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### **Civil Religion and Secular Religion**

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Scientific truth is said to be one and the same in all places and at any time. However, in religion as in all human affairs it is very important to be aware of the situation and the circumstances in which a truth is declared. Realising the place where we come together, we have to keep in mind that Jerusalem is a meaningful place for at least three world religions. Giving tribute to this fact I would like to start with a reference to the old and well known novel of the three rings. The first version of this novel is to be found in Boccaccio's "Decamerone", but the one which I refer to is the adaptation of Lessing in his "Nathan der Weise": As a present for the time after his death a father gave up three rings to his three sons, declaring to each of them separately that it was the only ring. Only after his death the sons coming together discovered that it was uncertain which one of the rings was the right one, the one of his true heritage. So being deceived they became anxious to be seen as deceivers themselves when referring to their ring as the true one.

As you know, the rings stand for the three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the novel tells us something about how they belong together and how they should behave to one another confronted with the claim of each of them to be the only true religion. But, to make things even more intricate, Lessing gives us two versions or interpretations of this novel: The one says that the right ring was unrecognised mixed between the others making it a question of evidence or competition to each of them to demonstrate that it was the true one. The other says, that the right ring was lost, that means not among the three rings. This again may either be interpreted as giving place to the idea of a religion in general, which means that every religion has its own truth in itself. Or it may be interpreted as giving agnosticism a legitimate place in the discussion of religion, arguing that, if there is a true religion to be found at all, at least nobody can tell us which one it is. In Lessing's parable of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century it is open

which version is to be taken up leaving the reader to the twofold mystery which religion is the true one and whether religion at all may be called true.

### *I. Religion and Constitution in Liberal Perspective*

In modern Western societies this is a decisive ambiguity: It makes atheism and secularity to be at the same time a player in the competition of religions and a counterpart to all religions. In terms of politics this ambiguity may be found in the double bind relation of religion and state: On the one hand liberal constitutions seem to be independent of any religious legitimization. This essential feature of modern constitutional law also implies, that for the state it is not necessary, and even more, not allowed to decide which religion is the true one. The constitution may privilege one religion among several, but it is not possible to de-legitimize all the others by defining the public religion as the only true one. Modern liberal societies are bound to offer a home for many religions, and a constitution is most justified by its capacity to domesticate animosity and hostility between them. This is the one side of the ambiguity.

On the other side in most modern societies we in fact often find one religion determining the basic mentalities of the leading part of citizens. It is this religion that establishes something like a general religious background for the political culture of the community. In Germany a prominent modern term was coined for this, "Leitkultur" (leading culture), which implies the claim to define the Christian tradition as being the leading aspect of political decisions. In political debates this concept is very much disputed, but there is a conservative aspect in this idea, which today is widely accepted: In 1959 Wolfgang Böckenförde, the former member of the German High Court and professor for constitutional law, coined a principle which in recent years has been cited very often: "The liberal, secular state is based on preconditions which the state by itself cannot guarantee for." This indeed is the challenge to which we have to respond: In which sense may religion be called necessary for establishing a civil society, and what does this mean to the existence of other religions?

In this conference we discuss the relationship between religion and democracy. Looking to the three world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam it would be difficult to argue that any one of them would find its proper expression only in modern democracy. Rather it would be more adequate to argue, for historical reasons, that they first found their realisation in some kind of monarchy. But this is only a superficial impression. Looking closer to the tradition of

each religion we have learned, that each of them is compatible to aristocratic and democratic systems as well. Religion and political constitution have no linear relation to one another arguing that they enable only one commitment in both directions. There is no singular and exclusive political interpretation of religion in terms of politics. This neutrality or openness is important for holding fast to religion in times of rapid political change. So today religion even may help to demonstrate a certain continuity and identity in a world of changing political systems.

## *II. Civil Religion and Political Religion*

But in which sense may religion be called a precondition of, respectively a point of orientation for civil societies? The most familiar answer to this question in Western societies is: by establishing a kind of “civil religion” which is adequate to the political system. The term “civil religion” today is very much associated with liberal constitutions in the Western world, especially in France and the United States. In these countries civil religion is said to be the core, the spirit of the political constitution – but in a very different sense: In France, by the time of the French revolution, it was defined more or less in opposition, not to say in hostility to the established catholic church, pointing to some civic virtues such as the idea of a “volonté générale” or the ideas of “liberté”, “égalité” and “fraternité”, with its strong background in early modern republicanism. In France civil religion was a very radical solution for the problem how to reconcile the necessary independence of civil and public affairs from religion with the need of defining a common bond of the citizens to agree about the basic principles of the constitution. In the United States we find the same roots in the republican tradition, but concerning the role of religion a more Christian solution, rooted in 18<sup>th</sup> century Deism and the theology of a holy covenant with God. As in France so in the American constitutional system, too, this made religious denominations to be private circles of citizens without any public, constitutional influence on state affairs, but leaving much space to all citizens to appeal to the common Christian believes, for instance that the people of the United States is God’s “chosen people“.

