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The role of religion in establishing social cohesion

Nostalgic references to a religious past will not help solve the question of a "European soul". Yes, this past is both glorious and painful, but it no longer exists, writes Danièle Hervieu-Léger. Instead, the weakening of the foundations of religion could prove to be a good starting point for a more specific reconsideration of European religious heritage.

With the enlargement of the European Union on the agenda, and at a time when there is a manifest need for a "European voice" to make itself heard in the world arena, it seems particularly appropriate to consider the role of religion in establishing social cohesion and creating European identity. The question has been raised explicitly in the current debates as to whether or not the introduction of the future European Constitution should refer to transcendent matters and/or Europe's religious heritage.

At the root of these debates, however, is not just the simple matter of comparing divergent principles, or achieving the difficult task of reconciliation necessitated by the different ways in which the religious and political domains are organized in the countries involved. The problem of religion, in fact, has implications that extend far beyond the realm of religion itself, inasmuch as it provides an opportunity to examine — under the microscope, as it were — a number of issues inherent in the project of *cultural* European integration, and the accompanying emergence of genuine European citizenship. The purpose of the following discussion is to point out a few elements that may help to clarify various aspects of this question from the viewpoint of the sociology of religion.

Secularization as a unique feature of European society

The obvious starting point for any examination of the position of religion in Europe is the long-standing observation that the process of secularization is extremely advanced throughout the continent. The most readily available (and most widely used) indicator of the advanced degree of secularization is the level of religious practice. There are, it is true, considerable differences between the countries of the European Union in terms of religious observance. It is only, for example, in certain countries, where churches are deserted at all times of the year other than the main religious festivals (Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands), that religious structures seem to have weakened to the point of collapse. In general, however, the level of religious observance is considerably lower in Europe than in the United States.

The general trend observed in major quantitative and comparative studies of religious belief is that belief in a personal god (with the attributes of the Judeo-Christian deity) is waning in favor of a vague belief in a "power" or "supernatural force". There is no diminution in the belief in a life after death,

but it is becoming clearly dissociated from the Christian vision of salvation in the world hereafter. While the number of Europeans declaring themselves convinced atheists and rejecting any belief in life after death remains relatively low everywhere (with nonetheless significant national variations), it is still much higher than the 1 per cent rate recorded in the United States. Comparison with the United States is valid here because this erosion of religion in modern societies was long held, across the entire spectrum of sociological thought, to be an unavoidable feature of modernity itself, even a condition of modernization. The European situation could thus be viewed as a model prefiguring the general development of advanced societies.

When it was observed that American society, whose classification in the ranks of modern societies could hardly be questioned, did not adhere to this model of religious erosion, the unique nature of the American experience, rather than the universal nature of the European situation, was called into question. This point of view was reversed after the 1970s, when it became clear that religion was a powerful presence in public life everywhere except in Europe, the only cultural area where the paradigm of secularization was genuinely applicable, but in ways that varied from country to country. This reversal in points of view now leads us to examine the exceptional nature of the European experience in light of the prevailing tendencies elsewhere in the world.

The first effect of the shift in attitude to the paradigm of secularization was to enable the "loss" at issue to be reassessed. For a long time, the thinking was that the decline in religious practice was of itself an indicator of a parallel retreat in religious belief. This school of thought acknowledged that the combination of the spread of scientific and technical rationalism, the affirmation of individual autonomy, and the increasingly specialized nature of spheres of human activity led to the modern world's deep-seated loss of illusion, and, consequently, a definitive loss of religious belief.

The drawback to this description of a rationally disillusioned modern world was that it disregarded the structural insecurity into which societies driven by the imperative for change were thrust. This omission meant that the need for order engendered and stimulated by that insecurity remained unidentified. The proliferation of new-wave religious movements recorded at the end of the 1960s has shown that religious belief still thrives in Europe, even if its symbolism is liberated from the control of mainstream organized religion. The intensity (and the multifaceted nature) of different faiths is a response to the scale of the expectations, aspirations, and frustrations engendered by the typically modern promise that individual accomplishment is available to everyone.

