The Role of Religions in the Public Square: Elements of a Transformation Process

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I. *Describing the Global Context: Globalization – Pluralism – De-secularization*

Since the beginning of the 1980s, profound global transformation processes have been taking place which are changing all areas of life. These have particularly far-reaching consequences with regard to politics and civil society, which has come to play a decisive role in practically all countries worldwide. Moreover, in both politics and the social realm religions have become a major mobilizing force, as will be shown in what follows. First, however, I would like to take a closer look at the nature of these changes through the prism of three concepts: globalization, pluralization, and last but not least de-secularization.

***Globalization**:* The technologically-induced and economically and culturally significant process of globalization has created new global realities during the past quarter of a century. The changes effected may vary in scope in different places, but even in the remotest corner of the globe people are in contact with other regions, have travelled or at least know someone who has, have relatives and friends who have immigrated or wish to do so, and are connected with the rest of the world through radio, TV and the Internet. This ease of access to information about other regions of the world is a completely new phenomenon. And it is not only the privileged small groups of the educated who can download all kinds of news and knowledge about any place in a second, but practically everybody, for example by going to an internet café; in this way they learn about ways of life in other parts of the globe. The long-term consequences of this information revolution, which is at the heart of the globalization process, are not yet clear. But it is beyond doubt that they are, and will be, profound. This holds true not only with respect to science, technology and the economy, but also to culture as a whole.

The way people think and what they believe or do not believe in is shaped by the information available through the new technologies. Through them humans everywhere on the globe try to grasp and interpret the new realities of the world, thereby reshaping the knowledge and traditions they inherited. Although this creates new and enriching opportunities, it also destroys age-old certainties. In other words, globalization is not only a technological and economic phenomenon: it is perhaps, first

and foremost, a cultural one that has engaged the world in a huge process of reshaping traditional religious and cultural beliefs and practices. One may welcome or regret this – or probably find it both good and bad, depending on the subject in question. Since culture and morals are a core element of human and social identities everywhere, this cultural transformation is more far-reaching than the economic and technological changes. It is not surprising, therefore, that it creates hopes as well as fears worldwide – fears over the erosion of historically-rooted mores and identities, and hopes for the liberation from age-old bonds and patterns of discrimination. It consequently leads to polarizations in all societies. The German political scientist, Dieter Senghaas, has called this a "a clash within civilizations" – an analysis which is much closer to the global social realities than the hypothesis of a "clash of civilizations" of Samuel Huntington, which has been discussed intensively since it first appeared in 1993.[1]

Incidentally, the same diagnosis can already be found in one of the main documents of the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council, namely the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (1965). The document states:

> A change in attitudes and in human structures frequently calls accepted values into question... [since] the institutions, laws and modes of thinking and feeling as handed down from previous generations are not always well adapted to the contemporary state of affairs… Progress thus leads to tensions at the level of the family, between succeeding generations, as well as between races and different peoples (paras. 7/8).

The main element of the debates on values engendered by globalization are social values – and with it, legal and political systems.

Pluralism: One of the primary consequences of globalization is the emergence of global and national pluralism. In all ages, most societies and states have been ethnically, racially and religiously mixed. The relative homogeneity of early tribal cultures was replaced in more developed ones by the coexistence of adherents of different religions, races and peoples. This traditional plurality, however, was regulated by rules which had developed over time and were more or less accepted as long as discrimination was not all too blatant. At present, however, large waves of immigration (which is a result of modern mobility), information technology, as well as the political option for constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, world-view and religion, are creating new forms of pluralism at the local and global levels. This leads to the creation of societies everywhere that are highly mixed religiously and ethnically, particularly in the more affluent regions of the world. In addition to this the exposure to alternative ways of life through the Internet and other mass media enables the individual to choose his or her world-view, lifestyle, modes of behaviour, and religion – according to his or her

[1] Cf. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (Summer 1993), 22-49; ibid., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

preference. This universal freedom of choice continues, of course, to be curbed by the many forms of social control and collective pressure, as well as for the simple reason that many people like to follow the traditions they were raised in. But the very fact that other forms of life can be imagined creates what one may call *radical pluralism.*

The main characteristic of the new type of pluralist society is that there is individual choice in a wide range of areas – as well as a great degree of freedom that accompanies it. Whereas in traditional societies dominant groups decree what the individual has to do and be, this is not the case in modern societies. However, this movement towards freedom of choice – and with it, radical pluralism – also leads to the emergence of counter-movements which emphasize group identities and defend them against the intrusion of what are considered foreign modes of life – if necessary, with extreme social pressure and violence.

