superior to the achievement of a "simple" state of physical health: they persuade individuals to reach profound states of awareness and meaningful inner conversions (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). Yet, the new forms of spirituality, although they can ensure "well-being", cannot promise salvation.[3] This radical overturn of the conception of the body proceeds simultaneously with an ontological reappreciation of human nature. As I said before, in the Christian tradition human nature is constitutively evil. This is due to the ancestral stain of original sin. It is necessary for Jesus Christ to become incarnate so that Adam's sin is temporarily redeemed (Smart 1984). The life of the Christian (especially for the Catholic faithful) then, through participation in the sacraments and righteous conduct, can counteract the corrupting power of sin, although always to a partial extent. Indeed, the lives of the saints are not rarely the result of conversions from initially sinful behavior. Human nature for postmodern spirituality—as Wouter Hanegraaff notes—is, on the contrary, essentially good. That is, the human being at the moment of birth is pure. It is society that, starting from the very first socialization, contaminates people (Hanegraaff 1998b, p. 22). This means that the authoritative foundation that legitimizes social conduct now resides in the depths of the Self: connecting with this uncorrupted substance allows, in a certain sense, to draw on

a divine nature (Heelas 1999, p. 67). This state of affairs is impossible in the Christian imagery by virtue of the belief in original sin. The assumption—sociologically paradoxical—is that in the absence of the contaminating influence of society, individuals would retain their original purity. This conception automatically elevates childhood to an ontologically superior state (Adams and Haaken 1987, p. 506). Not to mention the uterine state which, from this perspective, becomes the true uncontaminated condition to be pursued as the ultimate goal of spiritual research (albeit through cosmic transfigurations as the effect of a symbolic projection): this has identifiable narcissistic roots highlighted by Christopher Lasch which, however, I cannot go into more detail here. I would only point out that the desire for fusion with the cosmos typical of the new forms of spirituality ultimately reflects the narcissistic desire to experience the blissful fullness of the fetal condition (Lasch 1999).

It Is no coincidence that one of the most widespread beliefs relating to the post mortem in postmodern spirituality is that of reincarnation (Campbell 2002a, 2002b; Houtman and Aupers 2007, p. 307; Houtman et al. 2009, p. 170; King 1996, pp. 346–47; Roof 2000, p. 59; Secondulfo 2009a, pp. 164–65; Walter 1993, 2001). This belief is also drawn from Eastern tradition. However, the version adopted in the West differs in several crucial aspects from the original one. First of all, clarification is needed. Reincarnation—this reinforces the immanent nature of the new forms of spirituality—postulates that the afterlife consists of a continuous return to the world (Secondulfo 2009a). The problem of the "just equalization" must—if the "theodicy" wants to maintain its "plausibility" (to put together Max Weber and Peter Berger's theses)—be resolved in the unfolding of the succession of the cycle of lives. Nonetheless, if in the original tradition this cycle is experienced as a metaphysical cage from which individual desperately wants to free himself, in the postmodern version—as Colin Campbell acutely highlights—the subsequent life is perceived as an opportunity to live the life more fully. What in the original conception is an unbearable torture, is instead experienced as a sort of reward in the postmodern version[4] (Campbell 2002a). The next life is not the place where the mistakes and faults committed in the previous incarnation are paid for, but rather the place where it is possible to complete the unfinished missions. The conception of reincarnation typical of new forms of spirituality is influenced by the ideological legacy of Western modernity: the cyclical vision of the original tradition is succeeded by a linear one by virtue of which the Self can, life after life, evolve spiritually (Campbell 2010, p. 753). That is, it is a progressive vision, foreign to the original one (Hanegraaff 1998a, pp. 478 ff.)—especially in the sense that in the new forms of spirituality, the emphasis is placed *exclusively* on progression. This postmodern conception is affected by the primacy of the Self, key element of the imagery of the new forms of spirituality (Giordan 2007): individuals think of subsequent lives as opportunities to improve their awareness, their inner balance, relieve pain, and resolve the contradictions of previous incarnation (Walter 1993). They perceive subsequent lives as the stage where spiritually improved selves can perform better roles. In the original conception, on the contrary, the Self is precisely what the individuals want to get rid of in order to return to the impersonal One[5] (Ferry 1996; Walter 2001).

