

The Role of Religion in Civil Society and Intercultural Dialogue: A Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspective

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The question I wish to raise is: What role religion should play in the new Europe you wish to build?

There are a number of immediate problems such an undertaking faces. First by way of definition, among sociologists of religion there is a vigorous debate about how we should define religion. There is always a debate about how broadly we should define religion. Certainly, as Ninian Smart reminds us, religion contains many dimensions. Among them are the experiential, which involves the psychology of religious persons. This might include questions of conscience, belief, personal choice, etc. When thinking about the role of religion in society, should we talk about the many different ways in which persons experience transcendence in their lives apart from organised religion? Can we speak of the «do it yourself» ways in which persons construct religious meaning, often borrowing from different traditions? Or does all of that take us too far afield and leave us with only a confusion of individual approaches to religion?

The answer to those questions influences the way we think about the history of religion in the modern era and the future of religion in today's world. However we come out on those important issues, for my purposes here, which are ultimately political, religion must include an institutional dimension. As interesting as it might be to speak about how football might perform a religious function in the lives of its fans, I will argue that for political purposes, religion has to be essentially what people consciously and in society with one another claim to be religious. For similar reasons I also will argue when it comes to constitutional solicitude, religion must be different from individual belief, or rights of conscience.

By religion I mean here all religions but I do not mean simply spirituality or personal belief. I do not mean rights of con-

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science or a moral sense or an ethical norm. Of course religion contains all of these things but for our purposes, religion must mean that social force that organises itself around certain claims about ultimate meaning and the transcendent dimension of life. So we must be concerned not only with private rights of religious expression and religious freedom but with institutional rights of religious organisations.

The desire to make the EU a model for peaceful integration and dialogue among peoples and cultures strikes anyone familiar with the history of the twentieth century as strange given the horrible conflict and destruction that marred this continent for so long. Religion has often been part of that. If we think back before the liberal era, the role that religion played in exaggerating difference, defining it, vilifying the other and legitimating acts of inhumanity and violence against the other in the name of God is well known.

It was for that reason among others that beginning with the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, European revolutionaries wished to replace religion with a new view of the human person that emphasized freedom, individual rights, and representative government. We all know that the churches, especially the Catholic church, resisted liberalism consistently and vigorously. No wonder that a vehement anti-clericalism marked and continues to mark much of European liberalism.

The rise of communism only exacerbated the problems with Karl Marx's insistence on a materialism that saw religion as nothing more than a tool of oppression which for the sake of dialectical transformation had to be repressed.

Islam in Europe historically presented very serious problems for those interested in a civilisation based on peaceful integration and dialogue. No more tolerant than Christianity when it came to the other faiths. Islamic insistence on joining mosque and state resulted in ongoing conflict between non-Islamic regimes and their Christian or Jewish neighbours. The clash of civilisations that raged during the expansion of Islam was not ended until the battle of Lepanto in the sixteenth century and smoldered in the background until the beginning of the new millennium when it seemed to reemerge with a vengeance. Even now as the Arab world erupts in what seems to be calls for democracy and expansion of human rights questions

still exists about how compatible liberalism is with Islam.

The liberal alternative has been well expressed in the French conception of *laïcité*. In its simplest form, the citizen is asked to leave aside his religion as he moves into the sphere of the public. But as the Stasi commission recognised in 2003, this idea of excluding religion from the public square simply does not meet the realities of today¹. You cannot champion human rights, individual expression, and freedom of conscience, and then tell people they should leave their religion out of their public discourse. Religion for many is an integral part of their culture. The successes of liberalism in creating governments free from the oppression of organised religion has brought with it a new condition, which like many of the successes of liberalism, poses a problem for the very continuance of the system itself. Now that people are for the most part not worried that Rome will be running the political affairs of their own country or that a new caliphate will be dictating their business practices anytime soon, they ask, Why is it that my religious values cannot be reflected more in the public policies of my country? What is there about my religious values that make them different from my values about politics? About public values? How can I be respected as a human person if I must present a dis-integrated self in public, one that hides away what I really feel and who I really am simply to validate a political regime? There seems nothing more opposed to the spirit of liberalism than that.

