

Imaginarities of Cultural Diversity and the Permanence of the Religious

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The contemporary national and international scene continues to present the general public with a stream of curiously uniform events, discourses and commentaries. They relate to the 'permanence of the religious', refer to public authorities' new sensitivity to the Christian heritage and that of the Churches, and produce intellectual but in fact secular discourses (from Luc Ferry to Clifford Geertz), whose field of meaning, based on faith and transcendence, is the essential protection that is supposed to save modern humanity from loss of cultural identity, existential crisis and the perils of relativism. In this context I also feel I need to comment on Nicolas Sarkozy's recent remarks, which have revived the debate on secularism in France; on the shocked reaction, widely publicized, of many intellectuals to the refusal of Rome's academics to welcome Benedict XVI for the beginning of the university's academic year; on the publication of many articles and books rediscovering the Christian message and its 'profound meaning' (Valadier 2007; *Le Temps* 2007; Lenoir 2007). We might wonder what these discourses underlie, how we should interpret them and how far we can reconcile them with the trends on which our modernity is built.

The current position

What first strikes us about these discourses, which are intended to restore to the sacred the legitimating and founding role it is credited with today, is their convergence with the return of nationalist themes, given that religion is often presented as a significant national marker closely connected with the political sphere and values of identity. Indeed the issue of religion often recurs when it is a matter of the limits that should be imposed on integrating other cultures into Europe and the institutional measures that should be taken as strong religious identities emerge claiming a greater public visibility. At this point in history dominated by longstanding conflicts

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in the Middle East, the threat of terrorism, the proliferation of fundamentalist creeds, it seems in fact as though Europe was finding it hard to conceptualize in terms of *law* the ethical and cultural differences that the pluricultural system in which we are immersed makes particularly evident. In this situation it is clear that politicians, intellectuals and media have great difficulty in reminding us, or even themselves remembering, that a specific anthropological model defines and distinguishes western culture and characterizes it in relation to other civilizations. When it comes to identifying individuals and groups, that model is based chiefly on the egalitarian criterion of *inclusive citizenship*, which is expressed in the legally constituted state, rather than on *orthodox criteria of allegiances*, which are more ethnic, confessional, racial or gendered in nature.

However, if these difficulties arise it is because there has been marked out, not at the institutional but at the *symbolic* level, an area of meaning that truly matches the *civil model of inclusion and egalitarian generality* which exclusively defines our culture. And so it is because we have not been reminded, on the one hand, that only symbolic meanings matching our 'civil' – and not religious – model are able to eliminate the cultural prejudices that crop up here and there in current debates on the 'return of the sacred' and 'religious identities' understood as strong social carriers; and on the other hand that these prejudices are the direct legacy of monotheism seen as a religion of *foundations* – so that all the monotheisms, by their exclusivist nature, claim to be founded on principles thought of as absolute and universal, whose authority lies in a metahistorical and metasocial transcendence (Assmann 2010; Augé 1982). Indeed it is precisely this which contrasts with the contractual and civil conception underlying all our modern institutions and cultural practices. We have here on one hand an egalitarian, inclusive socio-political model based on contract and the arbitrary (in the positive sense of the word); and on the other a range of values, experienced in the west as transcendent, universal and necessary foundations, on which many discourses are nowadays being superimposed about the return in force of religious identities and their mutual compatibility – discourses that again and again use phrases such as 'the end of the grand narratives of modernity' (Marxism, scientism, philosophies of history, secularism . . .), 'the advent of a post-secular, post-modern phase', 'God's revenge', 'the return to a fundamental questioning about the meaning of life and values' and so forth.

However it is really and truly a matter of asking whether the thinking evolved by anthropology and comparative history of religions is not capable of arriving at a different diagnosis, in contrast to these clichés which often come from the most conservative sections of civil and political society – and it is true that the keenest spokespeople for the idea of the 'comeback of religion' are in fact the supporters of the neo-liberal model and the new world order. But what then are the real implications of their discourse? This question prompts a prior one, which is: what is the origin of the contradiction mentioned earlier, which runs through a Europe divided between an institutional model, on the one hand, that is based on inclusion and egalitarian generalization of rights and, on the other hand, the difficulty with seeing in terms of rights differences in values and world views revealed by pluri-ethnic society?

