

# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND COMMON VALUES

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**T**hree hundred years ago no-one in this part of Europe spoke about «pluralism», and common values were essentially taken for granted. As for welcoming a rainbow of faiths and denominations: Unthinkable! Why?

Postmodernity... Today's triumph of pluralism and multiplicity... To many this implosion of the Enlightenment project appears to challenge the traditions which have informed our culture and politics. A direct assault, in effect, on our common European values. It is true that the times, these interesting times, pose many challenges. People are confused and bewildered by the rootlessness and drift of contemporary life; the growing intolerance; the fragility of once solid-seeming institutions: churches, political structures... even banks!

It is tempting not to sympathise, sometimes, with a despondent, even despairing, *fin-de-siècle* mood. But we should look at the calendar and register that we are at the start of a new century, not the end of an old one. We are also, I will argue, on the threshold of a more hopeful time... because this moment of religious and cultural pluralism, this «postmodernity», should be perceived as a gift. As a *liberation*.

Allow me to take a helicopter shot, as they say in Hollywood, of Christianity. For it is this tradition which has shaped our institutions, and indeed Europe as a whole. It might be understood in either its pre- or post-Constantinian phases. Before Constantine, the Gospel of Christ was a *subversive* message embraced by those often on the fringes of power, a counterbalance of grace and intimacy to the prevailing religious certainties and dominant structures of power. After Constantine, Christianity was codified into *the* structure of dominant

power, tied until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century to wealth, power and, unfortunately, sometimes even violence.

Might we look back on this very moment as the historical bookend to the post-Constantinian era of Christianity? We could even go one step further. Will the pluralism of postmodernity actually lead us deeper into the heart of the Gospel? If so, what is our task, as thinkers, as writers, as pastors, as politicians, as cultural analysts, and policy makers? It is Easter. It is surely relevant, at this most joyous season of the calendar, that we contemplate resurrection in its broadest terms. What new life might be brought from the seeming deaths we face as members of a culture and of institutions whose prior foundations are shifting?

In addressing today's theme of Religious Pluralism and Common Values, I want to embark on a very specific reflection, one based on the tradition I know best, that of Christian Democracy. As you all well know, it has for over a century informed the economics, political, and cultural life of Europe —and indeed Latin America— by translating the insights of the Church's social teachings to practical politics. You as scholars at one of the world's most ancient universities I know you wrestle with the question of the relevance of common values for a modern, or indeed, a postmodern world. As someone who has for all of my professional life been a part of, if not the head of, political parties whose names contain the word «Christian», I too wrestle with this question, particularly as we engage and cooperate with parties whose inspiration comes from other streams. For us in the European People's Party this has been a specific policy of «opening out» since 1990. As some of you will know, it has had its moments of difficulty, even drama. But I would like to concentrate here on what the implosion of modernity

has meant to me, which has been to lead me back to the source, to the notion of *personalism*.

### Pluralism and personalism

The issue of religious pluralism has been a hot topic for many years in the US and it has become very topical for all western societies—all societies, really. In the last essay written by **Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997)**, who died on november 6, 1997, he says:

I came to the conclusion that there is a plurality of ideals, as there is a plurality of cultures and of temperaments [...] I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ.

There is not an infinity of them: the number of human values, of values that I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite [...].

I think these values are objective—that is to say, their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given. The fact that men are men and women are women and not dogs or cats or tables or chairs is an objective fact; and part of this objective fact is that there are certain values, and only those values which men, while remaining men, can pursue [...].

If pluralism is a valid view, and respect between systems of values which are not necessarily hostile to each other is possible, then toleration and liberal consequences follow, as they do not either from monism (only one set of values is true, all others are false) or from relativism (my values are mine, yours are yours, and if we clash, too bad, neither of us can claim to be right)<sup>1</sup>.

Personalism is the foundation of the principle of pluralism itself. Also of subsidiarity. And of solidarity. These are the distinctive core of who we are and how we formulate policy. Personalism is also the best starting point for understanding and analysing «common values» and the related concept of «the common good». I will not explain personalism in great detail, but it may be *à propos* to recall why the nexus of ideas around it—and developed most eloquently by Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain—still matter so much.