In Germany up to the Second World War there was no such concept – which, to many observers, is one of the main obstacles of public law in this country. But in this paper I would like to argue that the lack of such a concept also might be seen as another model how to man-

age the contradictions of religion and politics – a model with its own advantageous and disadvantageous. The arguments for the disadvantageous are well known: Many efforts, it was often declared, were made in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> and even at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to overcome the basic dogmatic differences and hostilities between the three Christian confessions, i.e. of Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism, not to speak of Judaism as an always present but publicly less acknowledged religion. That the reconciliation never happened was a decisive factor already in the Thirty-Years-War weakening the power of the Roman Empire. But the same was still true in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the open situation produced a disastrous hostility between Catholicism and Protestantism – leaving space for even more ideological hostilities such as anti-Socialism and anti-Semitism as well.

Because there was no proper religious fundament of society, people like the Austrian professor Eric Voegelin argued on his strong catholic background from the late 1930s onwards, that it was easy for National Socialism to establish an extreme anti-Christian version of political religion. After the war liberals in the United States took up the argument: The lack of *civil religion*, they argued, is responsible for the rise of totalitarian *political religions*. In the period of the cold war this indeed seemed to be true as much of Russian communism as of Nazism. Today in Western political philosophy the term “political religion” is often used in the sense of the totalitarian counterpart to the more liberal concept of “civil religion”. “Civil religion”, the positive concept, is declared to be a prerequisite of democratic societies all over the world.

This is why in the last decades in the Federal Republic of Germany a growing number of politicians and scientists began to look for something comparable to the tradition of civil religion in France and the USA. Many observers were inclined to call the spirit of the constitution a civil religion, others referred to the common Christian heritage of Germany, later of Europe, as civil religion, sometimes combining this heritage with the humanist tradition of ancient Greek philosophy and Roman law. Civil religion began to be a point of intensive political discussion: Should we hold to a kind of “constitutional patriotism”, as the liberal philosopher Jürgen Habermas demanded? Or should civil religion rather be defined in negative terms as anti-Nazism, bound together by a strong regiment of political correctness?

It is not my aim to define “civil religion” in German terms, because I do believe, that it is an arbitrary concept in the political context of Germany. Rather I should like to point to the ad-

vantageous implied in the lack of a civil religion in German modern history. In reflecting the disadvantageous of the concept of civil religion this may be of some interest for an international discussion, because in recent years we are increasingly aware of the problems implied in this concept. Confronted with the aggressive politics of Western countries in the Near East for instance I am inclined to ask: Does the appeal to any civil religion prevent politicians and governments from misleading political decisions in certain situations? Is civil religion suitable to serve as a universal concept for all people in the world? Can civil virtue be bound to one civil religion only?

Today's clash of civilisations shows many features similar to the German situation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: for instance an increasing economic and cultural collaboration of countries whose population is deeply divided in terms of religion; a strive for political unity in terms of a federal government; and, not the least, the counterbalance of traditional religious denominations and groups of modernists and traditionalists in all of them. What tells us the German model of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? First, we find a dominant religious tradition, Prussian liberal Protestantism, which is trying to play the role of giving a platform for all Christian and non-Christian confessions. It is the idea of the "Kulturkampf" in Prussia in the 1870s: Liberal Protestantism claimed to be open for all religious denominations as far as civic virtues were concerned. Those who were not willing to surrender, traditional protestant religiosity as much as the exclusive claim of the catholic church for political power were defined as being "confessionalism" – by that time a specific German concept for fighting against political aspirations in both, catholic and protestant churches.

All this seems to be very modern and much of what might be called a civil religion in Germany. But, as we all know, it didn't work. Neither the conservative wings of the churches nor the socialist party did agree to the concept of liberal Protestantism to serve as a common platform for the German Empire, leaving it to Jewish intellectuals, ironically, to support the idea with the vigour of their strive for emancipation. So, what we find in Germany from about 1900 to the Third Reich, is a careful counterbalance of religious groups who in terms of political programs fight against one another, but agree on religious neutrality in actual political decisions. It is this lack of a positive religious platform for political collaboration, which makes the German situation differ from countries with a civil religion such as France and the USA.

