# RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE
# A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION ON RELIGION,
# FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY[†]

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**Abstract**

We live in a complex, pluralist and dynamic world and we are constantly challenged to re-examine and redefine the fundamental elements of our existence: identity, culture, religion, Christianity, nation, freedom, democracy, etc. In such a context, the question of religion in the public square in general and the issue of religious freedom in particular becomes increasingly important. Indeed, religious freedom is one of the most fundamental rights of every person in a pluralist society, and we should be continuously engaged in promoting and enhancing it.

*Keywords:* pluralism, history, religious freedom, democracy, public square

## 1. Introduction

A forum on 'Religious Freedom' in the contemporary historical, social, political, and religious context is both a *privilege* and a *responsibility* of a new Europe we all want to build. A new Europe in which each culture can and must preserve its specificity and beauty, in which the differences represent opportunities for joyful celebration, in which the spirituality of each nation or ethnic group contribute to an enrichment of all with another dimension of reality. The beautiful and memorable quote from the great Catholic scholar Hans Kung is very relevant for our topic of discussion:

"*No peace among the nations*
*without peace among the religions.*
*No peace among religions*
*without dialogue between the religions.*
*No dialogue between the religions*
*without investigation of the foundation of the religions.*"

If we consider the last sentence of this remark, we realize that the basis for an authentic freedom of religion in our societies cannot be based on external

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criteria to religion itself. It is important, of course, that democratic societies guarantee this fundamental aspect of human rights and provide the legal framework within which every human being is free to chose and practice freely and responsibly his/her religion. But ultimately, for an effective practice of such freedom at local levels, it is the resources we find within our own faith and traditions that will best enable us to live a life that will respect and promote such freedom. In what follows I would like to propose an intriguing thesis: the key to a realistic freedom of religion is not less religion but more religion!

To be sure, religious potential is not automatically translatable into the social arena, as we will see, and, similarly, we are very much aware that it is not just any kind of religion or spirituality that enhances a meaningful life together. However, we also know that religion represents 'the sacred canopy' or 'the symbolic universe' within which we live, that is, it helps one integrate the various aspect of life, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of reality and the meaning of life [1-3]. That is why, one's faith, one's God, represent for many religious people, the ultimate reality to which they relate and give total allegiance. When everything is said and done, one's faith/God still remains as the ultimate point of reference for his/her life and conduct. Indeed, no amount of external impositions or legislation will be able to shape fundamentally the worldview of a believer as his/her faith does. This is an essential reason why religious phenomena cannot be ignored from the social fabric of humanity but rather explored and assessed from a variety of perspectives.

It has become evident that in our increasingly secular, pluralist, and postmodern world, in order for Christian communities to have any impact on social arena, they have to offer something radically new and refreshing, a new way of living – they have to embody an authentic living through concrete manifestations of forgiveness and reconciliation, of acceptance and welcome, of hope and love [4]. And this is the argument that I would like to propose in this paper: religious communities can make a significant contribution to the public arena, but in order for that to happen they must identify the necessary resources within their faith and traditions that will best enable them to live authentically with the fellow human beings. They would need to explore and articulate clearly and forcefully those aspects of their faith which teach how to love their neighbours and their enemies, how to relate to, and live together with 'the other' despite the deepest differences.

## 2. Religion and democracy: the return of religion in the public domain

It is a truism to affirm that the moral principles of the Judeo-Christian faith represented a solid basis for the democratic values and the religion has played an important role in the abolition of slavery, in the struggle for civil rights, and in the ethics of work, especially in the Protestant Europe [5, 6]. With the modernist period and with the increasing secularization in the west, religion has been 'sent' to the private sector and so with less and less impact on the public sphere. This tendency could be seen very well in the intense polemic

