**Interreligious dialogue and civil society**

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Our Conference is aiming to individuate two new topics of interreligious dialogue, beyond the dead ends of its former methods. The first topic is “civil society” and the second is “mysticism”. While maybe intuitively the latter of both is the more comprehensible one, I’d like to try to explain you in 10 minutes the importance of the first one.

The theoretical background of the topic “civil society” is the European modernity. Often this modernity is hold something like a “wrong way” or a failed tentative to conceive the political structure of human existence. In the context of our debate it is often affirmed that European modernity would have defined the space of politics by bracketing completely religion, by locking religion in the mere private sphere of personal convictions.

Fortunately, such a lecture of modernity is not any more possible. All the central institutions of political modernity, beginning from human rights through the idea of constitutionalism and even the idea of democracy, which was considered an enemy by the Catholic Church until a few decades ago, are based on anthropological convictions, which point centrally on the relationship of human being to the absolute divine God. Wilhelm Röpke stated therefore: “The measure of the economy [and of the modern liberal institutions] is man. The measure of man is his relationship to God”. And in a very clear way he explained how a religious lecture of liberalism is possible: “liberalism is not […] in its essence a renouncement of Christianity; rather, it represents its legitimate spiritual offspring. Only an extraordinary reduction of historical perspective can lead one to confuse liberalism with libertinism. Rather, liberalism embodies in the field of social philosophy the best that three thousands years of Western thought have been able to hand down us, the idea of humanity, natural law, the culture of the person and the sense of universality”.

This means that beyond the sharp and violent conflicts between State and Church in modern times we deal with the formation of liberal institutions which are not atheistic on their basis. Right to the contrary, many modern philosophers, not only Christians, Protestants and Catholics, but also Hebrews and therefore the most influent religious denominations in Europe at that time, recognized in these modern institutions the conditions of possibility not only for living and realizing the most inner and deepest religious convictions of the individual, but also for the coexistence and reciprocal tolerance and recognition of a plurality of religious credos.

For Mendelssohn it is fundamental the accordance of religion with natural reason, and the conviction that therefore the Other has to be tolerated. In other words, the toleration of the other as first and most profound expression of the ‘rationality’ of religious revelation. Even if from my standpoint the religion of the other results ‘erroneous’, this position of the other is no threat neither for society neither for my own religious position. He can think that the same universalism is realized in diverse ways in the singular religions: in their “scriptural universalism” they realize all a diverse realization of universalism without affirming only the abstract universalism of reason as the only possibility of communicative interaction.

For Kant morality “extends itself” to the idea of a divine lawgiver and “leads ineluctably to religion”: morality is teleologically incomplete and therefore there is no abstract rational universalism of practical reason but this practical reason is always intrinsically connected with another sphere which for human reason is inesplorable. Morality (practical reason) reaches its real and major effectiveness only in religion, even if without any doubt it is possible to think morality without religion. But this does surely not mean to reduce religion to morality as Kant is often interpreted.

Between Mendelssohn and Kant is emerging an interesting perspective of religious universality: in the religious dimension the rationality is brought to the absolute sphere: but this absolute sphere is no longer a rational universality where every individuality and singularity is disappearing, but this kind of universality is reachable only in every one’s personal relationship to it. This means when Mendelssohn and Kant conceive religion as fulfillment of the rational universality. This means that individuality, the respect for every other individual, is anchored in its absolute dimension which is a relationship to the absolute. The other is not against me neither he is the political other, but the religious dimension itself generates a concept of the other which is much more profound than the rational and the political one. Right in this dimension lays the possibility for a new topos of interreligious dialogue which overcomes the dead and violent ends of it.

The importance of this largely still unknown ‘topic’ of interreligious dialogue is becoming immediately clear if we take seriously the studies of Jan Assmann who analysed in the “mosaic distinction” the historical origin of “political theology”, in other words, for the real risk that religion transforms itself into political action. The problem is that even if religion is not *per se* violent or ‘political’, it can be exploited for a certain comprehension of politics, which thinks through the distinction of sovereignty i.e. of the dialectics of friend-and-enemy. Assmann himself indicated, though, a dynamics in every – at least monotheistic – religion, which is radically opposed to any political exploit: it is the discover of the “Inner Man”, which is the most radical opposition to any political character of the human person. If this dimension of “Inner Man” is the most radical opposition to any “political theology”, i.e. to the exploit of religion for political antagonism and violence, and if therefore in this dimension is articulated the most revolutionary dimension of every monotheism, then the “secular distinction”, or in other words, the separation between the religious and the political sphere, is not only a characteristic of ‘secular European modernity’ but it is the very original result of the ‘monotheistic revolution’ in the world history.

The immediate result of this distinction is the raise of *civil society*. ‘Civil society’ is not possible in a theocratic regime, but even in complete absence of religion we could not speak of it. This is perhaps the most radical affirmation of my introduction and of the inner sense of the first Session of our Conference. And maybe this is the most forgotten part of modernity itself which even today is always read through the lenses of the paradigm of secularization. But Kant and Mendelssohn, Rosmini and Hegel, give us another concept of it: without the affirmation of the absolute and the relationship of every person to the absolute – without religious dimension of the “Inner Man” – even the modern individual rights, the democratic realization of human dignity and the civil society which becomes more and more a globalized society, loses its fundament. This is no claim for a public religion, nor for something like a ‘civil religion’, because these ideas are not based on the idea of “Inner Man”. Only the very original religious relationship points out this dimension which stands on the basis of the modern institutions, and even of the freedom to choose the atheistic option.