Radical pluralism as a social and global megatrend raises important questions: What integrates different faith communities and ethnicities, and enables people to live side by side peacefully and interact in a civilized manner? Which form of government, legal arrangements, and political order are best suited to further this peaceful interaction between different groups in a particular society?

De-secularization: The third trend I would like to examine is de-secularization. Since the early 1980s significant changes have taken place with regard to the *political* role of religions. This process may best be described as de-secularization, since its driving force has been widespread disillusionment with secular ideologies such as communism and nationalism, and last but not least economic and political liberalism.[2]

The first manifestations of de-secularization were the practically simultaneous emergence of the Polish *Solidarność* movement, the Iranian Shiite movement, and the foundation of the Protestant "Moral Majority" in the US (all appeared in 1979/1980). All these movements have shaped politics on a global and regional scale during the past decades, and continue to do so. The solidarity movement in Poland represented the first effective protest against Soviet Communist rule – and with it, Communism as a whole in Eastern Europe. After some backlashes it contributed decisively to the downfall of the wall dividing Europe in 1989, and thus made possible the subsequent political reorganization of Europe in the twenty years thereafter. In a recent public discussion in Vienna's *Burgtheater*, the renowned British historian Timothy Garton Ash[3] noted that these so-called Velvet Revolutions of 1989 against communism initiated an age of non-violent revolutions for democracy and the rule of law worldwide. He considers this to be the most significant political development of our times.

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[2] Cf. Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

[3] His books provide perhaps the most vivid descriptions of the situation in Eastern Europe at the end of the Communist era. See his *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Despatches from Europe in the 1990s* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001); *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

It is indeed a sign of hope that after the fall of Communism (and also before, as the 1986 revolution in the Philippines demonstrates), religious groups – in this case Catholic – played a key role in many countries in fuelling the political movement toward more freedom and liberal democracy.[4] Ash's point of view may, however, seem a bit too optimistic if they are seen as the only trend. There are also other, less peaceful processes of de-secularization, and there are not only religious movements which further freedom, but also those which contribute to the oppression and exclusion of others. There are a variety of social, cultural, and religious reasons that led to the appearance of these so-called fundamentalist movements, such as the lack of social progress, justice, the search for identity in a globalized world, and religious radicalism per se.[5] But there can be no doubt that this menacing trend towards religious radicalism has accelerated in all parts of the globe, particularly after 9/11. At the same time, however, religious movements which do not want to leave the field of religious politics to violent and radical forces are growing. There are an increasing number of groups and individuals in all religions and in practically all countries which promote moderate and peaceful ways, and opt for better understanding at all levels of society. I will come back to this issue of interreligious dialogue at the end of my article.

In any case, whether moderate and non-violent or radical and fundamentalist, religious people and leaders have become important agents of political mobilization all over the world. Religions and their representatives have thus forcefully re-entered the public square during the past decades. It is beyond doubt that this process, which is reshaping our world, can have very different consequences – depending on whether the good or the bad side of religions triumphs in the long run. This imposes a high degree of responsibility on all who hold religious beliefs, particularly those who belong to one of the major world religions, which are the most actively involved in this de-secularization process.

As the examples already cited show, religions can be forces for peace and non-violence that further both the common and individual good. They can, however, also foment violence and the degrading exclusion of others. Dreams of religiously homogeneous societies which are a replica of an imagined past can easily lead to intolerance toward, and social strife with, believers of other faiths.

In the face of pluralism and global communications, new and intensified modes of communication and cultural bridge-building have to be developed and practiced in all corners of the globe. The challenges encountered on the way can be different, depending on the historical circumstances and mindset of the people involved. Nevertheless, it is imperative to discover ways and means of responsibly facing them in our age of globalization, pluralism and de-secularization – and thus find viable answers to the major social questions of the 21st century. This also calls for a new perception of the role of religions in the public square, both on the part of politics and on the part of religious communities themselves. It should be borne in mind that the concrete, historically-rooted relationship between religion and politics strongly varies in different countries and regions of the world, and that it often reflects a delicate balance which must not be upset too hastily despite the fact

[4] Cf. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
[5] Peter L. Berger (ed.), *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2009) (forthcoming).

that the new conditions call for new ways of interaction. In the final analysis, the crucial question is whether religions and politics can play a socially constructive role in pluralistic societies, working together towards peace and understanding as well as bringing people together and not dividing them. Although there are differences among them, religious communities should be a vital and prophetic voice that speaks out against violations of human dignity and human rights committed by political and social agents; and politics should further religious moderation and honour peacefulness.