It is a fact that obvious secularization has clearly occurred on some levels of civil society. It is also a fact that the symbolic secularization of the meaning universe

structuring the western world view appears to have failed. The proof of this failure is manifested especially in the attribution to religion of a 'meaning power', an instituting function and an extra semantic charge which are still extremely strong. The proof also lies in the fact that the west persists in seeing other civilizations – as well as their symbolic and social hierarchies – in religious terms (Gasbarro 2006, 2007; Sabbatucci 2000; Kilani 2003, 2005, 2006). Now we need to bring to mind the historical causes of this contradiction and identify its significant elements.

Multiculturalism, a way of viewing relations between the political and the religious

In Switzerland and other European countries the Churches' representatives have a strong tendency to think of relations between civilizations in terms of relations between religions. From this arise many initiatives designed to set up a dialogue between religions which is supposed to defuse conflicts. It is completely understandable that, since they come from the monotheistic tradition, the Churches are encouraged to see relations between different civilizations in terms of theological differences (and more generally in terms of different world views). And so there is an impulse towards reciprocal toleration which finds its institutional expression in the federative model of multiculturalism and cohabitation between communities. This federalist notion of religious communities is based on the idea that relations between human beings are governed by a system of shared cultural, especially ethical, values situated beyond both politics and law.

However, the Churches are not the only ones to ask the question about differences between civilizations in terms of religious differences. A number of spokespeople for civil society also perform this shift. And so we see many politicians, intellectuals, media . . . , faced with the multiplicity of symbolic perspectives thrown up by globalization, asking the question, like the Churches, about the diversity and compatibility of cultures in terms of differences between 'world views', 'value systems', 'concepts of life', which we need to ensure cohabit without too much conflict. As for the Churches themselves, they all refer, whether implicitly or explicitly, to a differentialist anthropological model known as 'multiculturalist'. This model emphasizes differences between peoples, the 'differential value' of cultures, seen as primary as regards the historical processes set in train by exchanges between civilizations and the socio-cultural complexity related to these processes. According to this perspective differences between cultures would be in part reduced by virtue of a kind of moral and symbolic equality attributed to them as 'forms of life' – that is, different ways of facing and solving the basic problems of the human condition.

After going into a decline in the 1960s and 70s, which were strongly affected in anthropology by the attempt to develop *intercultural*-type approaches (Lévi-Strauss 1970, 1993, 1996, 1964–71; Godelier 1986, 1999; Descola 2005), the *multicultural* or 'differentialist' model is nowadays attracting renewed interest in the social sciences. According to its adherents, cultures – seen in and for themselves – live side by side, each one expressing its own symbolic inclination, its original 'genius', its specific social potential. What is the origin of this anthropological model? It has its roots in

pre-romantic historical particularism – in particular that of Johann Gottfried Herder and his followers. Franz Boas, founder of American cultural anthropology, imported it from Germany into the USA where it was revised by the science of culture (Stocking 1968; Mancini 1999, 2000, 2007). This differentialist model rests on the idea of a kind of organic solidarity linking together a people's setting, language, institutions, customs, arts and religion. It is this solidarity that is thought to give the people's spirit its original imprint. Now, setting aside the risks of conservative or even racist distortions of this notion, two of its elements should be stressed.

The first is that the idea that a 'cultural spirit' might be inherent in civilizations goes together with a liberal perspective. Indeed symbolic structures would simply be the most appropriate responses to mankind's natural needs. This is how, in a multicultural society, the management and regulation of relations between the respective symbolic structures of each social group would fall on the market in values and 'perspectives on life'. Since a spirit directed and legitimized by nature could not bear the constraints of social rules, it would in fact only be necessary to let that spirit express itself freely and to attempt to illuminate its specific content. In a multicultural society several 'forms of life' exist cheek by jowl without meeting; in order to avoid conflicts between them a policy of recognition – the modern version of toleration – becomes the institutional remedy and political correctness its formal guarantee (Gasbarro 2006, 2007). If we envisage confrontation between individuals and groups in terms of individualism (which is the case with multiculturalism, which classifies cultures as individualities), toleration and political correctness seldom turn out to be effective in guaranteeing institutional and social equity among existing cultural groups, because their *differential status* wins out over the *civil principle of equality* (Dumont 1983: 296–8; 1991: 269).