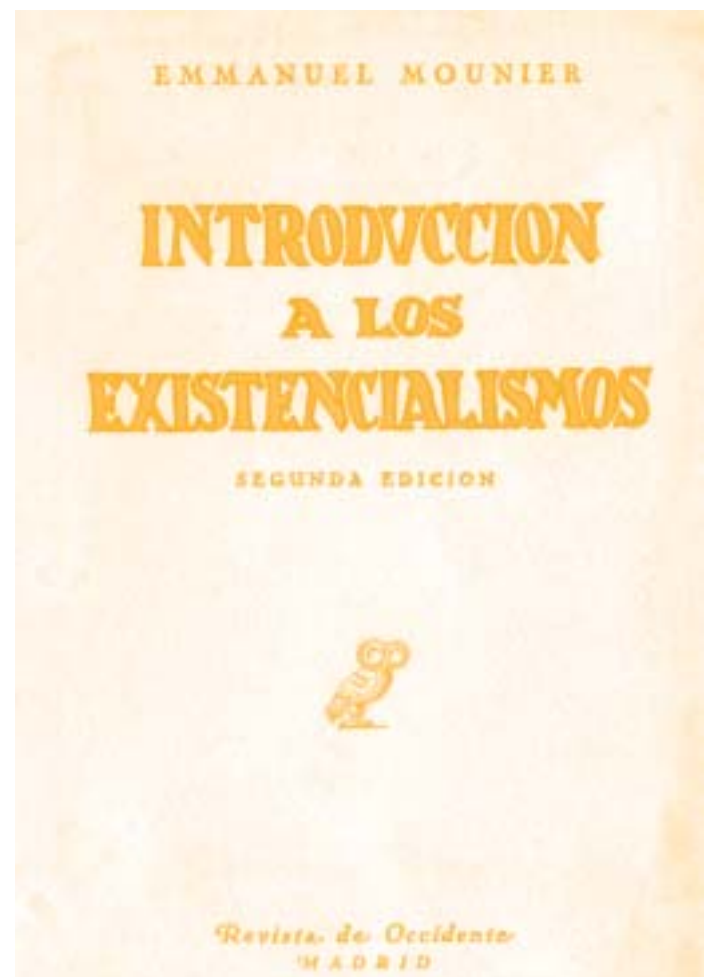
Personalism places the human person at the centre of political and social life. From that follows a crucial argument. *All* of the means of the state must therefore be applied toward the full spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional development of full personhood in the context of the social institutions (especially religious and educational) in which human personality develops. The political must then know its limits and its responsibilities. For the political is no more and no less than the fertilizer in the social earth of human flourishing. Politics

coordinates, facilitates, but must never be allowed to dominate in this process of human becoming!

The goal of personalism, says **Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950)**, is «... to combat the individualist's attempt to isolate the individual and centre him upon himself, and the collectivists' attempt to use the individual and to treat him as an interchangeable object».

Our entire doctrinal effort, he argues, has been to free the sense of the person from individualist errors and the sense of communion from collectivist errors... as a result of the questions posed by fascism, communism, existentialism.

A key notion in de moral philosophy of **Jacques Maritain (1882-1973)** is that of human freedom. He says that the «end» of humanity is to be free but, by «freedom», he does not mean licence or pure rational autonomy, but the realisation of the human person in accord with his or her nature—specifically, the achievement of moral and spiritual perfection. Maritain's moral philosophy, then, cannot be considered independently of his analysis of human nature. Maritain distinguishes between the human being as an individual and as a person. Human beings are *individuals* who are related to a common, social order of which they are parts. But they are also persons. The person is a *whole*,



is an object of dignity «must be treated as an end»<sup>2</sup> and has a transcendent destiny. In both the material and the spiritual order, however, human beings participate in a «common good». Maritain's emphasis is on the value of the human person as a form of personalism, which he saw as a *via media* between individualism and socialism.