The first problem is therefore related to the impracticable solution of the "just equalization", to put it in the words of Max Weber: if in the next life the sins committed in the previous ones are not paid for, but only spiritual advancements are achieved, how can one justify the presence of evil, iniquity and death in the world? Expelling sin from the world—as new forms of spirituality do—is not without price. Death has been considered for two millennia in the West—according to Talcott Parsons—the fallout of original sin: once the reality of original sin has been denied, it becomes logically imaginable—from a spiritual perspective—that death has no valid reasons for occurring. The perennial return to the world envisaged by postmodern reincarnation can actually be considered as an imagery nourished by "fantasies of immortality" (Parsons 1978, pp. 269, 277). For these reasons, on this horizon of meaning, death—as well as illness—is understood as the product of a choice of the person: that is, both are challenges that the individual decides to face to accomplish a further step in the progressive path of spiritual evolution (Walter 1993). The same goes for

the suffering and injustices suffered by human beings, as Wouter Hanegraaff observes. This is not a specific difference from the original conception. In order for this peculiar "theodicy" not to lose its "plausibility", it is necessary to give up proclaiming oneself a victim. Any event—even the most brutal, terrible and tragic—falls within the individual's choice to the extent that it realizes a cosmic plan of which the victim and tormentor are, for reasons that go beyond the field of individual intention, the main actors (the main *interpreters*, rather than actors). Hence bloody implications. The one who commits the crime (whatever it is. . .) and the one who is the victim become, in a certain sense, metaphysical accomplices of a higher plan of cosmic spiritual evolution. In a way that from a psychological point of view is at the limit of tolerability, the victim—Hanegraaff concludes—should even thank her oppressor: the latter becomes—in this eccentric "theodicy"—the vehicle for the spiritual evolution of both (Hanegraaff 1999, pp. 156 ff.). After all, if human nature is essentially good, how can we blame someone for their conduct? That is, evil has an illusory, apparent nature: everything is intrinsically good. Ultimately, free will is called into question in this postmodern conception: evil is a disguised good, therefore the individual can only act for the good. From this point of view, both the condemnation and the reward for earthly conduct become senseless. Guilt becomes an accident. People who carry out apparently heinous acts—Campbell states—exclusively actualize a cosmic instruction: they cannot be held responsible for finding themselves in an incarnation not yet advanced on the spiritual path or being mediums of superior conjunctures. For the new forms of spirituality, rather than actions, experiences are the heart of existence: the former have an actor who carries them out, the latter simply happen, and the individuals find themselves, without particular intentions, thrown into them (Campbell 2002a, pp. 82–83). Just as Lutheran and Calvinist "theodicy" is founded on an intrinsic "contradiction"—according to Carroll (2004)—so too is the "theodicy" of new forms of spirituality. The "contradiction" lies in the fact that since before they were born, individuals have chosen the evils they will have to face in life, and this is their mission to evolve spiritually (in the next life): this belief helps to compensate the emotional burden that suffering brings with it. However, this prenatal *choice* cannot—for cosmic reasons—not be made: this further (apparently) reduces the suffering that evils and pain bring with them. However, as I am trying to explain, to maintain the plausibility of this eccentric "theodicy", the price to pay is high, not only in terms of a radical reduction of free will.