Another reading of secularization in Europe has gradually come to the fore. The problems of the loss of institutional religion that dominated the 1950s and 1960s were followed by an approach *deregulating* institutional religions. The emphasis was switched to patterns of individualization of belief, leading individuals to independently evolve personal credos that would give meaning to their existence, according to their own frame of mind, interests, aspirations, and experience. This emphasis on the do-it-yourself approach to religious belief and practice does not mean that conventional religious traditions lost all their cultural relevance in European society. Those traditions simply began to increasingly serve as symbolic repositories of meaning, available for individuals to subjectively use and reuse in different ways.

The major religions are less and less "codes of meaning" imposed on individuals from above, and less and less "natural communities" within which individuals inherit their religious identity through generations. In modern societies, particularly in Europe, religious identity is increasingly a matter of personal choice. Individuals make their own choice of religious allegiance — often after a long spiritual journey — either for good, or merely for a short time. More than any other people, Europeans are moving away from the model of the "practicing" believer, who receives his religious identity from the community to which he belongs from childhood, and within which he complies with rules of religious observance set by the institution responsible for the transmission of faith. They most closely follow the pattern of two descriptive models that I have elaborated in order to take account of contemporary patterns of faith in the modern world: the *pilgrim* (who follows an individual spiritual path involving a series of phases) and the *convert* (who chooses the religious family to which he belongs).¹

These models do not merely apply to the European situation, but are the most appropriate description of the trend towards religious individualization in Europe. This trend disrupts the organization of conventional forms of religious allegiance, particularly the traditional forms of involvement in religion at the parish level and the transmission of religion through the family. The British sociologist Grace Davie's expression *believing without belonging* best characterizes this state of secularization in Europe.²

Let me point out, in passing, that this formula can be inverted to become *belonging without believing*, another expression which typifies Europeans' attitude toward religion. This attitude entails a distant shared memory, which does not necessitate shared belief, but which — even from a distance — still governs collective reflexes in terms of identity. The Danish citizens who do not believe in God and never attend church, but who faithfully continue to pay the tax that goes to the Lutheran Church because they like to see religious buildings properly maintained, and the French citizens who are nostalgic for the beautiful church services of their childhood and complain about mosques being built in France while never setting foot in church until "the bell tolls" for them, illustrate how one can "belong without believing", the European counterpart to the expansion of beliefs without belonging.

In all these cases, Europeans' shared religious identity is nowadays expressed through the general advent of a spiritual individualism that overturns established structures for the transmission of religious identity. This subjectivization of religion is the latest stage in the long process of its gradual repression into the private domain. Historically, Europe was the place where political autonomy was affirmed (through processes that varied from nation to nation) in relation to the authority of any religious standard imposed from above. Europe was the test-tube that saw religion's exit from the stage and the invention of political sovereignty, giving rise to a set of standards governing collective life that was dictated from below.³ It is now the testing ground for the absorption of the symbolic resources of religion into contemporary individualistic culture. Even so, religion has not disappeared: it continues to exist as a personal option and a means of individual identification, but it informs collective identity less and less and, at least in Europe, no longer provides the framework for ethical standards in the life of its citizens.

Religion's role in determining the values of European civilization: The residual pluralism of different religious cultures

If we wish, however, to describe the position of religion in Europe, it is not enough simply to record the objective indicators of loss (the decline in religious practice and the erosion of traditional belief patterns) and to strive to map out personal homemade symbolic systems. Such an approach does no more than skim the surface, revealing only the visible involvement of individuals with the "major religions". If we truly wish to take the measure of the presence of religion in European societies, we must dig deeper, and look into the political, cultural, ethical, and symbolic structures that make up the framework for collective life in the societies concerned.