Also there is the problem of the third-generation and social and cultural identities. In Great Britain several of the perpetrators of the devastating terrorist attack were in fact third-generation Muslims who had been born and raised in the United Kingdom. Their adaptation of radical Islam represented a homegrown British model not dissimilar to that displayed by several young men in Northern Virginia who went off to Afghanistan to obtain military training as young jihadists.

Questions like this lead me as an American to think of my own homeland, a place birthed by Europeans committed to the liberal ideals that they had long ago fostered. But there, because of a confluence of historical and geographical forces, a new order of the ages arose in which religion could be welcomed and at the same time separated formally from the state.

¹ *Rapport au Président de la République: Commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République*, Remis le 11 Décembre 2003, www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr. The report has also been published in book form as *Laïcité et République*, Commission présidée par Bernard Stasi, Paris, La Documentation française, 2004.

And despite the worries that many of my friends in Europe had especially during the presidency of George W. Bush that somehow religious leaders were whispering in the ears of our political leaders, hatching apocalyptic dreams that manifested themselves in unwise and in fact disastrous foreign-policy moves, I would suggest that has not been the case. Rather, a closer look at religion's role in America shows that it, on the whole, functions to promote dialogue, social integration, pluralism, and respect for others, while at the same time providing many of the traditional values that religions have always provided societies: common values, common purpose, and solidarity.

This of course was noticed by that famous French observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1840s as he toured around the then still emerging country. Tocqueville was writing for the French and particularly for the French who had real misgivings about democracy and its future. He immediately noticed that religion rather than contribute to such social strife in the US was in fact doing quite the opposite. Tocqueville's habits of the heart, chief among which was religion, worked to counterbalance the most threatening dynamic of a society based on freedom: individualism. Religion taught concern for others, for the common good, for association. It worked against partisanship. Religious associations in America were not like secret associations in his homeland, or like clandestine political lodges that needed to plot for political change sequestered from the public eye. Because the churches were free from state oppression, their activities were not monitored by the police and not seen as a threat to the regime. Because of the voluntarism and denominationalism, no one church dominated the culture or threatened the state. Religion was free to play a largely beneficial role in passing on social values essential to the health of the political society².

Today I would suggest Europe more resembles the US than it did in the nineteenth century. I raise this not to suggest that Europe could or should reproduce the American system, but rather to suggest that changes in European society have made new accommodations of religion in modern society possible. The following elements suggest this:

i. religious freedom is an established individual right that the individual may assert against the state. It is well-protected in

² See A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Paris, Charles Gosselin, vol. 1, 1835; vol. 2, 1840. An English translation by Henry Reeve was published in New York in 1838 with the title *Democracy in America*. See, in particular, vol. 2, parts I and II for discussions about the role of religion.

state constitutions and in the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights;

ii. religious pluralism is recognised by European states;

iii. there is an increasing amount of religious diversity, often because of the presence of non-Christian immigrant groups; and

iv. Religious organisations are for the most part not meddling in governmental affairs.

The way that religion plays an important ongoing role in European cultures is through mechanisms not unlike those Tocqueville observed in nineteenth-century America. I would like to discuss three such ways, based on the research of three European thinkers: Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Maurice Halbwachs, and Niklas Luhmann, via Peter Beyer.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger deals with the problem of the failure of the secularisation thesis. As she and many sociologists of religion have noticed, secularisation theories of last century simply do not explain the endurance of religion in contemporary society. She looked for new ways to explain the current situation. This led her to a study of social memory. She tried to outline the way in which religion functioned in the memory of a society. Unlike in the past, the elusive sacred is not easily limited to any one set of institutional symbols or policies, especially in so-called post-Christian Europe when the dominance of the church has been effectively challenged by competing ideologies, mostly the ideology of nonbelief put forth by liberalism or at least the ideology of the marginalisation of religion from the public square. Religion endures in the habits and the memories of the society. It takes on old forms and often new forms that do not self-identify as religious but that perform religious functions within the society. So hence we have the phenomena of believing without belonging or belonging without believing³.