Furthermore, there is another relevant aspect. The "theodicy" of postmodern spirituality fosters the process of discharging responsibility also of any evil or inadequate behavior done by loved ones. This works as emotional support: they are not to blame for what they do, nor are we ultimately to blame for finding ourselves in this situation. Individuals—as noted by Tony Walter—can blame distant cosmic mechanisms for traumas that affect their existence instead of blaming, for example, selfish or cruel parents. Furthermore, these traumas are transfigured into challenges with which the cosmos tests the individuals: a sort of ordeal whose overcoming is rewarded with an advancement on one's spiritual path. This belief relieves suffering thanks to a deviation: the cause of trauma is at the same time more abstract and fuller of meaning (Walter 2001).

5. Discussion on Matters of "Theodicy": Religion, Medicine, New Forms of Spirituality

"Theodicy", to not lose its "plausibility", must promise compensation scenarios that transcend the life horizon of the individuals: this means that "theodicy" must guarantee the "ultimate meaning" thanks to the perspective of a *life-after-life* where all the iniquities and evil experienced on earth are ultimately justified (Berger 1967; Weber 1976, 1980). Christianity, through the promise of the afterlife and the Apocalypse, has ensured believers' release (or punishment) for what they suffered (or committed) in earthly life. In this way, illness and death, through a transfiguration (a sort of symbolic metamorphosis), become meaningful moments within a soteriological drama. They are intended as a privileged medium to achieve salvation (Camorrino 2017). "Ultimate meaning" is safe in Western religions. However, the "disneyfication" of God, the weakening of belief in the afterlife, as

well as the spread of "therapeutic culture" and "pluralism"—as mentioned before—have led to its precarization. In Western religions, thanks to the persistence of the relationship with the transcendent sphere, the scenarios of salvation are still a powerful source of meaning: soteriological promises work as emotional barriers against the corrosive charge of injustice, illness and death.

The soteriological promise establishes the metaphysical distinction between medicine and Western religions: the former can promise health, but only the latter can ensure salvation. The implicit promise of immortality formulated by medical science, especially in the modern era, does not allow us to resolve questions regarding the presence of evil, injustice and suffering in the world: the "ultimate meaning" is the exclusive magisterium of the sacred domain.

The new forms of spirituality, for their part, exhausting their relationship with the sacred domain exclusively on the immanent level, do not envisage an afterlife.[6] To be effective, "theodicy", nevertheless, does not necessarily have to contemplate the afterlife. This is evident, for example, in Asian doctrines (Weber 1976, 1980). However, postmodern spirituality, in drawing from the Eastern tradition, has then made changes in which it is possible to identify undeniable Western legacies. This, as noted above, has remarkable consequences. As previously highlighted, in the new forms of spirituality "theodicy" does not guarantee salvation, but rather a progressive inner evolution which is not far from the self-realization promised by the "therapeutic culture". In postmodern society—as has been underlined by several scholars—therapeutics and spirituality reinforce each other: both contribute to a profound and lasting inner transformation which, rather than opening up soteriological perspectives, instead promises individual well-being. This happens, as we have seen, at the expense of "theodicy". Since human nature is understood as essentially good, it becomes very problematic to "plausibly" justify the presence of evil, injustice, illness and death in the world. This problem is strengthened—as I explained above—by the "contradiction" implicit in the "theodicy" of the new forms of spirituality due to which free will itself is called into question. Spiritual ignorance does not make individuals responsible for their fate in subsequent lives, since ultimately there is no individual fault even in being spiritually ignorant: it is the cosmos that decides, not human beings. For these peculiar reasons, subsequent lives do not prefigure an opportunity to achieve the "just equalization" but rather new chances to enjoy the worldly experience more fully.

6. Conclusions: The Health/Salvation Nexus

In the Introduction, I put forward the hypothesis that it would be fruitful to analyze the health/salvation nexus by considering the different relationships that Western religions, the new forms of spirituality, and medicine have with the sphere of the sacred, with the sacred understood above all as that domain that governs the relationship of the human community with "theodicy" and the "ultimate meaning". I discussed this hypothesis mainly referring to the Weberian and Bergerian theoretical perspective.