At this level, one can gauge the extent to which both institutions and mentalities are imbued with and shaped by religion, even in the absence of any explicit reference to the religious traditions involved in the development of the civilization's values. Civilized values have developed, broadly speaking, within a Judeo-Christian cultural context: we are aware, for instance, of what modern thinking, and specifically European thinking, on autonomy owes to the Jewish concept of the covenant (*Brith*) as the foundation for the relationship between the deity and humans on a quasi-contractual basis (binding the fulfillment of the divine promise to the elective loyalty of the people). The concept of the covenant is the opening page of history. Christian tradition renders this concept twofold: universal (the Good News is for all humanity) and individual (conversion is an individual choice). Yet this common context that lies in part behind our concept of human rights is diffracted and differentiated within different religious cultures.

It is common, and perfectly justifiable, to draw a distinction between a "Protestant Europe" and a "Catholic Europe" within which, for example, the construction of the modern problem of autonomy has taken different routes. The difference can best be illustrated with reference to the German and French experiences. The German treatment of autonomy, predating any concept of political autonomy, is born of the historical experience of the Reformation, and constructed through the affirmation of a religious individualism that radically challenges the foundations of authority in the Church and dispenses with the need for institutional mediation in the relationship between believer and deity. The concept of the individual and the sovereignty deriving from it is radically different from the essentially political construction established in France due to the joint struggle against despotism and religion that came together in the revolutionary experience.⁴

If we wish to make a more detailed analysis of the differentiated ways in which religion contributed to the development of the values of civilization in Europe, we would need to look further into relevant subdivisions within the Catholic and Protestant spheres of influence. Within "Protestant Europe", for example, the British, German, and Scandinavian issues of the Enlightenment, themselves rooted in different Protestant structures, engendered political cultures, concepts of the relationships between the State and the citizen, and interpretations of sovereignty and representation that were far from homogenous.

The key point is that each European society is now characterized by its own specific religious roots. In a country such as France, where the historic effect of secularization was particularly far-reaching and where the objective and subjective loss of religion may be specifically illustrated, the phenomenon of the Catholic encoding of culture, institutions, and mentalities continues to be extraordinarily significant. As Sartre maintained in *Being and Nothingness*, "We are all Catholic." In particular, this phrase highlights the two-way relationship which secular society maintains with the figure of the Roman

Catholic Church, whose direct potential for influence over society and individuals it dedicated itself to undermining.

More generally, the programme of public institutions (everything from schools to hospitals, courts, universities, etc.) was entirely based on, and has continued to operate (though, obviously, not explicitly) with reference to the Catholic model.⁵ It is impossible to appreciate the discussion of many questions in French public life which have nothing strictly to do with religion (from food quality to the ethical regulation of science, the management of hierarchical relationships in business, the future of rural society, societal expectations of the State, and demands for workers' rights) without being aware of the extent to which French culture is impregnated with Catholic values.

The fact is that the same degree of symbolic and cultural encoding is at work in all European countries, from Scandinavia to the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, or Ireland, though it takes completely different forms. In all the countries of Europe, not only the styles of political life, the content of public debate on social and ethical issues, the definition of State or individual responsibility, the concept of citizenship or of family, and attitudes toward nature and the environment, but also the practical rules of civil conduct and attitudes toward money or patterns of consumption, have taken shape in historical and religious contexts which still continue to shape them. Not because the religious institutions have retained any real power to set standards (they have, on the contrary, lost that power everywhere), but because the symbolic structures which they shaped, even after official belief has been lost and religious observance has declined, still have a remarkable capacity to influence the local culture. It is worth noting that this differentiated influence operates within a shared world shaped by a long history in which the political and the religious spheres were resulting in, among other things, the specific style of religiosity centred around the individual.

A disintegrating cultural matrix?

The key question today, obviously, is: What will be the future of this civilizational matrix shaped over a long historical period? Several sets of factors contribute to shaking a cultural foundation that is at one and the same time unified and diverse. In each instance, the problems encountered highlight and accentuate the tension between, on the one hand, the process of the homogenization of the European religious scene under the influence of secularization and, on the other, the possibly contradictory stimulation of the various religious cultures which exist in the same European area.