about the reference to God in the preamble of the European constitution [6, p. 13]. However, the spectacular re-emergence of the religious phenomenon in the social arena in recent decades, the situation has changed significantly. Thus, whether one thinks of the re-emergence or the new visibility of religion model, one thing is clear and beyond any doubt: religion has become a major factor in the social and political arena [7]. In recent decades the role of religion has been seen as particularly influential, as a potential factor for social stability/instability and as the motivation for individual conduct, indeed as an "absolute necessity for democracy" [8]. Empirical studies conducted throughout the world about religion, human rights and democracy have confirmed that religion is a vital dimension of any democracy, as it offers the highest framework of reference and values, and gives content and coherence to the structure of human communities and cultures [9]. John Witte's remarks more than a decade ago are still very relevant: "Religion is an ineradicable condition of human persons and communities. Religion invariably provides universal sources and scales of values by which many persons and communities govern and measure themselves. Religion invariably provides the sources and scales of dignity and responsibility, shame and respect, restitution and reconciliation that democracy and human rights need to survive and to flourish. Religions must thus be seen as indispensable allies in the modern struggle for human rights and democratization. Their faith and works, their symbols and structures, must be adduced to give meaning and measure to the abstract claims of democratic and human-rights norms". [10]

The religious factor cannot thus be ignored or dismissed since it plays a major role in the fabric of human society. I believe Jose Casanova is right to argue that the scepticism regarding the place and role of religion in democracy is not so much a problem with religion per se, or with the undemocratic character of specific religious practices and beliefs. Rather, the problem resides within a secularist assumption in the modern secular democratic societies, namely that democracy must be secular [11]. With such and understanding, the re-emergence of religion in the European public sphere represents a challenge to secularism and to European secular identities. It is therefore urgent that a way has to be found to understand and accommodate sensibly and pragmatically the role and place of religion within democratic processes.

Surely, the basis for the appropriation of the positive potential of religion in our societies cannot be based on criteria extrinsic to religion itself. Ultimately, for an effective and beneficial practice of religion, and in order for its potential to bring about hope, compassion, reconciliation, and social healing, we must find resources within our own religious texts and traditions and explicate them in ways that are relevant to the concrete social and political realities of the communities [12, 13]. If I, as a Christian, look carefully into the Scriptures I find that among its most essential affirmations are these two: first, that every human being is created in God's image and is to be valued, loved and affirmed as the most precious gift of God's creation. As such I should do everything in my power to promote, enhance and rejoice at the encounter with 'the other'. The

second essential assumption of our Scripture is that one of the attributes of the essence of God's being is his love/concern for 'the other' – embodied in Jesus Christ's ultimate sacrifice of self-giving for his enemies.

## 3. Faith, freedom and democracy: the danger and potential of religion in the public sphere

There is a certain anxiety when people consider religion in the public life. And this fear is not necessarily because of religion per se but rather it is a fear of an imposed religious totalitarism. This fear of the imposition of a single religion in the public arena, determines, in turn, a refuge in another extreme, namely that of complete elimination of religion from public life. But, as Miroslav Volf correctly points out, none of these options are not viable or desirable [14]. There is, on the other hand, a real possibility for a positive contribution of faith to public life but for that to happen we need at least two things: to understand well the public dynamic of political pluralism – which means that no religious person should grab all the attention and no religion should be imposed by constrain; similarly, faith should neither be understood as simply 'private', to do only with the intimate life of the soul, nor should it be an aggressive faith. If these two conditions are met, contends Volf, there is a proper place for faith in public life. The purpose of the public engagement of faith is not to impose a single viable alternative for the social arena. On the contrary, the ultimate goal of faith is to contribute to the human flourishing, which is also the essence of Christian faith. But human flourishing could only be attained when a person finds her proper place in the order created by God: a stance which has to be in harmony with the creator, with self, with fellow human beings, with nature. From a Christian perspective to live a good life, means to love God and love your neighbour. The concerns for human flourishing and for the common good belong to the essence of biblical faith and Christian identity. We are very much aware that we live no longer in Christendom when Christianity occupied the central place in the market, but in a context in which Christianity is only one of the players in the public arena. In such a context any form of manipulation and/or constrain must disappear, and all the resources and the wisdom of faith must encourage for a holistic, integrative understanding of faith within the whole of life and must be use toward the common good. This can only be done by an authentic practice of forgiveness and love, by maintaining and developing the greatest respect for the freedom and integrity of every human person.