Western religions, maintaining an albeit weakened relationship with transcendence, can promise scenarios of salvation. This implies that the anguish caused by injustice, illness and death is softened. The corresponding "theodicy", despite having lost coherence due to the "disneyfication" of God and the weakening of belief in the afterlife, still guarantees the faithful an answer to the ultimate questions. Let us imagine a scale capable of measuring the health/salvation nexus: in the case of Western religions, a side leans towards salvation.

The new forms of spirituality exhaust their relationship with the sacred exclusively in the immanent dimension. For these reasons they cannot symbolize an imagery of the afterlife, understood as an otherworldly realm. The doctrine of reincarnation drawn from the Asian tradition, due to its postmodern declination, causes the loss of the "plausibility" of the corresponding "theodicy". This leads to a precarization of "ultimate meaning". However, it is possible for the new forms of spirituality to justify the presence of injustice, evil and death in the world but at very high prices in psychological terms. In this case, therefore, the scales are placed in a balance between health and salvation: postmodern

spirituality promises a state of superior well-being resulting from the harmony between the body and the mind and also the spiritual evolution of the Self; nevertheless—for the reasons I have discussed—it does not envision soteriological scenarios.

Medicine has no relationship with the domain of the sacred. The "ultimate meaning" is the exclusive magisterium of the sacred: medicine cannot in any way rule on this province of existence. As mentioned before, medicine does not have a "theodicy". Even when it implicitly promises immortality, medical science can in no way resolve the problems raised by the ultimate questions. Medicine cannot justify the presence of injustice, evil and death in the world. In the case of medicine, a side leans towards health.

In conclusion: I analyzed the very relevant health/salvation nexus by applying the concept of "theodicy" as developed by Max Weber and Peter Berger. This concept is a useful heuristic tool for investigating the different social relationships with the sacred, but not only, as we have seen in the case of medicine. The concept of "theodicy" allows us to better understand the horizon of "ultimate meaning". The domain of "ultimate meaning" influences the conduct of individuals, giving shape to different cultural forms (and vice versa). The concept of "theodicy" allows us to analyze and understand the different ways by which human groups react to the eschatological pressure that characterizes human existence. I hope that thanks to future research, the sociological relevance of the concepts of "theodicy" and "ultimate meanings" (key for the phenomenological sociology of religion) will be highlighted. This paper is a small contribution in this direction.

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Notes

1 My theoretical approach is inspired by phenomenological sociology. Throughout the paper I use the concepts of "ultimate meaning", "plausibility" and "theodicy" drawing them from Peter Berger's work (Berger 1967). In any case when I use the concept of "theodicy" especially related to that of "just equalization" I refer to the studies by Max Weber (1976, 1980, p. 211). Peter Berger himself, moreover, when he applies the concept of "theodicy" to his research, makes explicit reference to the work by Weber.

2 More correctly for the case of new forms of spirituality, because of the absence of a transcendent God, we should speak of "cosmodicy". However, if I use the term "theodicy" it is because I mean it—as I specified previously—in the Weberian and Bergerian way. The term "cosmodicy" is taken from Wolfgang Schluchter who uses it to differentiate the specific vision of Asian religions from that of monotheisms centered on the figure of an otherworldly God (Schluchter 2017, p. 34 n. 35).

3 This statement is a valid generalization although it cannot be applied to all new forms of spirituality.

4 This is a generalization that holds its validity, albeit in some Asian traditions (for example, in some folk religion versions) the belief in reincarnation is based on the opportunity of living the next life in a happier way. Not all Asian traditions see reincarnation exclusively as a vehicle for liberation.

5 This statement is correct with specific reference to most of the "impersonal schools of Eastern traditions". Here, as in other paragraphs of this article, I am indebted to the precious specifications and comments of the referees. I take this opportunity to thank them for their precise and authoritative indications.

6 Here I am referring exclusively to the postmodern readaptation carried out by the new forms of spirituality in Western society. In Asian traditions, in several cases, belief in the afterlife is contemplated.

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