The first — and most visible — factor is Europe's *cultural and religious pluralization*, primarily associated with the phenomenon of immigration, and, specifically, the long-term settlement of immigrant populations in the host countries. The core of the phenomenon of pluralization, clearly, resides in the massive Islamic presence in several European countries, which is a common bond between European countries facing the problems of reciprocal acclimatization of quite separate religious and cultural worlds. At the same time, this necessitates the wholesale reassessment of the relationships between religion and culture in the societies concerned. However, it also reveals the disparities in these societies' responses to the demands for the recognition of Islam in their midst.

While it is true, for example, that the size of the Moslem populations in the United Kingdom, France and Germany has made Islam a force to be reckoned

with in these countries, it is also clear that the road to integrating these populations is significantly different, due to both the political cultures of the host countries and the specific features of the different branches of Islamic faith involved (in these cases, those of Pakistani, North African, or Turkish origin). The different approaches to issues such as the wearing of veils in school are clear demonstration of the fact that the presence of Islam has become a fact of life that both unites and divides different European countries.

The same dialectical tension between rapprochement and separation is at work in connection with the *cultural globalization* phenomena affecting Europe along with the rest of the world. On the one hand, the spread of a homogenized media culture; the accelerated development of the movement of goods, persons, and ideas; the homogenization of models of consumption; and the general subjection of trade — including the exchange of symbolic ideas — to the liberalized market regime are tending to erode the cultural — and, in particular, the religious — individualism of European societies. On the other hand, the very dynamic of cultural homogenization provokes reactions likely to stimulate the reactivation of those same cultural specificities and allows national political and symbolic problems involving religion one might have thought obsolete to resurface. While it is conceivable that the growing hegemony of North American culture and values may engender, as a reaction, the affirmation of a European culture with its own references and values, there is also the possibility that it will give rise to "reactionary identities" sustaining, even in Europe, heightened rivalries inseparably linked to religious persuasion and nationality. The fight to defend "cultural uniqueness" may find sustenance in the fertile soil of the religious worlds that exist side-by-side in Europe, but these very different religious worlds may make something quite different of that struggle.

One feature of the phenomena of cultural pluralization and cultural globalization is that they contribute both to the erosion and, paradoxically, to the partial reconstitution of the various religious civilizations which exist in Europe. This is not the case with a third set of phenomena directly impacting the *cultural foundation* made up of these religious civilizations. Indeed, considering the cultural upheavals with which Europe (like all democratic Western societies) is faced nowadays, we might wonder if we are not currently engaged in changes whose effects could well be as decisive in scale, for religion, as the critical turning-point of the Enlightenment was in the eighteenth century.⁶ That period was characterized by the elimination of the transcendent from the political sphere, though it did not preclude the transfer of a form of transcendent thinking without a reference to a deity (and the eschatological considerations that went hand-in-hand with it) into the political arena. It is possible that the cultural change we are currently experiencing will shake up the symbolic framework of our societies from top to bottom, perhaps definitively displacing religion from society. Identifying (and hopefully interrelating) three major observations will perhaps help make some sense of this stage in our cultural development:

The first of these observations involves the advent, for the first time in human history and specifically in this economically and politically privileged arena that is western Europe, of a well-fed or *satiated society*. Not only have the generations reaching adulthood today never known the reality, or even the real threat, of war, but they now live without ever having to worry about having enough to eat. An adequate supply of food is now a given which is not adversely affected by even large-scale animal epidemics (compared, for example, with the last swine fever epidemic in Europe, which caused shortages

as recently as the 1950s). The cases of hunger that still exist in Europe have chiefly to do with problems some underprivileged social groups have in accessing resources, rather than with the fact that resources are not available.⁷

This *revolution of food satiety* (apart from the new problems of food safety it has brought to the fore) can be perceived as a major symbolic operator, entailing a radical transformation in collective and individual relationships to the world. This transformation also affects other areas that pose some threat to the experience of being — more or less — safe, in particular childbirth (except in rare cases, giving birth is no longer a life-threatening experience in Europe) and (up to a point) health.⁸ Admittedly, the experience of insecurity has shifted to other areas (employment, urban violence, social segregation, the environment, etc.) and general access to this "self-evidence of safety" is still, in the real world, unfairly distributed. But this is precisely because the "self-evidence of safety" (supported, one might say, by the self-evident sufficiency of food resources that is its symbolic centre) has become the norm to the extent that we now become indignant about new experiences of insecurity, or when we see that sense of safety fail.

