



Seyla Benhabib, Giancarlo Bosetti

Beliefs in the US. Between new fears and old responses

Reset interview with Seyla Benhabib

Reset editor-in-chief Giancarlo Bosetti talks to Seyla Benhabib about the differing roles of religion in the US and Europe: "[The US] was founded by puritans who came in order to exercise religious freedom; therefore, the exercise of this freedom holds an important post in the public sphere, even if there exists at the same time a strong doctrine of separation between Church and state. In general, the American public sphere is more permeated with religious tones, even if they are not of a particular religion: just think of the famous phrase, 'God bless America'. I've never heard a German chancellor say: 'God bless Germany!'"

Giancarlo Bosetti: Prof. Benhabib, you are familiar with both the US and Europe. Is there really a difference between the two in respect to the role of religion and the public sphere?

Seyla Benhabib: Absolutely. I think that this is true when you look at both catholic and Protestant Europe. Europe has experienced the struggle between Church and state, which has drawn certain lines, and I don't believe that anyone would think of crossing those lines. In Europe, the majority of discourses are about culture, which is becoming a stronger container for moral issues and complex ethics instead of religion. Sometimes, it's true, there are public discussions that touch on religion; for example, in Germany, on the subject of the crucifix in schools; or with the question of the veil in France: secularization carries weight because students — Christians, Jews, or Muslims — do not openly display signs of their religion. But Europe is still trying, in many different ways, to maintain neutrality in the public sphere.

GB: And in the US?

SB: The US has had a totally different experience. It was founded by puritans who came in order to exercise religious freedom; therefore, the exercise of this freedom holds an important post in the public sphere, even if there exists at the same time a strong doctrine of separation between Church and state. In general, the American public sphere is more permeated with religious tones, even if they are not of a particular religion: just think of the famous phrase, "God bless America". I've never heard a German chancellor say: "God bless Germany"! In the US, there is a sort of a widespread ecumenical religion. I would like to give another example. I was very surprised when, after 11 Sept. 2001, at a commemoration ceremony for the victims, President Bush invited not only a priest, a pastor, and a rabbi, but also a Muslim leader. It was a surprising gesture, inviting all of these religious figures, if you think that the hijackers were Muslims. The interesting thing is this: the US has brought religion into the public sphere without penalizing or excluding it, and this is the big difference between the US and Europe. Europe, instead, is facing more and more problems linked to the relationship between religion and public

sphere; in particular, the presence of a population of Muslim immigrants.

GB: Moral values played an important role in the political contests in both the US and Europe, in relation to their respective situations. Can you affirm that one of the aspects of this phenomenon is the return of the influence of religion in political life in the US?

SB: Certainly, this is undeniable. It is necessary to see if what is being discussed is a return of religion understood in terms of dogma and faith, or a more instrumental phenomenon. But it is clear that we are facing a return of religion all over the world — not just in the US. In the last twenty years, there has been a rise in fundamentalist movements everywhere — as much in the Islamic world as in the Christian — and this, in some way, constitutes the difference. One of the phenomena that we need to deal with currently, in my opinion, is the power of organized evangelism. The growth of fundamentalism in the US does not come from American Catholicism, or from any of the other Protestant denominations, such as the Methodists, Congregationalists, or the Episcopalians, but rather from the evangelical movement, and it originates in the southern states.

GB: According to the specialists, based on the analysis of the presidential elections, the votes of not only the born again Christians, but also of the Catholics, have played a decisive role in the election results; all of the press, from "Mother John" to the "Boston Review", have furthered a common discourse in which the right wing is supposedly favoured by religion because it is closer to the sentiments of the people, while the Left and the Liberals remain more elite. What do you think?

SB: I remain unconvinced, and I will explain why. You speak of John Kerry and the Catholic vote; Kerry refused to make his Catholicism a fundamental argument, preferring a civil celebration of the separation of Church and state. If, in fact, the majority of Catholic votes did not go to Kerry, even if we don't look at numbers, it was more a question of class. The votes lost by Kerry among the Catholics were due to a question of class, to the perception of elitism that a class of electors of democratic traditions had of him. Elitism played an important role in these presidential elections, and this is the absurdity of the situation, because George W. Bush and John Kerry both went to Yale, and both come from high-ranking families: but George W. Bush's family is much more linked to the elite structure of the country, while Kerry's father is a Jewish immigrant. Nevertheless, Bush managed to appear on the right wing as closer to the people.

GB: According to some, Liberals speak to the people about their needs in terms of politics, while the Republicans and the right wing talk to them about what they are and about how they feel.

SB: It is the means of achieving the goal. I don't think that the Left should worry about this. Politics can be done with heart and commitment. There surely exist values around which they can raise sentiment; it can be anger, honour, courage: they just need an ideal. The point on which the Republicans have gained leverage is an extremely powerful sentiment — fear. People talked about compassionate conservatism, but to me the last presidential elections were all about Sept. 11 and not about religion. The recourse to religion in the evangelical direction was used to orientate the vote, to organize the community, but in reality the determining factor was security: the best president would be the one who could guarantee national security, combat

international terrorism, face their fears.

GB: But couldn't religion have represented a sort of response to this fear?

SB: Personally, I think that *de facto* the religious right wing had a great influence in the Republican Party during past presidential campaigns. In this particular presidential campaign, religious themes were subordinated to the organization. I consider it important to understand this because the moral majority and family values have always been the foundations of past Republican campaigns, while in this specific campaign, the president accurately avoided touching upon "ambush" issues. In this way, my opinion of the principal factors is not the same as yours. I believe that this "moral packet" exists, but it comes behind fear and security.

GB: You're saying, therefore, that the process of secularization has not come to a halt and is carrying on also in the US?

SB: No, I don't intend to affirm this. I don't think that one can realistically support the hypothesis of secularization. I think that there was a general crisis, and the crisis of secularization was a part of this. Today, technological progress brings new questions to medicine and to the role of science, and a large quantity of people in every sector question the beginning and end of life. In this type of question, one thinks that science and technology have the solution. In reality, they create more problems than they resolve, and the public sphere also does not have ready solutions. In short, secularization does not have responses for this progress or for technology. In this way, I can understand that some have abandoned it.

GB: Should the Left be called upon to use religion more, or the Right to use religion less? What is the liberal opinion on this proposition?

SB: I think that from a sociological point of view, the theory of secularization does not hold up. Modernity and technology do not signify the end of religion. It is not like that, from a sociological point of view. I believe that, in general, there is a sort of secret quest in our culture, and that religion is one of the forms that it assumes. This is a large debate regarding sociology and culture: if the big question of the secular twenty-first century is, "is there a return of religion?", okay, then I think that the response is positive: yes, there is a return of religion, and the explanation resides in a growth in the complexity of life and in an incapacity of political ideology, also liberal, to guarantee a solution to many problems. I still don't think that the Left should use religion instrumentally. Sometimes there exist organic religious groups inside the Left. An example is the American Civil Rights Group, which, as is well-known, is a case in which the influence of religion, Churches, and the state is clear. Everyone knows that it's impossible to invent a Martin Luther King, but it is evident that there sometimes exist organic bonds between progressive and religious movements, and I think that we should cultivate these bonds as much as possible; there is no reason to set them against each other. The problem is distinguishing between organic and instrumental bonds. The Left cannot simply rediscover religion to meet their own objectives, but instead should have common objectives with which they can mobilize a diverse array of forces. Probably there could be a policy for social justice, against poverty, for disarmament, against war, for clandestines *sans papier*, in which there could be a mobilization of people from groups linked to the Church and from secular groups to work together. This is what I would try for.

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