The question of how society creates and sustains the pre-political values necessary for its own continued existence may also be seen as a function of how a society structures its social memory. As Maurice Halbwachs has shown, memory is fundamental to the creation of a culture. The process by which we remember is in turn affected by the society. A society has a «collective memory,» which uses «collective frameworks» to reconstruct an image of the past that comports with the

³ D. Hervieu-Léger, *The Role of Religion in Establishing Social Cohesion*, in K. Michalski (ed.), *Religion in the New Europe*, New York, Central European Press, 2006, pp. 43-63. See also Hervieu-Léger's *La religion pour mémoire*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1993.

predominant thoughts of a society⁴. When a society changes, it must change its current memory. It can do this by deemphasizing some elements and emphasizing others, perhaps those that had been neglected before.

Memory creates a fundamental difference between America and Europe. As Bernard Henri Lévy claims in his book, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*, America is built not on a memory of the past, as he thinks is Europe, but a dream about the future⁵. However, the EU is certainly a dream about the future; and to dream it means reconstructing the past and ceasing to be controlled by it.

Part of reconstituting the past means reconstituting the memory about the role of religion in society. Even as Europe attempts to escape from a past of violence and mistrust, it for the most part is content to hold to the old notion of religion as being an anti-liberal force that must be controlled and limited in democratic society. I would suggest that notion is a relic of the modern age, a relic of the wars of religion and of revolutions. Being bound by it will hold back the new, multi-level, multi-cultural Europe.

As Peter Beyer has shown in his *Religion and Globalization*, religion functions to create subsystems of meaning within cultures⁶. In a functionally-based society, traditional religion, which was part of a status-based society, has diminished. But religion can also function well as a subset of functionally-based societies. This is essentially the insight of Niklas Luhman, Peter Beyer's mentor⁷.

There are two approaches that religion might take in creating substructures within the new globalised societies. The conservative approach is to offer alternative identities that resist the new global identity and emphasize localism in particular.

The second progressive approach is to deemphasize the difference between religious identity and new global social identity. In this model, religion encourages the breakdown of the old defining characteristics that marked particular religious identities in the past. The danger of the first approach is that it can be revanchist; the danger of the second is irrelevance⁸.

If I am right about this, where does this leave us? There is a need to enter into the kind of double learning that Habermas talks about⁹. A new dialogue between religion and liberalism must accept several changes.

⁴ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, L.A. Corner (trans.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

⁵ B.H. Lévy, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*, C. Mandell (trans.), New York, Random House, 2006.

⁶ P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, London, Sage Publications, 1994.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 97-109, Chapter 4.

⁹ See J. Habermas, J. Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, B. McNeal (trans.), San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2005.

Tony Blair in his recent *memoir* talks about what he considers his greatest political achievement: brokering a peace deal in Northern Ireland. There the opposing sides were dug in, walled up in decades of prejudice, hatred, and mistrust. Fundamental in breaking down that stalemate was the realisation that each side could not achieve everything it wanted. Northern Ireland could not maintain its unity with the UK and ignore the claims of Catholics; the Republic of Ireland with its Catholic majority could not swallow up the North and disregard the claims of the Protestant minority. Both sides thought, probably still do think, that such one-sided outcomes would be more ideal. But neither could be part of the current political reality. Second, each side needed enlightened leaders that wanted to improve the situation and not maintain the *status quo*¹⁰.