The experience of satiety, which now typifies our societies, has major symbolic implications. In particular, it is directly linked with the focusing of belief systems that is supported by surveys of Europeans' values. As soon as it is set up as an objective that is accessible in the here and now as a normal condition of individual and collective life (which ought to be the case for everyone), it can be accepted — or at least suggested — that the experience of satiety (not to be confused, obviously, with the personal, subjective experience of satisfying a desire) displays a crucial affinity with the shift of individual and collective aspirations for accomplishment demonstrated by the surveys of values. Less and less associated with the arrival of the Kingdom, or even with the radical or gradual transformation of society, the ideal of accomplishment is increasingly centred on the individual, part of a trend not of dismissing, but of "subjectivizing", utopia, which is perceived as a radical alternative to the experience of the present.

This shift has nothing to do with some "end of history": it is simply caused (obviously only in part, but a nonetheless significant part) by an increasingly clear-cut dislocation between the "fear of shortage" and the aspiration to happiness, which is now labeled "selfrealization", "fulfilling one's potential", personal access to "wisdom", "balance", "inner peace". One might maintain that this "subjectivization of utopia" is one of several aspects of the invasion of the expressive individualism characteristic of all modern democratic societies. It is, however, worth establishing the connection between the general trend of subjectivizing utopia and what has been described here as the collective and individual experience of satiety. The latter, in its direct link with matters of biological survival and, therefore, death, resolves one of the central symbolic themes in all religious traditions, as evidenced particularly in the Jewish and Christian liturgy: the thousand-year association of the end to hunger with the fulfillment of god's promise of a "land of milk and honey".

The second observation involves the spread of democratic culture beyond the political sphere in which democracy, as a way of organizing the exercise of sovereignty, took shape. In this respect, the turning point that came about in Europe in the years 1968–1970 was clearly crucial. The democratic experience, as achieved *par excellence* by the desire of self-determining citizens in public debate to guide the society in which they live, is expanding beyond the confines of public life to infiltrate the exercise of all relationships,

overturning established roles and hierarchies. No institution — school, business, university, or church — is exempt from this transformation of traditional ways of exercising authority, representations of obligation, and a more or less "naturally ordained" distribution of roles and tasks.

This democratic revision of "natural" roles and forms of authority obviously has the greatest impact within the family. In Europe, the trend suggests that the "relational family", an association of individuals on an increasingly contractual basis, is inevitably gaining ascendancy over the "traditional family", in which roles are supposed to reflect the "natural" destiny of its members. The question of homoparental families is the latest, and most controversial, stage in this grass-roots revolution in conjugal and family relationships, directly — and revealingly — reflected by the reforms in family law undertaken in a number of European countries.

I wish to focus on just one aspect of these changes here: their connection with the undermining of the religious justification for authority (specifically, male or paternal authority) defined as godgiven. This undermining of authority which has already begun in the political arena is finding further application in contemporary challenges to the assignment of men, women, and children to predetermined roles in society, or in the family justified by a "natural order" which refers back explicitly or implicitly to the "will of god", a "will" which is, by definition, intangible and surpasses our understanding.

The very different ways in which European societies and religious institutions have adjusted to the new forms of marriage and parenthood — between the openness (despite some counter-reactions) that characterizes societies in the Protestant sphere of influence and the defensive fall-back position more typically adopted by societies in Catholic-influenced countries — help revive the divisions between civilizational values that have been broadly shaped by religious history. Such disparities are being eliminated, however, with the onset of a cultural and social revolution that is ultimately destroying the very foundation of these civilizational constructs.