The second element that needs to be stressed is that any general theory aiming to understand modernity in a systemic globalizing way is accused, from a differentialist perspective, of rationalist illusion harking back to the Enlightenment – an illusion to be deconstructed in this case in favour of a return to the basic relationship between the universalism of nature and the particularism of cultures. Cultural neo-relativism, which is so fashionable nowadays, has its origin there, legitimized on the ethical level by implacable arguments drawn from nature and its laws. In the interplay of relations between cultures nature is for all and each culture is for itself. The best one will win and its victory will be the sign of a predestination, a spiritual superiority that will now be proved by the success achieved economically, politically and militarily. Thus it is no accident that the multicultural model was born and spread mainly in the countries with an American protestant, liberal culture, then into Europe from the 1980s.

Pluriculturalism, another way of seeing relations between the political and the religious

The second model, which could be called 'pluriculturalist', does not take its inspiration from the historical particularism of pre-romantic or romantic origin which established a fundamental continuity between the spirit of cultures and nature. It is

the most representative product of the civil or contractual tradition emerging from European modernity as it began to be formed in the late 16th century. This model is pluricultural in the sense that it does not see cultures as concrete incarnations of a particular spirit and with an essential identity, but rather as historically determined artefacts thrown up by the permanent interaction between different societies. That is why each culture is, in its basis, 'pluricultural' since it appears as the original result of exchanges between specific cultures. Each culture's degree of complexity can therefore not be interpreted as a reflection of a natural predestination; instead it will be the consequence of its ability, gained as the result of specific historical experiences, to develop symbolic structures and social rules that in their turn are likely to increase exchanges and relations with other civilizations. (This complexity appears in Islamic civilization, for instance, in China, Japan, Europe and in Jewish culture.)

Indeed every society that has met the intercultural and inter-religious challenge has found itself facing a twofold task. First the task of establishing minimal general rules for possible cohabitation with other cultures – rules whose nature is less *universal* than *general* in that their effectiveness is *factual* and *empirical* and is not based on any sort of *orthodoxy* invoked as its foundation. Then the task of fostering a symbolic encounter with the other cultures with a view to producing new forms of compatibility, both ideological and practical.

This pluricultural model comes directly from the anthropological ideal that was formed in the Renaissance, to which Norbert Elias applies the term 'civilization', in contrast to the ideal of 'Kultur', which serves as a backdrop to the multiculturalist vision (Elias 1994; Dumont 1977, 1983, 1991). The model of 'civilization', or civil model, reverses the notion of the nature/culture relationship that underlies the differentialist model. It refuses to give priority to natural determinisms to the detriment of the arbitrary rules emerging from civilization. The invention of the civil model and the social invention of modern civil society are concomitant, with the latter being characterized by utterly original ideological and institutional features.

The pluricultural model's civil approach thus differs radically from the one based on natural foundations that is peculiar to the multiculturalist model. According to the former, cultures do not embody different modalities of interpreting and providing answers to problems inherent in human nature. By contrast they are seen as *symbolic structures* of concrete societies which problematize and manage, each in its own way, nature's great determinisms. From this perspective we are dealing less with a conception of social relations interpreted in a natural and determinist style than with a conception of relations with nature seen in historical and social terms.

So, from the viewpoint of *civilization*, nature is the place where hierarchies and spontaneous differences dominate – the same hierarchies and differences that, historically and socially, are likely to cause discrimination (social, of status, etc.), unless thinking about equality intervenes to contradict them. But historically this social idea of equality was hardly invented by Christianity seen as a vehicle for humanist thought. Rather it was invented by civil society, the supreme foundation-stone upon which western modernity rests.

