

THE RESEMANTICISATION OF DEMOCRACY SO THAT IT MAY BE AT THE SERVICE OF THE INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORLD'S PEOPLE

Commentary on the speech given by Benedict XVI at Westminster Hall London (Friday 17 September 2010)

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1. Democracy falls prey to ethical relativism and aggressive laicism

According to Benedict XVI, democracy can be at the service of the integral development of human beings when it is driven by a positive “secular ethic”. This ethic is not immanentist and nor is it neutral. It is grounded on the ability of each person to search for the truth, for the good and for God, and therefore it is based on an ethic that is open to the transcendent.

The pontiff praised the British tradition of democratic institutions which have served as models for the participatory forms of government that exist around the world. He pointed out that its so-called “rules of procedure” in particular can be found in the Social Doctrine of the Church (=SDC). However, he did not fail to point out that modern democracy does not seem capable of addressing certain basic issues like the placing of limits on the exercise of political authority and crucial moral dilemmas.

In particular, with regard to the integral development of individuals and peoples, Benedict XVI maintains that it is increasingly obvious today that a democracy that bases its decisional processes solely on social consensus and not on solid moral principles, finds itself without instruments of a critical, interpretative and decisive kind that are needed in order to deal with the huge ethical challenges of today. These include the challenges presented by the financial crisis, the sharing of material and non-material resources, the new inequalities caused by ungoverned globalisation, and furthermore – as mentioned in his latest address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See –, subtle yet dangerous forms of laicism and the moral subjugation of people’s consciences, as seen in the requirement for “obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education which allegedly convey a neutral conception of the person and of life, yet in fact reflect an anthropology opposed to faith and to right reason”.¹

How can we emerge from this now endemic situation of weakness in contemporary democracy which proclaims a way of life in keeping with a neutral *laïcité*, but that is actually

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Address to the members of the diplomatic corps (10 January 2011). Several Italian newspapers misconstrued his words and claimed that the Pope was speaking out against education in human sexuality in schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. The pontiff and the Church are not at all opposed to education in human sexuality, but in fact encourage it. However, they maintain that it is necessary to place it together with education in love and emotions. The Church is critical of education in sexuality that deals only with genitality, because it has been seen from some programmes and teaching materials that they speak of the sexes as if they were something separate from the actual people, free and responsible individuals who are open to the transcendent. In his speech, Benedict XVI expressed his concern at how secularism in the West is contributing to a growing marginalisation of religions, in particular of Christianity. It not only disregards the legitimate role that religion holds in the public sphere, but also the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and faith. He said that “there are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none. And there are those who argue – paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination – that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience”.

opting for partial or distorted values. The intention is to impose it on everyone, thus displaying the face of a new “dictatorship”, one of ethical relativism.

The pontiff recommends an “emergency exit”, noting the great civil achievements of the British Parliament, such as, the abolition of the slave trade. These were made possible when the legislation was built upon firm principles grounded on the natural moral law. In other words, democracy is subordinated to integral human development when the political authority has an ethical rather than a conventional base; that is, it has “objective norms” that allow it to be upright and principled.

However, at this point another question arises. What would allow for the recovery of a value platform rather than a consensual platform? It would not be based only on sociological data, or on “overlapping consensus”, as John Rawls called it, nor on opinion polls or the majority criterion, but rather it would be secured to a supra-historical mooring.

For understanding the seriousness of this issue and to find a response to the present question, we need to make a short excursus into the present crisis in democracy and into the gnoseological and ethical causes.

2. The causes of the current crisis in democracy and post-modern secular ethics

The current complex ethical-cultural crisis in democracy – a crisis that is also institutional – has many causes. According to Benedict XVI, one of the main reasons, already mentioned above, seems to be the lack of reference to natural moral law and the belief that only practical reason, guided by a desire for the good (recently a perfect good), can remain alive and open.

In our times, it is a secular ethic that has actually come to be the basis of democratic life. It appears as a totally autonomous ethic, produced exclusively through human freedom, detached from natural moral laws and from reference to a divine lawgiver. An immanentist ethic like this requires no real obligation but only self-obligation. What is permissible and what is not permissible are decided through the will of a human legislator. Norms are justified only through consensus. They are established by free citizens through agreement and then accepted. The morality of democracy, therefore, would have no accountability to the unwritten moral law that was placed in our conscience by God, and even less to God, understood as the ultimate motivation of moral norms.