In more global terms, it is suggested that the current rocking of the cultural foundation is closely connected with the changes in Europeans' attitude to nature. Indeed, these changes have a direct influence on the dynamics of collective production of what Charles Taylor labels "strong evaluations".⁹ Social cohesion is effectively determined by the choices a particular group is led to make between options it agrees to regard as superior or inferior, better or worse, desirable or undesirable, etc.

Such evaluations involve not only contending frames of mind, interests and aspirations within the group, but also the references, norms, memories, aspirations, etc. that make sense within the group. One might hypothesize that, to a great extent, the connection that has arisen in the long term between this social dynamic of the production of strong evaluations within European societies and their specific religious civilizational matrix was based on a particular way of viewing the *natural order*. The problem of the natural order was itself rooted in a religious worldview (clearly differentiated according to whether a Catholic or a Protestant society is involved) that survived the advance of secularization in various forms (including in legal form).

Now, because of prodigious advances in science and technology, the basic human experiences most directly involved in the production of "strong evaluations" — sustenance, reproduction, health care, communication, the

distinction between the living and dead, etc. — have been overturned by the discovery of the human capacity to alter processes previously thought to be immutable: with medically–assisted procreation dissolving the connection between marriage and filiation, the development of genome science and the practical control of the living organism turning farming conditions and therapeutics upside down, and the expansion of the cognitive sciences with all its implications for the field of information and our relationship to time and space, etc.

There is no need for a long list: what entire civilizations have for thousands of years considered to be imperatives inevitably imposed upon humans by the dictates of the natural world, shaped symbolically by different religious systems, are now increasingly perceived as a set of mechanisms that can be manipulated, broken down, reorganized, and modified. Nature has ceased to be an order, in either sense of the word: nature is perceived less and less as a world governed by immutable, eternal principles and is consequently less and less able to impose its rules on humans.

All European societies are today faced with a radical revision of their attitude toward nature as the order of things that used to structure their symbolic worldviews (i.e. the shared mechanisms of meaning which lay at their centre). The foundations of the religious civilizations incorporating this view of nature have been definitively shaken by the accompanying reassessment. The topical debates on bioethics in all European countries and in Europe as a whole are a perfect illustration of this. We are calling upon the symbolic resources of the different religious traditions to deal with ethical problems raised by the scientific control of nature the like of which have never been encountered before. At the same time, we are discovering the extraordinary weakness of these resources in terms of delivering standards, as well as the contradictions they entail. This process brings to light the eminently political nature of the generation of standards in ultramodern societies, and this discovery is seriously undermining the cultural plausibility of the codes of meaning that religions claim they still offer.

From the elimination of religion from culture to new ways of exploiting "Europe's religious heritage"

It may seem paradoxical, even provocative, to emphasize the ongoing process of the elimination of religion from European culture, as I have just done, given the prospect of a process which will instead amplify the wealth and the unifying power of Europe's "religious heritage". I do not seek to disparage the symbolic and ethical potential of this heritage. Indeed I have endeavoured to emphasize the importance of the religious civilizational matrix — both unified and diverse — in which European societies are rooted. Nonetheless, I think it worth examining — in the precise light of the cultural development that I have just described — the significance of referring to the European religious bedrock in terms of heritage.

My first remark concerns the reference to memory that forms part of this reference to religious heritage. As we know, the question of memory is raised obsessively, most specifically in societies in which there is a risk of loss of memory because of the rapid rate of change. Traditional societies, which rely on memory, do not feel the need to talk about collective memory all the time. It is a given which makes its organizational power felt in all aspects of social life and is not an "issue".

On the other hand, modern societies, which have change as their motor and their imperative, are much more anxious about keeping the flickering "flame of memory" alive. The predilection for commemoration is a modern and even an ultramodern one. Concern for heritage, and religious heritage, is in keeping with that attitude. Religion can be considered "heritage" only because it is kept distinct from and operates separately from the places where the rules of collective life are primarily decided. The classification of religion as heritage is supported inexorably by the erosion of the organizational power of religion in social life.