On the importance of not confusing Christianity and democracy

There are many who, in a sometimes imperceptible sideways shift, tend to see a direct legacy from Christianity in the democratic values of toleration, equality and respect for diversity – as if Christianity and democracy ran naturally side by side. They underestimate the fact that, by their very structure, the monotheisms are supremely anti-democratic since – as was mentioned earlier – they are based on a principle of vertical authority from which comes a revealed, exclusive truth with universal claims. In addition, the social and political conception of Europe and more generally the western world, the model for which is formed by democracy and egalitarianism, is inspired less by the Christian egalitarian, individualist model (which some authors, such as Max Weber, see as going back to the reformed communities modelling themselves on the first Christian communities) than by the pre-Christian civic model (of Rome or Greece). It is this model, typical of the holistic (not individualistic), egalitarian societies of antiquity, which was applied in both Greek democracy and the Roman *res publica* and was taken up at the Renaissance by those philosophers of law who stand at the origin of modern states. Finally it was this same ancient model again which inspired the idea at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation of a community of equals sharing the same faith.

And so the notion of a reason establishing rules common to a society's members is the consequence of a long process of civilization in western modernity. After the experience of the wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, it took off with Kant and Enlightenment philosophy when the *civil* was invented as a place of egalitarian, peaceful cohabitation for the different manifestations of the religious and for a plurality of world views. From the model of the Roman *res publica* based on civil rights, and through the separation made by Machiavelli between politics, ethics and religion, contractual, civil thought was formalized by Grotius and Hobbes's, then Rousseau and Kant's jusnaturalism, and finally won out over all forms of natural determinism in the religious, social and political spheres. Though modernity has not eliminated religion's symbolic hierarchies and social priorities, it has nevertheless left private individuals free to choose their respective allegiances based on civil and public equality – we are very far from a conception where religion occupies the highest place in a symbolic hierarchy.

Thus the basic characteristic of the civil anthropological model is neither toleration nor moral humanism, nor democracy understood as the power emerging directly from the people (an idea that goes back to ancient Greece and is not the same as the Roman concept of *res publica*). Instead it lies in the fact that, in the structuring of collective life and relations between individuals, appeal is never made to universal foundations – whether this means a divine right, a shared faith, principles transcending human history and order. By contrast appeal is made to general rules applied in certain specific orthopractices in order to organize communal life in day-to-day historical practice.

What might these *orthopractices* consist of and what is their specificity? Taking as its inspiration the legal model of the ancient *res publica*, western modernity has in fact refrained since the 16th century from appealing, in civil and political matters, to metasocial foundations (such as the natural foundations of race, ethnicity, gender,

but also any transcendent, absolute basis). To define the identities of individuals and groups it appeals instead to a contractual or legal model of social reality, a model that goes together with setting up specific symbolic machinery such as contract, civil rights, the legal activity of courts, etc. This civil machinery, understood as the place where the collective will is exercised, is designed to include, integrate socially and gain the adherence of individuals and other cultures. This civil machinery is in fact neutral in itself, without an intrinsic meaning that refers to any idea of natural basis. Indeed its only status is to function as operational tools whose validity depends exclusively on their inclusive social effectiveness (Sabbatucci 1976; Gasbarro 2006).

Of course it could be objected that this orthopractice of the law cannot in fact be neutral, protected from the risk of being recruited to serve ideologies emerging from hegemonic social groups, who are inclined to use them for their sole profit. However well-founded that objection, it is nevertheless the case that, like other orthopractices such as scientific knowledge or technology, the law has by nature a considerable inclusive performative reach and that, like science or technology, civil rights are likely to be exported outside our culture. This is so precisely because they are defined less by their orthodoxy of principle than by their concrete orthopraxis. And it is just this civil machinery for integration and inclusion that allows us to communicate with other cultures, despite the profound differences that separate us as regards world view.

Issues around the civil idea: an unclear trio (the civic, the religious and the question of meaning)

Unlike naturalist liberalism, the fundamental premise of the civil idea is to state that civil equality takes precedence in the social sphere over all differential allegiances and guarantees the free exercise of them. This practice of inclusion and contract makes it possible to break, not only with any view appealing to an orthodoxy based on values claiming to be universalist, but also with the cultural relativism of forms of life.