In situations where democracies lack any reference to natural moral law, Benedict XVI proposes that it be reinstated. It would bring with it the restoration of practical reasoning capable of the true, of the good and of God. It would be intrinsically inclined towards the good, and so it would be able to recognise the moral order inscribed on our conscience from the beginning and to develop it coherently in the various situations of life, always having the human *telos* as its reference. To put it another way, the pontiff maintains that it is necessary to begin to “resemanticise” democracy and to go beyond all those ethics of modern derivation – like for example the neo-contractual, neo-utilitarian and dialogical ethics. These are connected to the considerable scepticism that exists with regard to objective and universal knowledge of the true, the good and of God. Many contemporary scholars, in one way or another, convey these ethics when involved in processes of legislation. The dominant political culture claims that conscience has no objective references in deciding what is true and good. We all decide what is true and good for ourselves, according to our own measuring

gauge and according to our own intuition and sensibility, and so each of us would have our own truth and our own morality incommensurable with that of others.

In post-modern theories on ethics and democracy, the principle of autonomous absolutist ethics is actually directed to a way of thinking that has the hallmarks of Hobbes, Kant and Rousseau. This kind of trend puts democracy to a large extent in opposition to the objective moral essence of rights and duties, to a concept of the common good connected to the universal good of humanity, and to a positive vision of *laïcité* which cannot exclude the quest for the true and the good, but rather presupposes it. To understand this, it is enough to take into consideration the above-mentioned trends that saturate our western culture. If we look closely at these, we see that they are incapable of revitalising contemporary democracy, precisely because their design and premise is an absolutised moral autonomy that is closed to the Transcendent.²

As moral autonomy does not recognise the validity of any ethical norm or standard purpose that does not come through consensus, it obstructs recognition of the inviolable dignity of each human being and the fundamental principle underlying it which derives from the ability of human nature to enter into communion with what is good and with God. A secular ethic that has a tendency to absolutise, does not even recognise a true human good, one that is personal and held in common, and that must be shaped and accomplished in God's way. Today's democracies, according to Benedict XVI, must reject this kind of proposal if they wish to achieve human rights and significant justice. They should therefore make place for the natural moral law, the base rule for the common good, for social justice, and for a positive *laïcité* that would otherwise be very feeble.

It is only through the restoration of the natural moral law as the ethical norm for political life that it is possible for democracy to avoid remaining insensitive to the human *telos* and to social justice in all its dimensions: institutional, subjective, substantial and regulated according to shared premises concerning the common good. It is only by restoring ties with the natural moral law which is, even if in an elemental way, inscribed on our conscience, that it is possible to have moral consensus, and also the upright lives of the populace and its stability.

If it is said that there are no moral rules except for those willingly constituted through individual decisions or collective consensus, then this autonomy makes it impossible to have any rules that are binding on citizens, because they always have the power to revoke any obligation. Each person's freedom is absolute. There could not even be justification for an obligation to respect the freedom of others, because each one would have the authority to avoid this obligation. Moreover, respect for the equal freedom of others would be a limitation that could not be imposed on the freedom of anyone: either on account of a freedom that by definition does not allow for limitations; or on account of the other insofar as his/her freedom is equal to mine, so therefore I have no reason to limit my freedom for the sake of theirs.³

3. The corrective function of religion, or the restoration of an integral practical reasoning that is open to the Transcendent

² See M. TOSO, "Democrazia e giustizia sociale", in *Studium* 3 (2006), pp. 389-391

³ See G. ABBÀ, *Costituzione epistemica della filosofia morale*, LAS, Roma 2009, p. 82.

Benedict XVI maintains that the norms that are necessary for upright government can in themselves be formulated through the simple forces of reason, without having to involve the contents of revelation. This is because God created the reasoning of human beings giving each similar capability, and hence it is innate. Nevertheless, the pontiff contends, although religion does not have the authority to furnish governments with these norms or with specific political solutions, it has its role to play. This is to help reason by purifying it and illuminating it in the discovery and correct formulation of objective moral principles. This is an auxiliary “corrective” role that presupposes the prior ability to know the true and good through reason. Religion, therefore, sustains reason by helping it to overcome frailty and momentary or contingent obnubilation.