For Europe, an act of commemoration — i.e. classifying religion as heritage — is, at the same time, a way of negotiating its attitude to its own history. This is my second comment. What does Europe's religious history first and foremost consist of? For the most part, of wars — often bloody wars — setting groups and entire nations against each other. Indeed, the question of how to ensure religious peace is the main issue that gave rise to the founding of the State in Europe. The reference to religious history as heritage currently at issue is a way of assuaging the dark memory of the religious wars in Europe in favour of the convergent contribution of different religions to the creation of the (intellectual and artistic) values and works which now form a bond between Europeans.

Treating Europe's religious treasure as heritage is also a way of cleansing religion of its connections with the political conflicts and phenomena of social domination and violence with which it was associated, of retaining and conserving only the "pure" civilizing power it is supposed to have exerted throughout history. We should not resent or decry this application of selective memory. Quite the opposite, it contributes crucially to the production of norms and values that we use to govern our collective lives. Referring to Europe's religious (or spiritual) heritage is not, in that sense, an act of conservation in a museum but rather an activity of symbolic production that contributes to the emergence of a shared worldview. From this point of view, there is nothing anecdotal about the debate on the nature of the reference to religious heritage in the texts governing the European Union. For, while it propounds irreconcilable local views, it also illuminates the collective cultural choices currently being made.

The third comment is that, precisely because of its nature as an active producer of shared norms, reference to Europe's religious heritage also entails a twofold risk. The first risk is that such a reference may itself become the focus of strategies undertaken by the major churches to regain the public prominence they are tending to lose. The search for the prospect of shared meaning, sustained in part by reference to the religious heritage which Europeans theoretically share, may seem, in the eyes of religious institutions, to be an opportunity to put themselves forward as the special keepers, hence the most legitimate administrators, of that heritage.

In a study of Pope John Paul II's speeches during his visit to the European institutions in 1992, Jean-Paul Willaime asked the question in explicit terms, as follows: "If, by civil religion, we mean the system of beliefs and rites by means of which a social area ritualizes its collective existence and maintains collective reverence for the values which lie at the foundation of its order, one might wonder whether the Pope's visit to the European institutions is not part of a process of developing a civil religion for Europe, a process in which the Catholic Church would put itself forward as the favoured guardian of the European soul."¹⁰ This is an important question that is worth considering if we

wish the reference to a shared religious inheritance to be able to operate, not as a way of placing rivalry between religious persuasions and ideological conflict back on the agenda, but as an integrating reference which may be shared by all Europeans, believers and non-believers, whether or not they adhere to a particular religious persuasion.

The second risk, probably more alarming, is that this reference to Europe's religious heritage, while one hopes that it may have an integrating effect within the Community, may be seen outside it as a way of setting boundaries. The heritage covered by the reference is a Jewish and, above all, Christian heritage, in its two variants, Protestant and Catholic. As such, it denotes a clearly demarcated area, bordered to the east by the domain of Orthodox Christianity and to the south by that of Islam. The discussions surrounding Turkey's entry into the European Union clearly show — quite apart from the major issue of human rights — the cultural, legal, and symbolic issues raised by opening the European house to admit an Islamic country, however declaredly secular that country may be. Nor is the fact that there are no Orthodox countries among the signatories to the Treaty of Athens without significance.

The public debate to which the definition of the cultural, political, ethical, and symbolic heritage denoted by "Europe's religious heritage" belongs itself represents an active aspect of the ongoing construction of social cohesion in Europe. It is, first of all, a place where the very frontiers of the shared European area are defined. Secondly, it is the privileged place for negotiating — based on the work of producing a shared memory — the reconciliation between establishing a common spirit and acknowledging the unique features that nourish this common spirit. Lastly, it is one of the potential testing grounds for the production of "strong evaluations" with respect to the completely new cultural situations currently facing Europe.

In this final area, Europe partakes of the questions that are raised in all ultramodern societies. It also shares the risk that the extent of the social implications of this turning point, and indeed the psychological implications for the individual, may give rise, as it already has in the United States, to a severe backlash on the part of institutions and religious authorities. Such bodies may make every effort to defend their social and economic influence, and even to regain their lost political influence, by relying on the reactionary forces generated by the widespread insecurity (the loss of all absolute references) caused by this change.