The Three Ideal-Typical Relationships between Religion and Politics

Despite the historically-conditioned differences between religion on the one hand and politics and the state on the other, differences which make each country a unique case, there are three ideal types – in the Weberian sense[6] – of relationships between politics and political institutions and religious communities.

1. ***The Laicist Option***: This option attempts to exclude religions and their voice as much as possible from the public square and regards religion as a private matter. This political choice is the outcome of a form of secularism that views religions as irrational forces which are prone to furthering divisions, civil strife and ultimately violence, and which must therefore be kept out of the public sphere. This fear that religions may destroy rather than foster social harmony is partly ideological. It focuses on the negative side of religions, disregarding their positive contribution to public life. At the same time the negative record of non-religious beliefs is overlooked. Nevertheless, this fear does have a basis in real historical experience: religions and their leaders have all too often justified violence against dissidents of their own faith as well as other faiths, and have been potent forces for discrimination.

This laicist model has its origins in France, where it is, however, no longer strictly applied, although present conflicts in French society have revealed its milder after-effects (the headscarf debate etc.). Laicism has found more or less radical successors in Communist regimes, some of which are still alive and well, for example in China and in a rather different form in North Korea. There have also been less violent forms of secular nationalism (e.g. in Turkey, the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, and Syria). But if the hypothesis of de-secularization described above is true, it means that laicism is retreating everywhere, particularly in those countries where religion is a fundamental part of the people's culture. This general trend will in all likelihood become stronger. Thus, under the present global conditions the laicist option, which aims to ban religions from the public square, is not a viable political model for the future. This holds true apart from the fact that it does not do justice to religions – which is the primary reason why it should be rejected.

2. ***The Theocratic Option***: The second option is the exact opposite of the laicist one. It aims at establishing or maintaining a regime which is based on, and legitimated by, a particular religion. This

[6] According to Max Weber, an ideal type is an abstract sociological model and not an ideal in the normative sense. In this case it describes basic options which are, however, never to be found in a pure form in reality.

form of religiously-founded government is often called theocracy. This term, however, is inexact since God never rules Himself: it is rather a group of men who rule in His name, be it clergymen, monks or laypeople who consider themselves to be legitimated by God and His law. This already shows where the problem lies. If the exalted status of religious law and religious faith is used to legitimate politics, and if the difference between God in His transcendence and man in his contingency and fallibility is ignored, one necessarily ends up with a religious ideology, i. e. a man-made political system claiming absolute truth.

The political problem with this claim is not only that it is necessarily false, but that it is doomed to become totalitarian under the conditions of globalization and pluralism. Any regime that attempts to exclude other opinions must apply more and more pressure against its citizens in order to sustain its claim to absolute truth and ensure religious homogeneity. In this respect it mirrors the laicist or secularist option: all who do not profess a particular religious faith must be excluded from the public square, and only the most orthodox supporters of the regime are allowed to speak out. The human and religious costs of this type of "theocracy" are immense, and its political success highly uncertain. It is undermined by global communications and the will to live in freedom, choose one's belief, and freely express one's opinions publicly. Upholding a state religion and the rule of religious law in all areas of life today requires state oppression in the name of religion, which not only harms people but also the substance of the faith it pretends to promote. Moreover, it deprives itself of the benefits of political freedom, which – among other good things – fosters creative solutions to social problems that cannot be found or put into practice in a state of oppression and fear.

3. *The Pluralist Option*: The third option is a regime which grants the same rights to all religions and their adherents and actively supports them, engaging them at the level of civil society. Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are desirable for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is perhaps the fact that they guarantee fairness towards all religious communities as long as they do not oppose peaceful coexistence. If the law of a particular religion becomes the foundation of the state, it necessarily discriminates against those who do not belong to this particular creed. Just as laicism discriminates against all faiths and their adherents, and negates their positive potential for the public square, so do politics based on a particular religion discriminate against those of other beliefs. Ensuring non-discrimination for all therefore requires a non-religious, i. e. secular, state. This political form of secularity, however, should not be confused with secularism or political laicism, which excludes religion from the public sphere. The pluralist state is secular in that it avoids discrimination with regard to creed, colour, ethnicity and sex. It does not, however, exclude religions from the public square, but encourages them to engage in it in a civilized way, in a manner which does not contradict the public good. This is why it is the only political option that can guarantee peace in pluralistic societies. Moreover, the involvement of religious actors at the level of civil society allows them to make their legitimate and indeed necessary contribution to the state as a whole. It gives religious

leaders, thinkers, and the faithful in general the chance to be heard and a stake in the state order. It also helps them to realize that non-discrimination is preferable to the power monopoly of one religion, that human rights for all and the rule of law are also in the interest of religions, and – most importantly – that they do not conflict with their profound tenets of faith.

