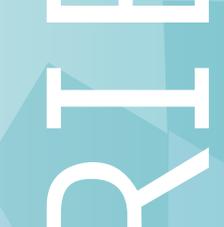
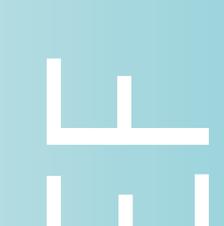
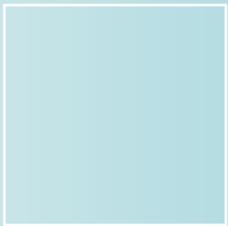




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STUDIES

Issue 2016/05
December 2016



Middle
East
Directions

Secularism anno 2016 – the place of religion in Europe today. The need for more open societies

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The contemporary debate on Islam both hides and reveals a deeper debate on the meaning of religion in a secular Europe. In fact, the more or less conflictual relationship with Islam compels Europeans to make explicit what “European values” they “oppose” to Islam. And herein begins the problem: are these Western values secular or Christian first?

There would be little problem if the secular values were merely a result of the secularization of religious norms, or were at least congruent with them. But this is no longer the case: the deep conflict that is dividing Europe between a secular majority and hardcore religious faith communities on abortion, same-sex marriage, bio-ethics, or gender issues shows that there is no longer a common moral ground for values. And even in the USA, where a majority of the population still claims to be religious, the ‘culture war’ ended, after the approval of same-sex marriage by the Supreme Court, representing a victory for new values that hard-core believers see as incompatible with their religious norms.

Of course, one could show that the Western conception of human rights derives from a Christian matrix. One can also stress that both the Catholic Church (through Thomas Aquinas’ concept of “natural law”)

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and the Kantian agnostic tradition did consider that moral values could be universal and could stand by themselves without depending upon faith or theology. However, as we saw, this continuity between Christianity and modern secularism is no longer based upon common values. The continuity, if such a thing may be said to exist, is now commonly expressed in terms of “identity”. However, the question remains as to how we should conceive of an “identity”, and specifically a “Christian identity”, based upon shared values, if not on a common faith? The reference to “Christian identity” instead of “Christianity” represents a means of “secularizing” Christianity, thereby excluding from the common values any specific religious value, norm or practice that could be seen as not being congruent with these dominant secular values (for instance differences in status between men and women, “pro-life” versus “pro-choice”, gay rights et cetera). However, the consequence is that any religious values or norms perceived as not being congruent with what we call European values, in a word anything that could be seen as purely religious, should be excluded from the public sphere. This trend represents a striking departure from the historically constructed mix of compromise and consensus that has shaped the relations between state, society and religion in Western countries since the end of the wars of religions. New tensions are thus rising that go far beyond the case of Islam. And because Europe cannot just revert to a previous stage where religion (in this case Christianity) was intimately linked with culture, it must rethink the place of religion in the public sphere and the definition of religious freedom, by accepting that a state of rights is not necessarily based upon a consensus on values.

The paradox of freedom of religion:

- Freedom of religion is both defined as a Human right and is perceived as a threat to Human rights (women’s rights, child’s right –in the case of circumcision for instance-, not to speak of “animal’s rights” –ritual slaughtering). The problem is that freedom of religion is not just freedom of opinion, it is the freedom to have a religious practice, and this practice cannot just be reduced to the private sphere.
- Religious norms are not, or no more, “cultural” norms: circumcision as a cultural practice is negotiable, but as a religious norm it is not. The problem today is

that, due to secularization (for Christians) and deculturation (for second and third generation immigrants), religious norms are no more embedded in a shared culture and appear thus either as “weird” or as “fanatical”. For faith communities nevertheless there are non-negotiable elements (abortion for the Catholic Church). Either the faith communities tend to pressure the state to implement a “secularized” form of religious norms (banning abortion in the name of “Life” instead of “God’s law”, as well as banning same sex marriage, by defining civil wedding as a shadow of the Christian sacrament of marriage), or they tend to ask for some sort of consciousness exemption. In both cases, it creates tensions.

- Conflicts of rights are dealt with by courts in the framework of the existing laws, and under the final supervision of the EC of HR. There is no one “fit for all” solution. It depends also of the national traditions of relations between state and religion.
- But in any case, in order to deal with tensions associated with religious practices, we should disentangle the relationship between rights and values. Rights are defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they are individual, protected by law, regulated by courts and do not entail specific values. Values are linked to personal choices or religious family traditions. Freedom of Religion should not be connected with the “correctness” of religious dogma. Faith communities may apply to themselves norms that don’t make sense for non-believers (*halal*, *kasher*, male circumcision) as long as they do not contradict the rights of others, outside the religious sphere, or do not veer into criminal practices (female circumcision).
- European societies should accept their own diversity.

(This text is a brief summary of the conclusions of the ReligioWest project, under the supervision of Olivier Roy, funded by an ERC grant).

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Middle East Directions

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