He envisages a political society under the rule of law—and he distinguishes four types of law: the eternal, the natural, the «common law of civilisation» (*droit des gens* or *ius gentium*), and the positive (*droit positif*). Maritain held that natural rights are fundamental and inalienable, and antecedent in nature, and superior, to society. Rights are grounded in the natural law, and specifically in relation to the common good. It is this good, and not individual rights, that is the basis of the state, and it is because of this that he held that there can be a hierarchical ordering of these rights<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence Maritain favoured a democratic and liberal view of the state, and, argued for a political society that is both *personalist*, *pluralist*, and *Christian-inspired*. He also favoured a number of liberal ideals, and the list of rights that he recognises extends significantly beyond that found in many liberal theories, and includes the rights of workers as well as those of the human and civic person.

Emerging from this same tradition, Alojz Peterle, the first prime minister of independent Slovenia and the man who represented the future EU states in the European Convention, says:

In the East 'we have lived through totalitarianism —where the person meant nothing and against which the EU was founded— much more recently than the other countries. We want to refresh [...] the centrality of the dignity of the person [...] We must translate personalism to the East, where there is a great mistrust of politics. We must make clear that politics serve people, people do not serve politics, as in our past.

From personalism flow some core principles which define a society with common values:

- The human person is layered; his nature is essentially spiritual.
- Human development, *our becoming ourselves*, happens most effectively in the context of social institutions —civil society— which reflect and mediate common values.
- The role of the state is, and must be, fundamentally limited to what enables individuals to flourish. Its essential task is to make such growth, such «becoming», economically and environmentally sus-

tainable, and to mediate conflict in the application of common values.

- Last but not least: the state should be held *accountable* for these ends.

Personalism, on this reading, is not some charming but moth-eaten mumbo-jumbo from the century before last. Not at all! I put it to you that it may be the *sine qua non* of a civilised modern society, of a 'decent' society and of a *decent* polity for our religiously and culturally diverse society. A state should respect, indeed celebrate, the spiritual dimension of human life. It must accord an essential importance to a vibrant civil society. It is limited and accountable.

Those, for me, basic core values emerge from the most universal and powerful concepts of our tradition. This moment of pluralism, it could be argued, is not the great postmodern threat, as some see it, but rather a kind of liberation... an awakening to our pre-Constantinian roots of faith. These are broad and potentially ambiguous terms, but I think they can and should be defined concretely, specifically, and in the context of public policy. I think for example of the current arguments over the ban on headscarves and crucifixes in French schools. Europe —the world altogether— is threatened by a dialogue of the deaf, of mutual incomprehension and intolerance —or worse, as we saw in New York and more recently in Madrid. Public policy needs to address these issues, including the most thorny and difficult. But how?

The life of the mind can be, sometimes, lonely. But I assure you that your work is profoundly *connected*: we need you to continue and develop so that we as a society are more prepared to articulate a coherent set of common values, and then to apply these to the difficult issues our society faces, in its many, and many-faceted, transitions. After 9/11, after Madrid, no-one could argue that such labour is irrelevant. But in truth it never was. If religious freedom is to co-exist with —and better still, enrich— common values, then we need to examine how concepts which flow from Catholic Social Thought and the acceptance of the «Declaration on Religious Liberty» by Vatican II can be translated in ways that make sense in a pluralist context. This is not such a headache as it might sound. For the «spiritual» can be defined in ways that do not alienate non-theistic elements of society. This is not to deny there has already been conflict about this.



## European constitution

It was, for example, one of the struggles —still unresolved— in the 18 months of the European Convention. «The European constitution has to mention the Christian values»: this was one of the major requests by the EPP Group. The debate was started when the Presidency presented its draft article as to the Union's values:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, values which are common to the Member States. Its aim is a society at peace, through the practice of tolerance, justice and solidarity.