With this civil model the metaphysical opposition between universal and particular defended by advocates of differentialism is replaced by the historical, contingent opposition between generalization on the one hand (for this idea see below) and on the other the relationship which different cultures establish among themselves – and they are never seen in their abstract isolated identity but always in their concrete historical interactions. For the relational thinking of civilization or the civil, the basic structure is not the analogical one which links the individual's natural specificity to that of the ethnic group, the nation, the culture; it is rather the relationship of the citizen as social actor to the state; and it is that relationship, a contractual, arbitrary one, that here functions as a model to think the human person, the social group, civil society, the legally constituted state, democracy (all of them institutions defined less by an essential substance than by establishment of precise contractual relations).

The relational model underlying the civil idea is by its very nature artificial, extendable at will, inclusive and dynamic. Indeed its legitimacy flows directly from its ability to be generalized at the concrete historical, as well as the cultural-symbolic level. Adopting such a model then makes it possible to avoid a whole raft of risks inherent in the multiculturalist model. Legitimized by the appeal to natural founda-

tions that justify the diversity of cultures, multiculturalist relativism is in fact likely to be replaced by historical and comparative relativization of relations that cultures have set up among themselves. Each civilization will then be apprehended as a 'process', a mobile entity in constant interaction with others, and its identity will be composed of those interactions.

Multicultural and pluricultural stances, which relate to *Kultur* and *civilization* respectively, are also expressed differently in the sphere of religion. We know the Churches adopt the multicultural model at the same time as rejecting the ethical and cultural relativism that flows from recognizing differences between civilizations. They emphasize the model's individualist side in order to safeguard the principle of freedom of conscience; however, at the social level they tend to reject the idea of the privatization of religion which involves relegating it to the private sphere.

But the Churches are not the only ones among the advocates of multiculturalism to take a precise stance on relations between religions. In order to describe the new world order within those forms of life called cultures, a number of cultural anthropologists, mainly American ones, give religion a privileged symbolic value, considering it as a basic marker of identity (Geertz 1966, 2006). This understanding is in complete accord with the assumptions of multiculturalism, which, as we have seen, privileges the symbolic aspect of culture (thought to reflect its 'genius', its differential spirit) to the detriment of the socio-institutional dimensions brought out by the social contract. Thus we see the incompatibility between those totalizing world views, religions. When toleration fails then the 'clash of civilizations', the consequence of a new world order, becomes inevitable (Huntington 1996)

In fact the multiculturalist model tends to rehabilitate religion and its 'principles of meaning' insofar as it privileges in civilizations 'spiritual' expressions of mankind to the detriment of socio-institutional dynamics and machinery designed to regulate communal life (economics, law, social norms for gaining individuals' adherence, etc.). In essence the study of values experienced by subjective consciousness, of semantic ranges, of meaning structures and symbolic foundations is given precedence over an understanding of objective institutional and symbolic logic which is social and historical in nature (Weber 2002). For culturalists religion is the seat of symbolic life. Its existential value, which provides a pragmatic answer to the problems of an existence subject to natural determinisms, cannot be deconstructed in the same way as the other cultural codes of social life, whose artificiality and arbitrariness may be accepted. On the contrary, religion embodies a perspective necessary to society, which it institutes. The religious domain, as a fundamental structure of culture, must be promoted both within and outside the cultural system. Thus the Churches, which are open to dialogue between religions; a large number of religious studies departments, whose importance in the USA is well known; as well as many debates between the 'community of believers' and non-believers, even within the social sciences, all fit perfectly within the assumptions of multiculturalism.

So we are told that, if cultures are essentially religious cultures, only a hermeneutic strategy aimed at understanding them from within and inter-religious dialogue will allow us to avoid the clash of civilizations. We should note in passing that though post-modernism deconstructs all modernity's globalizing theories (Marxism, positivism and scientism, historicism, etc., which have been systematically subjected

to the criterion of verification/falsification), it nonetheless refuses to subject religion to this verification process, preferring to see it as a comprehensive doctrine of life, death and human history.