I am aware of the optimistic perspective to German history, which is implied in this interpretation. But conceding the fact that religious hostilities are at the bottom of the German Empire as much as of the Weimar Republic it is worth to point out to the liberal idea in Germany of another solution for the question how to balance the political implications of religion with the necessity of religious neutrality in politics: It is a model based rather on liberal practice than on liberal doctrines and practised by parts of the Prussian bureaucracy throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. How did this model survive after the Second World War? In the last part of my paper I would like to argue that it was the programmatic sense of secularity that took up the idea.

### *III. Secular Society and Secular Religion*

In religious discourse the term “secular” usually is used, especially in English, in a strong negative sense, pointing to a lack of religion in society. However, in German religious discourse we also have a positive understanding of “secularity”, in its origins going back to its use by prominent protestant theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Gogarten. This use takes up the ambivalent meaning of the term “world” in religious writings, where “world” is as much the stage on which God realizes his program of salvation as it is the counterpart to God, the home of the devil. From here secularisation could be defined as the materialisation of God in Jesus Christ, or to say it in more historical terms, the process of God’s realisation in the world, with the realm of God as its transcendent goal and end.

In Post War Germany secularisation became to be a key concept for understanding the transformation of religion in the modern world. Again, this could only be defined as an ambiguous process: On the one hand churches lost membership and attendance to their services in continuous decline; on the other hand churches did indeed play an important part in defining Germany’s political identity from the very beginning in 1945 up to our days. The German population never lost contact to its religious heritage. This can be demonstrated by the fact, that today people within and without the churches agree more than within one religious denomination. This is true in many political questions with a strong moral background such as death penalty, birth control, integration or gender policy or protection of the environment. Differing from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, today secular society in Germany indeed is not hostile to religion and the churches.

This is because secularity became to be an integrative feature of religion itself. Soon after the war the big Christian churches began to reconstruct their relationship to civil society: Instead of defining themselves as a counterpart to “the world”, they acted as an integrative part of society. Instead of “mission” say aimed for participation and “responsibility” in all social and political affairs. So the relation between church and society was defined as being more inclusive than exclusive. Indeed, what we have in Germany today are churches appropriate to secular society, appropriate in the sense of corresponding to the self-understanding of a secular society: in being tolerant, peace-oriented, pluralistic etc.

But also in terms of theology a remarkable change of discourse has taken place, which makes me speak of a secular religion. The concept may be circumscribed by three basic principles: It is based

1. on the theological conviction, that God and world are two concepts which mutually refer to one another: God may be found as much in the world and only there as the world in God. Secularity in this sense defines as much a theological problem, the problem of God becoming a human being, as a scientific problem, the problem of the reality of the world.
2. It is based on the political conviction, that for church and religion the world is, as I said, the place of their existence, not their opposition. Secularity in this sense may be defined as the conviction that a Christian church is but one religious institution among others, who take influence on public opinion.
3. It is based on the ethical conviction, that religion has to make clear decisions in fundamental items of private and public, political and social orientation. Secularity in this sense may be described as a peaceful culture of ethical dissent.

For my generation secularity was one of the most important utopias for future realisation. We thought that all over the world, in all religious cultures at one future day secularity should be a common platform for enlightened people beyond religious dissent and peculiarities. But today I am not sure whether this is any more realistic. Many intellectuals and engaged politicians in non-Christian countries declare secularisation to be one of the main instruments for westernisation i.e. Christianisation. And Christian theology supports the idea that secularisation is no neutral concept, but deeply influenced by the Christian idea of God becoming a human being. I believe that this is true. So what do we have to do? How do we come together? May be its

wrong to strive for a common platform beyond religion, may be we should only find a way of living together peacefully, each religion following its own rules.

But even in such a distant way of looking to one another we may recognise features of our own understanding of the world in other religions. What secularity tells us is the story of a deep ambiguity within religion itself: The secular is something denying religion and at the same time is religion in itself: It is denying religion in establishing the world as a human and natural order, but it is religion, too, in being involved in the competition of all religious systems wherever. So coming back to the novel of the rings we find that the problem here formulated is still the same. We only should try not to go back behind the complexity of its reflexion unfold already in the middle ages by Moslems, Jews and Christians all together.