Reacting on this other members of the Convention proposed to include the principle of separation of Church and State or the laicity principle. The President of the Convention indicated that, if a reference had to be included recognising the importance of religions in the European civilisation, it would be better to put it in the preamble of the Constitution. The debate restarted when the Presidency proposed its draft preamble. The EPP Group presented an amendment which was the translation of a paragraph in the preamble of the Polish constitution, saying:

The Union's values include the values of those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty as well as of those who do not share such a belief but respect these universal values arising from other sources.

Under pressure from the socialists, other members of the Convention launched a move against any introduction referring to God in the constitution threatening a final compromise. Finally, the Presidency presented a final preamble:

Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, the values of which, still present in its heritage, have embedded within the life of society the central role of the human person and his or her inalienable rights, and respect for law [...].

It would be wrong to say that during the Convention there was a real debate on the inclusion of God in the constitution. Some looked into combining two questions: the Christian nature of the Union should decide its borders and prohibit any accession of a Muslim country, so, Turkey. But this argument would prove to be

difficult in view of a long-term planned accession of countries such as Bosnia and Albania. The Turkish members of the Convention expressed themselves little on the subject, and only reminded of the virtues of the laic principle. The Turkish Prime Minister spoke out against a reference to the Christian roots in the *Constitution*. Whether God gets mentioned or not in the eventual document is an important issue with broad cultural and philosophical ramifications; but in some ways this debate —still unresolved— is only a surrogate, a mask, for a larger and much more basic set of questions with which we are wrestling here.

I can see plenty of ways in which personalism unites rather than divides: humanism, Buddhism, psychoanalysis all begin with an acknowledgement of the *mysterious core* of the human person, an understanding that there is something beyond «ego» in each person which must be respected, nurtured, understood. But we need to go further than lowest common denominators. We should be more ambitious. How can we become more attuned to the *needs* of the diverse traditions to which we are now home to ensure that nothing in society keeps Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, members of new religious movements, those without religious affiliation, from expressing the liberty that is theirs to develop their deepest selves? We should reflect on the meaning of liberty in this context. And perhaps—I realise this observation is not at the moment the height of fashionable «cool»— we have something to learn from the United States in this context.

## Civil society and state

Liberty matters, as something more than a word. The ban on headscarves, to take an example, would be entirely unthinkable in the US. I have to say my instinct is the same. In religious matters, it is not, I think, for the state to lay down how such liberty is exercised. Nor is it wise or practical to try to lay down the law on cultural matters. On January 12, 1993, the *Woodstock Theological Center* sponsored a public forum to celebrate its political philosopher and theologian Father **John Courtney Murray (1904-1967) s.j.**, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. One of the participants, Dr. Os Guinness, executive director of the Trinity Forum (UK) declared:

I, personally, owe a great debt to Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray for helping me think through the first principles of religious liberty in American public life. I am convinced that the meaning of America and the meaning of modernity are deeply and closely linked, not just for America today, but for all in the world facing the issues

of sectarianism and tribalism and struggling to live with each other's differences.

Murray's sharp distinction between society and state was the heart of his eventually successful argument for religious freedom. For him, civil society, not the state nor even the church, was the moral and religious core of our world: society was healthy and moral in direct proportion to the types of questions that it collectively pursued. The good of society, not just of the individual, depends upon free and open expression of ideas and beliefs. For Murray, the public schools were the meeting ground for three distinct social realities, namely, the state, the family, and the churches. Each had a stake in how future generations were shaped. So the concerns of families, the state, and the churches ought to have a voice in public education. The university should not try to reduce America's religious pluralism to a secularistic or a coerced unity. It should train students for broad and deep discussions of our core values in society at large.

The state's function is limited. It is not for the state to nurture the spiritual in modern society, only to enable it by encouraging civil society. Civil society is

central. But I should stress that I am not thinking of the corporatist, rather bureaucratised structures of the middle to late 20<sup>th</sup> century —the major trade unions, for instance. They no longer have the same power, for good reasons. In large part the economic structures —huge heavy industries, organised labour— are no longer there to sustain them. This same point applies increasingly to political parties... at least to those which do not recognise the profound changes in the way modern societies really work; the empowerment but also alienation of the individual; the wholesale secularisation; the utterly changed demography of developed societies in the past 50 years. Without question all this has represented a colossal assault on the structures of civil society, which have had no choice other than to wither away, or to face the challenge and adapt. The Church itself did this with Vatican II and John Courtney Murray had a decisive influence on the content of the «Declaration on Religious Liberty».