The pluricultural, civil model on the other hand gives priority to social relations (and thus to institutions such as the law, politics, technology, social organization, the economy, etc.) and more generally to all those codes of social life that, compared with the religious code – which claims to be exempt from social life – fit more immediately with historical contingency, the immanent world of human action. The characteristic of these civil codes, as we have said, lies in the fact that they are by their very nature operational, capable of being generalized to all cultures, over and above the differences between them, because they cannot be laid down as universals. That is why the advocates of the pluricultural civil model appeal less to the impulses of faith than to ‘reason’s reasons’, which see human beings as historical actors – those reasons being now social, now economic, political, institutional and symbolic, without any of them being thought peculiar to one culture in particular. This option in favour of human reason made it possible for states to arise which are non-confessional (neutral in religious matters) and liberal (in the sense of neutral in politics).

The consequences of the civil revolution

This civil thinking, which was profoundly revolutionary, was to turn out to have important consequences. I shall mention three of them, which in their turn led to other developments.

First consequence. Cohabitation among citizens with the same rights and duties, and united by a *common will*, breaks any link of allegiance and dependence based on differential criteria of identity, be they natural (race, sex) or supernatural (religious identity). All those extra-civil differences are absorbed within a civil equality whose nature is understood as historical and social and so *immanent* and *contingent*. Civil equality therefore lacks any objective or supernatural basis (we think of Hobbes, who makes religion a natural institution which in no way depends on a supernatural basis). And so cultural and religious differences are thinkable only within *civil equality*, on which the legally constituted state now rests. Thence come the new categories of ‘civil society’ and ‘civilization’ in the word’s anthropological sense – since in the 16th century ‘civilization’ became autonomous in relation to religion and its theological foundations. However, in rereading this historical process, we should avoid seeing that dynamic as a kind of secularization of the law, or a laicization of religious values and models. Instead we are dealing here with the establishment of a totally unprecedented cultural logic, radically foreign to theological thought and the logic of the foundations that structure it. Modernity’s institutions and knowledge are not the result of a secularization of religious reason – contrary to what Marcel Gauchet (1997) seems to suggest. They are rather a radical alternative to a truth principle based on the criterion of dogmatic authority. In other words, those institutions and that knowledge replace vertical, hierarchical *orthodoxy* emanating from a *revealed truth* with the empirical horizontal criterion of *factual certainty*, civil nature (law, technology, historiography).

In fact the *empirical criterion of certainty* has no precedent in western religion. It seems to be a specific invention of modernity. Science and technology, which have, like law and historiography, produced empirical certainties, cannot be thought of in religious terms, that is, as independent of religion by the very nature of their origin and historical development. It is within their paradigm, rather than from the paradigm of religion's authority, that we can and must ask ourselves about the limits of their respective truths (it is banal to say that science is not capable of explaining empirically the truths of faith – just as we do not ask religion to explain dogmas scientifically).

Second consequence. The second consequence of the advent of a civil conception based on the principle of inclusive equality should be sought in the establishment of two new meaning fields or, if you will, two spheres of action on an equal footing: the *civil* and the *religious*. With modernity not only did the first term become radically autonomous with respect to the second, it ended up including it. That is why the civil, as a cultural structure whose nature is not only political and institutional but also symbolic, managed to gain the upper hand as an autonomous anthropological dimension through the concept of civilization. This notion has a greater capacity for generalization, so it is more capable than the religious of including cultural differences – including religious ones.

Third consequence. This has to do directly with the status of religion in civil society. The social inclusion of religion in the sphere of the civil is today a *de facto* right and a legal fact whose status relates essentially to what is *private*. It is not a matter of lowering its social and symbolic value but of regulating in terms of equality its legitimate exercise of difference, since in the area of religious choice citizens are equal with regard to the civil sphere, which is supposed to manage those rights and differences in an equitable and neutral manner. Therefore, if in the public exercise of difference demands (displaying the veil, the crucifix, the kippa . . .) are legitimate, on the other hand they cannot be accompanied by actions that symbolically delegitimize and politically destructure the social pact based on civil equality.