Caritas in Veritate (=CIV)⁴ in particular, shows us how religion, or rather, how suitable theological reflection on religious experience can concretely help reason to be itself, in the fullness of its exercise, according to the various levels of knowledge, and it can help democracy to place itself at the service of the integral development of human beings.

When the human *telos* dwells in the Charity and Truth of Christ, it becomes accessible to everyone.⁵ In Him, the innate capacity for the true, for the good and for God, present in each person – independently of race, culture or even of religious choice – is reinforced and healed of its weakness. When we live in Christ in full communion with God, we are each more secure in our relationship with the Supreme Truth and the Supreme Good. It is on this foundation that we structure our own normative *telos*, a set of good things that are ordered among themselves through love of God. It is due to the human *telos* having been made more available and certain on the universal level by Jesus Christ, and due to the restoration of the natural moral law, which is precisely the prescription and regulation of human desires in view of the personal *telos*, that there is an increase in motivation – *motus ad actionem* – to reciprocal benevolence, fellowship, and collaboration in achieving the common good. Our own desires and interests do not prevail, but they are guided and regulated according to the requirements of the universal good. Social development is pursued as the totality of conditions that foster human fullness.

⁴ Cf BENEDETTO XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2009

⁵ Life in communion with Christ, with his way of thinking and loving, allows people with their human potential to grow in their ability to know and desire, and to grow in the corresponding virtues. The experience of an existence in communion with Charity and Truth, gives admittance to a wisdom horizon that allows access, thanks to its trans-discipline nature, to those humanistic cultural syntheses that are indispensable for an unfragmented vision of development. "Charity in truth" allows us to enter a context of meaning that, overcoming it and acting on it, includes many fields of knowledge, respecting them in their specific expertise, harmonising all in an interdisciplinary whole. In this synthesis, made up of unity and distinction, the positive sciences open up and integrate with the prescriptive and metaphysical sciences. Faith dialogues with reason without ever rejecting its conclusions or contradicting the results. On the contrary, it includes them. Within this source of wisdom, in which rational and super-rational fields of knowledge converge – these being revealed, not irrational, and even super-rational – human fields of knowledge, unable alone to show the way to the integral development of human beings, are asked to extend and reach out beyond themselves. As it is the confessional point of view of Revelation that moves it, the perspective of "charity in truth" could appear to be a limitation in an approach to social problems, but in fact this is not the case. It opens up theoretical-practical perspectives, a vast and comprehensive breadth of wisdom within which reason is safeguarded, purified and expanded in its presentation. The sectors of knowledge are surpassed in a cultural synthesis that values the various types of rationality without destroying them, but rather develops them. Through them we can and should collaborate with all including non-believers, as long as they have at heart the destiny of humanity and cultivate with passion and honesty their own person and profession.

The restoration of the human *telos* in the moral order, Benedict XVI maintains, is particularly crucial in the rethinking of social development, in all the complexity of its expression and description. This is basically because it helps to overcome the ethical dichotomies of modernity that destroy and desemanticise integral and social development. With the restoration of a normative *telos*, the behaviour of citizens is conceived and carried out as an interdependent whole. There are no divisions or counter-positions between the various forms of the good, between ethics and truth, between personal ethics and public ethics, between life ethics and social ethics, between ethics and finance, between work and wealth, between ethics and the marketplace, between ethics and technology, between environmental ethics and human ecology, between fellowship and social justice.

For integral social development, the CIV proposes a first person ethic. This is based on the intrinsic ability of each human person to be disposed to reach out towards the perfect good, towards God. This is quite unlike all that has been happening recently in secular ethics, third person ethics, where there is scepticism that there can be knowledge of the true, of the good and of God. This does not lead to just collaboration among individuals, many of whom feel free to pursue any goal whatsoever. Nor does this lead to a satisfactory state of affairs since it maximises the mean utility of that society and leaves aside the interests of weaker citizens who are unable to speak out or contradict.

To sum up, religion, or rather, critical reflection on religious experience, helps to restore integral practical reason. This is placed in the wider context of living conditions and of practical knowledge that relativises its claim to be the only source of rules. Yet it also reinforces reason by pointing to the meta-sociological and meta-historical dimension which transcends but does not deny the phenomenological, and thus allows for the formulation of the human *telos*, that is, a totality of all that is good established according to the yardstick of the Supreme Good.

