

Abstract

In this brief contribution, a French Muslim scholar argues passionately that there is a positive link between guaranteeing the neutrality of public spaces (including promoting secular education) and a return to 'religion as message'.

A century of religious worship in the under the umbrella of the separation of Church and State is long enough now for us to be able to analyze it and draw some significant conclusions.

Something that will interest the most fervent of religious believers is that this secular experience puts all religions back in their original state – that of a message adopted out of pure conviction, completely uninfluenced by fear or force. People believe while all the time having the option of not believing, and they practise their religion only insofar as it fits in with their daily schedule, their commitment, and no more. The small amount of worship devoted to God is genuine and in no way prompted by social hypocrisy or professional ambition of any kind.

Diminishing religion as an institution is not a betrayal of religious messages. On the contrary, drawing back in this way encourages a return to religion as message. The Church instituted by Jesus is an invitation to universal brotherhood, and the transnational community of the Ummah really exists only in the sense of belonging together to a more or less clearly identified Islamic teaching. The use of the term "community" in relation to Muslims is, in any case, a linguistic indulgence, if not sheer nominalism.

Nevertheless, the experience of the secular state has brought to light some serious shortcomings in terms of ethics, sense and transcendence.

Let us look for a moment at the confusion – not to say the impasse, or failure – of secular education in its mission to educate future generations. Educating does not just mean training minds and stuffing heads with all sorts of knowledge. Educating means,

above all, handing down values such as serious-mindedness, commitment, a sense of responsibility and other virtues – even if we do not know on what conviction we should found them, or in the name of what transcendence we uphold them. A Nation, indeed, is not just a set of cold, implacable institutions, but a soul, an ethic, and a path towards a horizon.

One question has been on my mind since I started reflecting on the subject of religion and secular education: is it really possible to separate the temporal from the spiritual, in human consciousness ?

If we are always to always distinguish between the political and the religious, if we are at all costs to maintain the separation of the state from all religious institutions, then it seems logically and logistically impossible to dissociate the temporal from the spiritual, as human beings lie at the intersection of these two dimensions. Is it possible to separate responsible human behaviour from conscience, and conscience from ideals and convictions?

There is food for thought in this, as pragmatic laws are not designed to settle such metaphysical questions. Moreover, what is the point in having a spirituality that is not reflected in positive behaviour in society?

Let us leave it up to each and every person to draw on their own spiritual or philosophical tradition. The important thing is that we eventually end up by establishing a shared ethics.

There are no longer any issues lurking in relations between the State and the Churches, and generally speaking there is social stability in relation to religion. Perhaps

it is time for the state to concern itself with religion as a “citizen’s need” like sports and the arts, in the same way as it concerns itself with hunting and fishing and all sorts of highly popular disciplines which are undoubtedly far less existential than faith and transcendence. If this “citizen’s need” is not met, it is the fundamentalisms, the sectarian movements or, more trivially, pushiness and wheeling and dealing that will take care of it. We are already seeing examples of that happening.

Yet how can we get religion talked about again, given the tense reactions any time the subject is raised and the habits that society and official bodies have got into?

New opportunity for discussion in France

There is an opportunity. The presence of Islam in France and the concern about how it is organized can be a fortunate coincidence, a breath of fresh air. Because the collective memory of French Muslims bears no scars of the secularism or anticlericalism that marked the birth of secular education, and have not suffered the slightest ill-effects from them, their relationship with religion is completely different from that of their Catholic or Protestant fellow-citizens, for example.

Because of this stormy, painful history, most of the traditional churches arm themselves with caution when they intervene in public. They prefer to speak in the name of solidarity, mutual support or humanity than directly in the name of God or charity.

Muslims’ religious expression in public, on the other hand, is characterized by extreme spontaneity, even naivety. As people whose speech is peppered with references to God, and who will pray anywhere, anytime, without feeling the slightest embarrassment

or shyness, they have no conception of how “corny” it is to talk about religion. They are not aware of the extent to which mention of beliefs gave rise – and still does give rise – to derision, if not a mental block, on the part of their listeners, because there is no tradition of “imam-haters” and the presence of Islam in France began a long time after the so-called War of the Two Frances.

The presence of a religion with a clear mind free from this anti-religious trauma could in fact be a chance to take the emotion out of people’s relationship with religion and to think calmly about the role of spirituality as a foundation for an ethics that provides the meaning necessary for building up the human conscience.

While clinging jealously to the individual freedoms, rationality and denominational neutrality that characterize public institutions, there is nothing to prevent the numerous religious traditions that make up our society from giving us the benefit of their experience, enriched over several centuries. The liveliness shown by a religion should not be a source of embarrassment, or cause anxiety. A living religion is a dynamic force with proposals to put forward, a source of ethics which is capable of suggesting, promoting or disapproving.

It is too easy to present the neutrality of the public arena as the expulsion of all religious expression. In fact the most stimulating challenge would be for secular education to become able to transform the antagonists of yesterday into partners who have lived through the same experience, with a fertile, fruitful, fascinating debate.

While in the shadow of secular education, religion no longer has a secular arm for

making its presence felt – it has only the word; and it must use it at all times and with full independence. Drifting off course, all drifting happens when religion exceeds its prerogatives and tries to assert itself using some method of pressure. In that case, let us strip it of all administrative authority and remove it completely from the political sphere – partly to safeguard its immunity and protect it from the ambitious and the career-minded.

In our new century, religious feeling is making a come-back. Channels for accessing it must be dug before it overflows. If we do not acknowledge the place of religion in society, it will not disappear – on the contrary, it will evolve anarchically, and will burst out of its framework.

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