In the Roman Catholic Church, theological arguments for religious liberty and the non-discriminating pluralist state based on secular law were made officially binding in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae* in 1965. It is based on the traditional belief that the acceptance of faith is a personal act and has to be voluntary. Interference by the state in matters of religion, be it at the individual or community level, can therefore be justified only if they conflict with the common good. Of course, while there may be some dispute over what exactly contradicts the good of society as whole, differences in religious practice are certainly not one of them. Additionally, *Dignitatis humanae* calls for the state to actively involve faith communities in politics and to support them legally and financially to achieve this aim. This support will take different forms in various countries, depending on their historical and cultural background.

The pluralist option serves today as a guideline for political thought and action, as well as the basis of modern constitutions. In his book *La Revanche de Dieu*, Gilles Kepel, a renowned French sociologist, called this acceptance of religious freedom an homage to the secularist spirit of the age. I think it is not. Its foundation rather lies in the tolerant and humane spirit of Christianity, which places the worth and dignity of the human being, his well-being, and freedom above the claims of the state and state religion, since the individual is anterior to, and higher than, the state and its institutions.

The question of freedom of religion has also become a central topic at the international level. The present international order based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is secular, and should remain so for the reasons described above. However, it should also give a voice – and with it, a greater stake – to faith communities, which could also be included in the work of international institutions. First efforts in this direction have been made by the European Union. Its new constitution, which has been renamed the "reform treaty" and will hopefully become effective in autumn 2009, calls for an ongoing and institutionalized dialogue with religious and non-religious faith communities.[7] This could serve as a model for international global governance to bridge the existing gap between religion and politics in the international public square. To give but one example of this gap: Next week a conference on "Religion and Development" will be held here in Vienna. From my research in this field I know that until now development efforts and institutions have hardly taken into account the efforts made in this area by religious institutions, which are quite remarkable.[8]

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[7] Cf. Michael H. Weninger, "Menschenrechte in der EU – Grundlage einer Wertegemeinschaft?", in: Ingeborg Gabriel (ed.), *Politik und Theologie in Europa: Perspektiven ökumenischer Sozialethik* (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2008), 134

[8] This exclusion (or negative view) of the religious dimension is demonstrated in an exemplary way in the otherwise excellent best-seller on development by Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: How We Can Make it Happen in our Lifetime* (London: Penguin, 2005), which contains only half a page on religion and tradition as obstacles to development.

By its very existence as a Roman Catholic document, *Dignitatis humanae*[9] demonstrates that a definition of the relationship between religion and politics is required not only by political, but also by religious actors. In this connection religious leaders, theologians, and ethicists coming from a particular religion carry a high degree of responsibility for the peaceful interaction between religious communities and the state.

It should be mentioned at this point that religions have their own stance on politics, based on the contents of their faith and traditions. Religious faith always and everywhere differs from politics in that its aim and ultimate concern is the relationship with God, whereas the aim of politics is the common good. Religions differ from each other in the extent to which they demand political involvement from their believers, and each one has a particular view of human life and accords different weight to the creation and sustainment of a just society. The German sociologist Max Weber distinguishes between two ideal types of religious belief systems: the innerworldly and the otherworldly. This distinction provides a basic orientation for categorization. Whether justice is seen as a fundamental requirement of faith depends on the basic view of the human person and his or her worth as an individual. An affirmative answer to this question is shared by the monotheistic religions, which have stronger bonds with the political world than the Asian religions, which Weber describes as otherworldly.[10] All religions, however, remain fundamentally different from politics. When this difference is denied they become political ideologies, in which case religion is exploited by power and subjugated to its aims.