We have sufficiently clear evidence to believe that this is not a mere hypothesis. The possibility that extremely bitter cultural (and hence social and political) conflicts may come into being in this context is not just a theory. The possibility of the emergence in Europe of a "culture war", like the one in the United States whose violence is described by the sociologist James D. Hunter (in a somewhat one-sided but relevant manner), cannot be dismissed out of hand.¹¹ At the very least, this situation encourages the *republicanization* of religious identities (which secularization was supposed to have pushed back into the private domain). While this feature is part of the general trend of all modern democratic societies to promote individual rights (of a person or group) to publicly assert the uniqueness of identity,¹² it takes on special significance in the religious domain. There, it heightens the tension between the propensity toward the tolerant individualization of belief and the ambition of asserting the right to differ within the public forum as to the "truth" the community claims to possess.¹³

In this context, reference to Europe's religious heritage becomes meaningful. If Europe's religious foundation is weakened, this does not mean that the Judeo-Christian bedrock into which the foundation is sunk is being definitively dismissed. For that would mean forgetting that both the concept and experience of autonomy and the concept and experience of human dominion over nature — both implicated in weakening the religious foundation — are themselves derived (at least in part) from that same Judeo-Christian tradition.

Thus, the very experience of the weakening of the foundations of religion becomes the starting point for the reconsideration of European religious heritage with reference to two specific aspects: firstly, the possibility of redefining autonomy on the basis of Judeo-Christian concepts of otherness and mutual relations, rather than as merely the liberal affirmation of an individual's autonomy in his or her private life; secondly, the issue of dominion over nature, which might be considered, in the light of the Judeo-Christian concepts of the Creation, as something other than raw material and a source of revenue. In my opinion, the question of the "European soul" is best addressed by considering these two aspects, not by referring nostalgically to a religious past that is both glorious and painful but which has, in any case, definitively ceased to exist.

¹ Cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999 (Poche Champs, 2001); and D. Hervieu-Léger, *La religion en miettes ou la question des sectes*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2001.

² Cf. G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, London, Blackwell, 1994; and G. Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, London, Darton, Longman, Todd, 2002.

³ Cf. M. Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

⁴ Cf. the analysis given by P. Bouretz, "La démocratie française au risque du monde", in M. Sadoun (ed.), *La démocratie en France, T1: Idéologies*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, pp. 27–137.

⁵ Cf. F. Dubet, *Le déclin de l'institution*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.

⁶ Regarding this change, cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme. La fin d'un monde*, Paris, Bayard, 2003.

⁷ Cf. B. Hervieu et J. Viard, *L'Archipel paysan*, Paris, Editions de l'Aube, 2000.

⁸ Despite the considerable shake-up caused by the AIDS epidemic, the eradication of a number of major diseases and progress in disease prevention have given substance in Europe to the problem of "entitlement to health", which is borne out (confirmed by negative examples, i.e. access problems) by the existence of social, economic, and cultural inequalities in access to healthcare.

⁹ C. Taylor, *Le malaise dans la modernité*, Paris, Cerf, 1999. (Bellarmin, 1992).

¹⁰ J. P. Willaime (ed.), *Strasbourg, Jean-Paul II et l'Europe*, Paris, cerf, 1991; and J. P. Willaime, "Les religions et l'unification européenne", in G. Davie et D. Hervieu-Léger (eds.), *Identités religieuses en Europe*, Paris, La Découverte, 1996.

¹¹ James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America*, New York, Basic Books, 1991.

¹² On this "democracy of identities", cf. M. Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie*, op. cit.; and D. Schnapper, *La démocratie providentielle*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002.

¹³ On the specific tension in the contemporary religious arena between soft or mutual forms of validation of belief and hard forms of community validation of belief, cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti*, op. cit.

Published 2006–08–17

Original in French

Contribution by Transit

First published in Krzysztof Michalski (ed.), *Conditions of European Solidarity*, vol. II: *Religion in the New Europe*, Central European University Press 2006.

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