Thus, for a proper and beneficial contribution of faith to the public life we must acknowledge the great diversity of the present religions and religious views in our contemporary societies and to have a proper understanding of the way in which religion functions in the context of liberal democracies – in which every person is free to live according to her own perception and interpretation of life. It is vital that this freedom is guaranteed for everyone. Again, from a Christian perspective one of the greatest commandments from God is to love our neighbours – and this includes respecting his or her religious conscience. There

is no any right we could or should demand for ourselves which we are not ready to grant to our neighbours. To learn to speak and behave properly in the public sphere is key for the integration of faith in public life – and this means to learn to hear, understand, and respect other voices and to allow a cooperation and partnership of all factors and actors involved in public life towards the common good.

## 4. Faith, Church and society: a Pauline argument for Church's engagement with society

A careful reading of the Pauline letters in the New Testament will reveal the fact that, contrary to the common perception, Apostle Paul was very much aware of the social, political, cultural, and religious context in which he lived and that he encouraged a positive interaction with these realities. Anchored in a strong creational theology, with a perception of God's sovereignty over history and with the conviction that the historical reality was irreversibly affected by God's intervention in Christ, Apostle Paul had a positive view of the world and of the structures of society. For Paul and all first century Christians, there was one realm of reality in which body and soul, religion and politics, private and public, individual and social aspects of reality were intermingled in a complex unified vision of life. The gospel Paul proclaimed was not in any way detached from the everyday reality, and that it also had a political message at its heart. Further still, some studies show that the political dimension of the gospel was not secondary or accidental to Paul's writings but rather an integral and fundamental element of it. The gospel of the crucified and resurrected Christ, it is claimed, not only has a few social and political implications, rather it is political at its core.

Even a brief reference to Paul's argument in Romans 13 will suffice here to illustrate that the Christian commitment to love is not limited to individual relationships (within and outside the Christian community), but also includes the believers' lives as responsible citizens in the society at large. While responding to a specific situation in Rome, Paul develops a larger view of the governing authorities in line with his Jewish theology; he presents the order of society under government as God's intention. As such, believers should accept and be willing to live within such structures. Significantly, by presenting the "authorities" as God's instruments and so making them accountable to God, Paul overrides their claim to being the ultimate and highest point of reference and their demand for total and unqualified obedience. It is thus Paul's strong theological basis that both legitimizes and limits the authority of the government at the same time. The Pauline vision of the church and its place in the world starts with the premise that the Church's very existence represents its primary task. As a community of reconciled people, the church demonstrates by its own existence that the rebelliousness of the powers has been conquered, and by its very presence and life it proclaims the lordship of Christ to the powers. That is why it is vital for the church to embody the message she proclaims in her own

life in order to have a significant ministry to the society in general. It is only when the church first deals appropriately with various differences within her own life that she will experience an authentic reconciliation, that she will be able to say anything honest and effective to the larger society [15].

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion we can affirm that it will be only as we will learn to appreciate and affirm within our own religious traditions those aspects of our faith that promote true human life in its totality, that religious freedom will be not simply tolerated but indeed, celebrated. As a representative of a higher education institution which trains religious leaders we take as one of our utmost responsibilities to affirm and promote the fundamental freedom of faith as we attempt to develop a trans-cultural and trans-denominational awareness of the younger generation. In today's pluralistic context, we endeavour to inspire the leaders of tomorrow with such a vision of life that will enable them to do everything in their congregations and in the public square for the common good. To make a contribution for the public life, faith communities need to uncover and nurture a religiosity that will be beneficial for and conducive to human flourishing.

We can also conclude that religious communities can make a contribution to the social reality in their context: they can offer and maintain a sense of fundamental values for human life in the world; they can discern, unmask and resist any form of totalitarianism and absolutism; they can offer a framework of hope and a vision of life that will enable people not simply to cope with 'otherness' and 'difference' but also to promote a culture of peace and justice, of freedom and love, a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation, i.e. a culture of life.

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