Religious communities have basically three options for defining their relationship toward politics, the state, and its institutions:

1. Strict obedience to the existing state order, whatever it may be. This is the position of otherworldly religions, which place little importance on politics and emphasize personal salvation. There have also been trends within Christianity which were based on a particular reading of one of St. Paul's epistles (Romans 13). However, all religions clearly state that one must not act against the will of God and His commandment to obey the state. As is written in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

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[9] For more recent discussions on the declaration see Kenneth L. Grasso and Robert P. Hunt (eds.), *Catholicism and Religious Freedom: Contemporary Reflections on Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Liberty* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Hermino Rico, *John Paul II and the Legacy of Dignitatis Humanae* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002); F. Russell Hittinger, "The Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*", in: Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (eds.), *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 359-382.

[10] Cf. Max Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*, in: ibid.,*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* I-III (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr Verlag, 1988). The English translation of this work was published in three separate books: *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (New York: The Free Press, 1951); *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1958); *Ancient Judaism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1952).

2. A “theocratic option”, which is fundamentalist, integralist and anti-pluralistic. Its aim is to establish and maintain a state religion that enjoys a religious monopoly. Those belonging to other creeds are discriminated against by law since the ideal is a religiously homogeneous state. As mentioned earlier, in a world like ours this can be achieved only by incurring high human and religious costs; moreover, in the end the political pressure needed to achieve this aim also discredits religion and seriously harms its substance. Who, after all, wants to believe in a God who stands for and legitimates inhuman practices and laws?

At this point a few words on religiously motivated violence should be added. I do not think that religions are more prone to furthering violence than other forms of social organization. Violence has indeed been a frightful reality throughout all of human history – with or without religion. It is probably the characteristic of human existence which remains the most difficult to explain. Violence has been motivated by both secular and religious ideologies, and during the past century the former have done much more harm than religions ever have. Still, this is only a feeble consolation, and should not lead to self-righteousness since religiously motivated violence is currently on the rise.

The underlying question remains the same: Why, after all, do humans kill, torture, and debase each other? All religions try – I emphasize, try – to explain why man is a wolf to man and not a brother and sister, and they make the utmost effort to overcome this deplorable state of affairs. The question is that of the means employed: Can violence be allowed for a good aim? Although its use can sometimes not be excluded, there must be strict criteria for judging when it may be used and which goods may be defended. Otherwise it can, and indeed does, become a weapon in the hands of those furthering aims which are neither realistic nor humane, and therefore cannot reflect the will of a merciful God.

3. The third option is that of a pluralistic and politically secular state order. This form of constitutional government is a fairly new invention created by Enlightenment philosophy about two hundred years ago. Human rights and democracy cannot be found in the sacred scriptures, history or tradition. However, this should not make a pact between religions and such a state order impossible. The rule of law has always been a central concern in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, and the equality of all human beings and the freedom of religious choice are some of its main postulates (at least in theory). Force should not be applied in religious matters. Thus, the main elements and ingredients for a political order which guarantees the same treatment for all irrespective of their religious affiliation, their nationality, or sex has always existed. The international triumph of these ideas has, however, taken place under non-religious auspices. Because of this, one may ask: have religions not taken seriously enough their own message on the equality of all men and freedom of religion?

After a protracted reflection process, the Roman Catholic Church accepted human rights and religious freedom because it is the person who believes in God and holds a particular faith, and not society as a whole. It is he or she who is responsible to God, and not the state.

The aim of freedom of religion is peaceful coexistence. On this basis democratic and non-violent cooperation becomes possible, and truth claims can and must be upheld without violent enforcement by state authorities. This pluralistic option does not exclude, but indeed requires, the active cooperation of religious communities not only amongst themselves, but also with secular society and the political order. This cooperation should be based on fairness and the recognition of the equal dignity and rights of others.

It is in this context that interreligious dialogue acquires a hitherto unknown importance. Dialogue presupposes that other believers also have something valuable to contribute, that is, that they also have elements of truth in their teachings which may positively influence society, contribute to argumentation in the public square, and help people discover truly humane solutions for the problems of today's world.[11] In globalized and pluralistic societies people of different faiths live side by side, and thus have to get to know each other. This dialogue of life can be distinguished from two other forms of interreligious dialogue: the dialogue of theology and spirituality and the interreligious dialogue on ethics and politics.[12] As the foregoing analysis shows, it is particularly the last of these that is needed in order to help us find common ground in values and laws, and map out the terrain for further cooperation through peaceful discussion in the public square.

[11] In the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* (1965), the Roman Catholic Church recognized the value of other religions in that they contain elements of truth.

[12] Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Like Rosewater: Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (forthcoming).