So placing religion in the private sphere does not mean symbolically subordinating its value. It simply means recognizing the existence of a wide variety of differences of identity, whether religious or not, a recognition that obliges the state to regulate their exercise within civil equality. Two principles inspire this logic: on one hand equality may very well include differences; on the other there is more equality the more we manage to make them mutually compatible.

We may wonder why thoughts such as the ones presented here are almost never publicly debated. Why is there this persistent gulf between the civil orientation that dominates the institutional area and the meaning system of the religious? If the history of the cultural revolution, which was civil and distinguishes our culture, is well known and integrated (though too often forgotten), where does this resistance come from to treating religion like any other symbolic code regulating civil life? It is a fact that, when today we ask questions around the social significance of values, the argument as to the authority-truth of religion comes up again. We are all ready to discuss the interpretive limits of scientific knowledge, but too few of us will lay down the scientific and historical limits of religious truths. Following the rules of science we demand proof of non-religious beliefs, basing ourselves on the principle that our

anthropological consciousness forces us to see as arbitrary most historical, scientific or sociological representations, from historico-social utopias to ideologies criticized as being ephemeral. However, we are too forgetful that 'beliefs' emerging from civil social systems have nothing to do with the monotheistic faith that underlies our conception of religion, nor the structural hierarchy it postulates between the different orders of the world. We are not inclined to claim that religious systems and institutions should be subject to the criteria of verification-falsification to which we submit historical, anthropological, scientific, sociological or political ideas; on the contrary we tend to talk up the strength of their socio-cultural impact. In the end we seem to attribute to the religious, as if it went without saying, a meaning authority different in nature from other authorities – which definitely proves the hierarchical strength of that meaning code which we are inclined to place, generally implicitly, above other codes of civil life by virtue of a foundation *orthodoxy* we credit it with.

The very existence of this gap between institutional culture, based on the principle of inclusive equality and exercise of the collective will, and the dimension of meaning attributed to the religious – the former situated in the humanist sphere of history and civil life, the later promoted into a metahistory of foundations – indicates a failure of secularization in Europe. Contrary to what the Churches' representatives and certain post-modern philosophers claim, if that secularization has failed, it is not because it may reveal its existential limits or because a process of laicization may have been sharply interrupted. It is we, the modern heirs to a civil thinking, who should be criticized; we who have not managed to carry through to the end the civilizing task our culture had embarked upon by problematizing any deterministic vision of history and humanity – be it a natural or supernatural determinism.

The challenge of the science of religions

One of the factors responsible for this inability to carry through to the end the humanization of the principles of meaning that structure our world view probably lies in a wrong way of proceeding with the study of religions on the scientific and academic level. Emerging from theological thought because of its historical origin, the science of religions has itself too often contributed to widening the gap between what civil life produces on the one hand and the religious dimension on the other – a dimension that it persisted in presenting as having its own autonomy and specificity, often using the same arguments as theological and philosophical discourse. But crediting every religious production with extra meaning, or a specific and irreducible meaning, is the same as reintroducing into public debate a form of fundamentalism of thinking. If, because it was unable to produce a historical reconstruction of immanent human logic, which is every religion's peculiar feature, 'civil modernity' left unfinished the process of 'civilizing religion', that happened with the complicity of many representatives of the science of religion. If we do not problematize by historicizing it the meaning power that religion still exercises in the west, we are unlikely to push far enough analysis of the phenomena characterizing our era.