4. The purifying function of reason with respect to distortions of religion

Yet there are cases in which religion does not seem to be willing to exercise a ministry of purification of reason. This occurs, the pontiff reminds us, when there are distortions due to sectarianism and fundamentalism. Religion, then, rather than being a “resource” for society, becomes a problem to be solved. How can the religious experience be purified from kinds of rationalism that are destructive for it and for society? As the pontiff himself taught in CIV, it is only possible on the basis of ethical judgment that is structured by reason that is not imprisoned in the empirical, but that is open to the integrality of truth and to the Transcendent.

This kind of rationality exists and is exercised only when there is discernment centred on charity and truth (cf CIV no. 55). Cognitive experience, a characteristic of charity in truth, gives rise to the criterion “every person and all people”, that allows us to assess and purify all religions, and to structure them consistently according to their essential nature.

5. Conclusion: a positive laïcité. Religions, a resource and strength of democracy

The resemanticisation of a democratic state's *laïcité* presupposes that there is substantial trust in the human person and in human reason, which is fallible but also capable of knowing the true and the good through moral consciousness.

The modern and post-modern phenomenon of the progressive dessemanticisation of *laïcité* is due to culture becoming increasingly more secularised to the point of becoming secularism. It is essential, as Benedict XVI has said repeatedly, to have multi-directional commitment to the rediscovery of integral reasoning and the diffusion of a *ethos* that is open to the Transcendent. We must also work on a new evangelisation. This is essential, not only for the primary proclamation of Christ the Saviour in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, but also in order to liberate and humanise cultures and their respective *ethos* that are the basis of the juridical order and the *laïcité* of the state.

A secular state based on law, with regard to the primacy of the person and of civil society, cannot claim to be the source of truth and morality on the basis of its own doctrine or ideology. It receives from outside, from civil society that is pluralist and harmoniously convergent, the essential measure of knowledge and truth concerning the good of individuals and of groups. It does not receive this through pure rational consciousness, to be guarded and protected by means of a philosophy that is totally independent of the historical context, since there is no pure rational evidence in existence that is separated from history. Metaphysical and moral reason operate only in a historical context. It depends on it, but at the same time transcends it. In short, the state draws its support from pre-existing cultural and religious traditions and not from rationality. It is sustained by reason that has matured through practices and institutions that are favourable to it, in the historical form of religious faiths that, when they do not deteriorate, keep alive the ethical sense of existence and of its transcendence.

The attempts today to remove religion from the public sphere, even though on the one hand the promise is renewed to make democratic life more viable and peaceful, on the other hand it causes irreparable weakening because it takes away its lifeblood.

A healthy democracy has to recognise personal faiths and their belonging in community. It is not enough to have a “civilian religion” that is recognised only through social consensus – such a “religion” is founded on fragile moral bases and can change with the fashion –, nor a religion enclosed in the private, that is, conceived of as subjectivist, irrational and hence irrelevant and even harmful to social life. Nor will there be use for a religion that mortifies the dignity of people and their human fulfilment through horizontal and vertical transcendence.

A person's religious dimension does not lie beyond the universality of reason, but transcends it without contradiction. The faith of citizens, like the corresponding religious communities that educate them in their faith, nourishes that “social capital” – consisting of stable

relationships, lifestyles, shared values, civilian friendship and fellowship – which no democracy can do without, if it is not to be reduced to the pure administration of conflictual and disparate interests.

If this is true, then democracies must cultivate an open attitude towards religions that is not passive. It must be active in the sense that, within their competence, they must recognise and foster a public space – distinct from state institutions and also present in civil society – where spiritual and cultural families are shaped in an ethos that revitalises them, especially in the plural and convergent task of building the common good. The state apparatus, as a collection of procedures, will consequently guarantee personal faiths and religious communities the possibility of offering others their proposals of a good life, and regulations will oversee their free democratic, public and plural action.⁶

True tolerance is founded on religious freedom and not on the rejection of religions. State *laïcité* does not mean neutrality with regard to different religions. On the contrary, it means both acceptance and impartiality, that is, their recognition without granting unjust privileges to any of them.

⁶ Cf A. SCOLA, *Una nuova laicità*, Marsilio, Padova 2007, pp. 44-45.