Valuing the role of religion in a liberal society is not new and not illiberal. Several famous liberal thinkers saw the power of religion in society and wished to retain it in their new systems. It was common for them to talk about the necessity of religion while at the same time demanding that the current hold the religious powers and particularly Catholic church had on society be broken. We think here of Rousseau who spoke about the religion of humanity in urgent terms. The problem of bringing freedom to man who was born free but everywhere in chains could not be solved without religion. But for him it was a religion of humanity, religion free from the political strife and machinations that had characterised Christianity in Europe ever since the time of Constantine¹¹. It is fitting here that we remember Giuseppe Mazzini whose writings are filled with claims that without religion the new society he imaged could not come. At the same time he was a vehement critic of the Pope and the role that religion currently played in Italy and throughout Europe¹².

Much has changed since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries within religious organisations. Catholicism, for instance, has been brought, one might say kicking and screaming, to accommodating liberalism. The transformation of the church's opinion on this has been nothing short of astonishing and while not perfect has resulted in the church recasting itself as a force for freedom rather than as an impediment to it. Popes of the twentieth century have been leaders in human

¹⁰ T. Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 2010, pp. 153-199.

¹¹ J.J. Rousseau, *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique*, Paris, Garnier, 1762, Chapter 4.

¹² See for example, *Mazzini's Essays: Selected from the Writings of Literary, Political and Religious of Joseph Mazzini*, New York, Walter Scott Publishing Company, 1835, where Mazzini writes, «we abandoned the religious idea precisely when it was most urgent to revive and extend it until it should embrace the sum of things destined to be transformed, and unite in one grand social conception the forces that are now isolated and divided» (p. 26).

rights, in opposition to war, and their insistence on the dignity of the human person.

A particularly interesting example of this new attitude is the work of Angelo Scola *Una nuova laicità* in which he argues for a new understanding of church-state relations that reflects a new, liberal understanding of the place of the church in the society¹³.

What has not happened until very recently is a concomitant change in the attitudes of the state, more precisely European states toward religion. We can cite some exceptions. One would be France which under Mr. Sarkozy has attempted to redefine *laïcité* to be faith friendly. One can also mention the United Kingdom under Tony Blair that stressed practical engagement with religious groups in matters of social welfare.

Yet there remains a need especially when it comes to policy for the EU to affect the greater rapprochement between the state and religion. The EU of course has a great start with its magnificent Charter of Human Rights. Those protections there for religion are among the strongest in the world, in fact considerably stronger than those we enjoy in the United States. Policies that look to civil society and the role of religion in civil society should be instituted.

In conclusion, a brief discussion of two recent attempts in American life to encourage the public role of religion may be noted.

The first concerned the ill-fated invasion of Iraq and the subsequent coalition occupation. Very marginal attempts were made to understand the role of religion in the insurgency, with the coalition sticking to the line that the insurgents and terrorists were simply «high jacking Islam». While in fact few would doubt that the insurgents and terrorists are possessed of a perverse view of Islam, it is not accurate to portray it as not religious. Religious sentiments are used by them to motivate, organise and symbolise their actions. Ignoring that means any real attempt to counter that use of religion with conflicting ideas will be replaced by bullets and bombs that make more martyrs than converts.

A second more positive experience involved the initiative, begun in 1996 under Clinton and expanded significantly under George W. Bush of faith-based initiatives. The idea behind this was that government needed to partner with

¹³ A. Scola, *Una nuova laicità: Temi per una società plurale*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2007.

religious organisations and with religiously-motivated NGOs in providing social services. Where a religious group could provide a social service with a clear secular purpose, often more effectively than non-religious competitors, it should be allowed to share in government funding for those services. So everything from the education of children, to providing of housing, to the rehabilitation of drug addicts might involve new partnerships with faith-based groups. President Bush formed the White House Office for Community and Faith-Based Initiatives that facilitates cooperation between religious groups on the federal government. President Obama has expanded the programme, muting its critics who had portrayed it as a right wing scheme to establish Christianity.