Public policy should then nurture an increasingly vibrant civil society: from the NGOs which hold governments accountable on key issues like the environment and human rights, to smaller, more local organisations which respond to the needs of persons of faith, young



Rafael. *La Escuela de Atenas*. Estancias vaticanas.

people, ethnic minorities, the elderly. We need also to examine how the pillarized social structures we have inherited might be improved to facilitate entrepreneurship and creativity. Governments too need to rethink and re-define their role; their understanding of limits and accountability. In this, I suggest, the principles I have outlined may be a useful starting point.

### Ethics and politics

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) has explained the relationship between ethics and politics in the book *Politics and faith*<sup>4</sup>. One concrete result of this re-definition should be consultation with civil society, and new mechanisms for ensuring feedback. That in turn will surely help with the urgent task of re-establishing the legitimacy of the state, and ending the hang-dog indifference or even hostility of the voting public to the political furniture. I hope very much that this kind of grown-up, almost familial, discussion of current problems may be one of the fruits of personalism—, human-centred politics. Otherwise we risk our societies being ripped apart over so many issues, from welfare reform, to European integration, to how we deal with religious extremism. It is for politicians like myself, and for academics like you, to ensure that politics never encroaches on the liberty and dynamism of civil society. Most of all, the centrality of the human person must never be obscured by the institutional demands of the political process. I am not demanding an outbreak of saintliness, nor even trying to obscure the difficulty of what I am proposing. To articulate common values amid growing and increasingly complex religious pluralism is a daunting task. However, I am certain that to go on as we are, without a road map, will be *much more* difficult if not, eventually, impossible. Christian Democrats are fortunate enough to have the *richesse* of some of the greatest political thinkers in human history: I have at last reached a point in my career where I have time to read them! And I assure you that they can help us a great deal in facing what is perhaps the greatest challenge of our time: the subject of this talk, pluralism and common values. The issue goes to the very core of the democratic project.

But this great challenge is also a gift. It forces us to return to the source of our convictions, to imagine a moment when the *Gospel* was springing up like a wild shoot, subversively, in hostile soil. The fact that we, today, are once again without a monopoly of power, at the end of our cultural hegemony, should not be cause for mourning, but rather for awakening. Perhaps for the first time since Constantine we are again able to perceive our faith as the still small voice of the divine, pointing a way toward grace, mercy, and freedom. The social and political implications of the development of the human personality as a whole are emerging (or perhaps re-emerging). This is the way for us to recover our core values, but also —perhaps— the way for us to articulate *common* values which might make sense to the plurality of faiths that surround us. This is a great gift, a talent we should not, must not, have no right, to squander.

### Notas

<sup>1</sup> The full essay is published in the *New York Review of Books*, vol. XLV, nº 8, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> *Les droits de l'homme*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Man and the State*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>4</sup> *Politiek en geloof* - Essays van Paul Ricoeur gekozen en ingeleid door Ad Peperzak. Utrecht, Uitgeverij Ambo, 1968.

Un anexo con textos de Paul Ricoeur puede consultarse en la versión electrónica de este artículo en nuestra revista: <http://www.pliegosdeyuste.com>.

### RESUMEN

#### Pluralismo religioso y valores comunes

En un mundo en el que el Cristianismo ya no es la religión oficial y el pluralismo se hace cada vez más necesario, sostiene el autor que la situación actual está reclamando la articulación de valores comunes como modo de supervivencia de la sociedad europea. Partiendo de las tesis personalistas de Emmanuel Mounier y del concepto de la libertad humana de Jacques Maritain, y apoyándose en la obra de John Courtney Murray y Paul Ricoeur, se defiende la centralidad de la figura humana en la sociedad civil y se insta a los políticos demócratacristianos a jugar un papel protagonista en la creación de la nueva sociedad.