That failure of historical critique is also the reason for the inability, shown by some sectors of present-day social science, to integrate into the whole of civilization that

same meaning power of the religious. However, the history of religions and anthropology have shown empirically how in many societies the most important symbolic and social systems are not governed by religions but rather by other codes of social life (such as kinship, political structures, forms of production, symbolic logic . . .). Since Durkheim's founding contribution the two disciplines have worked, each in its own way, to show that religion is only *one* social code among others (politics, economics, law, relations with the environment, etc.), all of them being mobilized in this global system for communicating and producing material and symbolic values that is a civilization. Provided religion is not given a special or privileged status, it is amenable to being analysed with the same tools and perspectives as the other codes mentioned. The only specificity it can claim compared with them concerns the nature of the relations it deals with, that is, relations between human beings and non-human alterity, whereas the other social codes involve solely relations between humans or between humans and nature (in the form of scientific as well as magical knowledge and practices). Once we have accepted the specificity of the relations dealt with by religion we have to agree that it should not be restricted to the Christian world view: the idea of divinity varies with the particular social system in which exists (the divinities of the old polytheisms, which are part of very particular socio-political structures, are quite different from the monotheisms' one god; Assmann 2010; Augé 1982; Vernant 1983). The religious social code is not at all obvious; it is *culturally arbitrary* like the others, in the sense that not only do all cultures not share the same code but also that, when this happens, the code does not necessarily operate in the same way from one culture to another. And were Christian missionaries not the first to uncover the existence of other civilizations without religion or gods (Clastres 1988)?

The west has subjected modernity's grand narratives (including metaphysics) to historical criticism and anthropological comparison, which has had the result of subjecting their authority criteria to the *empirical criterion of certainty* and doing away with their universalist, totalizing character. Why should we not do the same thing with religion? It is an important matter. The western world is today faced with the radical nature of extremely complex cultural and religious differences. For the first time it is dealing with them without having any symbolic mediations, whereas once modernity had some, with its universals such as metaphysics, science, finalist philosophies of history, etc. Furthermore Europe finds itself lacking the political centrality which its colonial empire had guaranteed. Thus we need to have a cultural model that is *generalizable* (but not *universal*) and *comparative* (not *absolute*), on which we can build a new civil body of knowledge. In the area of technology, sport, science and communication we can already recognize that such codes are being adopted on a massive scale in the most diverse non-western cultures. But if economic, technological, sporting, scientific, communication codes are exported and spread to this extent it is not because they are based on any orthodox foundation or meaning value that presents itself as preferable to others – but rather because of their ability *in a practical way to include and integrate* cultural differences and so to *start up the process of compatibility and intercultural generalization*.

These inclusive codes belong to the civil sphere because the reality that has given rise to them, as well as the logic that regulates their use, is civil. In the same way civil law, as we have seen, does not have any intrinsic value; it functions as a system of

arbitrary rules adopted in contract by citizens with the sole aim of regulating relations between individuals themselves, between individuals and the authorities, and between the individual and nature. Civil society and civil law share the same origin, the same structure and the same operational logic.

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Between the 15th and 16th centuries the modern social system set up a symbolic order of the world very different from the one that had preceded it. Modernity broke with its past when people started to see relations between humans and nature (science and technology) and with divinity (the religions) on the same basis as relations between humans themselves, which were understood as resting on arbitrary, contractual and conventional principles such as are expressed in the law, morality, politics, economics (Gauchet 2007). Today, approaching the issue of relations between religion and politics, while ignoring the anthropological significance of modernity and the historical process it set in train to end up with civil society, is resulting in a fatal confusion between two different registers. On the one hand *recognition of the coexistence* within our culture of *different cultural codes* (law, politics, economics, religion, etc.); on the other *the need*, assumed to be inevitable, *to establish their hierarchy of meaning* (a hierarchy in which the religious code would infallibly occupy the apex). Those who confuse these two registers forget that since the wars of religion the peaceful cohabitation of politics and religion has been the original result of the moderns' civil society, which put an end to the hierarchical discourse affirming the supremacy of religion over politics. It was also that civil society which made those two distinct registers compatible in the practice of social life.

The science of religions therefore has an important part to play in this thinking about the articulation between the political and the religious. It has a duty to remember the history of that articulation. The thinking and the duty are crucially important in the current political context. And that is so particularly in Europe where we are at present witnessing a process of profound institutional restructuring in the academic field of religious studies. That restructuring is the opportunity for the science of religions not to display a structural inability to free itself from theology when, for historical reasons, it may still be institutionally connected to it – it is the opportunity for that science to reaffirm its secular, civil vocation.

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