In other words: only if even the ‘atheistic option’ is understood as a realization of an absolute self-determination of the individual in a sense which can be understood only in relationship to the religious relationship, this ‘atheistic option’ is an authentic realization of a free society. Without the presence of the religious sense which shows the dimension of “Inner Man” every self-determination looses its deepest dimension – the deepest dimension of the human being is the relationship to the absolute: The relationship of recognition to the “Other” is mediated not by reason or human mankind, but by God. And only in this relationship can happen what the modern secular and democratic state calls the recognition of human dignity of every person.

This dimension was rediscovered by Jürgen Habermas who stressed in some interventions a decade ago: “nella vita comune delle comunità religiose, una volta che esse rinuncino al dogmatismo e alla coercizione delle coscienze, può rimanere qualcosa di intatto, un qualcosa che altrove è andato perduto e non può essere ripristinato da nessun sapere professionale e specialistico da solo: mi riferisco alle possibilità di percepire e di esprimere, in maniera altamente differenziata, la vita deviata, le patologie sociali, i fallimenti dei progetti di vita individuali e la deformazione di contesti vitali degradati”. This does not mean that the ‘political reason’, i.e. the logic of political institutions and legislation, has to be re-integrated into the sphere of religious rules and ethics. This process would be contrarily to the “secular distinction” which is the most important political result of the discovery of the “Inner Man”. Instead, this means that the ‘political reason’ recognizes the importance of the presence of religion in the sphere of civil society for the functioning of its institutions, for the recognition of individual freedom and the fundamental rights of each person. This means that instead of a ‘political theology’ we have to develop a ‘civil theology’, a ‘theology of civil society’ which would have to be developed in an interreligious discourse. Every religion can claim for such a recognition by political reason as it is proposed in Habermas only under the condition that it develops a proper approach to civil society: ‘civil theology’ would therefore mean that a theory on *civil society*, not on religious society, is an indispensable presupposition not only for a peaceful and ‘civil’ coexistence of religions but also their most original contribution for a functioning secular politics.

This means, in other words, that only if religions conceive their existence in a secular society, which means in a society ruled by rational laws, they give a sustainable contribution to international peace without harming individual freedom and rights. In other words, developing a ‘civil theology’, the religions develop a new infrastructure of communication between them, which like every communication must be understandable, reasonable faithful and respectful. Of course, beyond this dimension there are others like mysticism, and therefore our conference has necessarily this second part. But the reasonable, civil and ethical communication is indispensable for avoiding ‘political theology’, exploit of religion for political violence or sovereign power.

To a deeper view, this dimension of ‘civil theology’, which we discovered due to the reflections of some modern philosophers, was not extraneous to medieval reflection, and thus to those thinkers who did not yet live in the context of secular politics. For example Thomas Aquinas retained that “the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is properly called a law, since a law is something pertaining to reason”. Every human action against reason and free will is for Aquinas a contradictory action: “everything that is against reason, is against human nature”. This shows that the ‘civil theology’ does not necessarily presuppose a secular, democratic society, but that religion can contribute to its formation. Indeed when Thomas Aquinas retained that Aristotle could be a common concept of rationality for all the three monotheisms, he thought also about the different ways in which Aristotle was read by Christians, Moslems and Hebrews: a universal rationality which is articulated in many ways but in the realm of civil reason finds its specific universality.

Right in this way, a ‘civil theology’ which has to be elaborated by all religions, can help to find a new ‘discourse universality’. Without any doubt, all religions had some critical reaction to the modern idea of formal universality of apriori reason for which Kant was always taken as the most specific example – and this reaction was formulated in diverse ways by the Protestant Hegel, by the Catholic Rosmini or by the Hebrew Mendelssohn. The way of ‘civil theology’ could instead be the specific way in which religions elaborate a proper, and interreligious, perspective on *universality*, showing that the alternative to ‘modern universality’ is not necessarily ‘postmodern singularity’ or ‘communitaristic particularism’ but a new dimension of universality which Rosmini pointed out as “another universality, which includes al the common aspects of the things as well as their own aspects, and the things themselves: in other words all that is required by the discourse […]. That the first idea of universality is only *partially*, becomes clear when you observe that it does not include all the particular notes and neither the things themselves of the genus one is speaking about, but only the common aspects”. This type of universality is less apriori, and more the result of an “overlapping consensus” (Rawls) in which the religions elaborate in a prospective of ‘civil theology’ their conception of fundamental laws, secular state, democracy and political institutions in an interreligious perspective which includes also the respect for the ‘atheist option’ which is an option of absolute choice of the individual.

This concept is fundamentally alternative to the ideas of Küng or Hick on interreligious dialogue: Hans Küng tried to find in a “global ethic” a platform beyond religions, on a reasonable ethical level, a place where religions can dialogue and encounter, but in this way he – and not Kant or Mendelssohn – reduced the religious dimension to morality and practical reason. For John Hick, every religion is only another concrete, ‘phainomenical’ expression of the same absolute which is ‘noumenically’ beyond every religious expression. In this way Hick cannot recognize the factual claim of absoluteness of every religion: no religion would identify itself with a superficial expression of something which is unreachable, because it sees itself as the way to the authentic absolute. Both Küng and Hick try to propose a theory of religious pluralism cutting the profound absolute dimension of every religion and making of it something like morality. On a deeper view, the ‘disintegrating’ conception of religion which usually is attributed to Kant, is much more pertinent to the contemporary conceptions of Küng and Hick.

The theory of ‘civil theology’ which I want to propose with the first part of this conference, is radically alternative to ideas of Küng or Hick, and can be expressed very appropriately with these words of the encyclical *Fides et ratio*: “To believe it possible to know a universally valid truth is in no way to encourage intolerance; on the contrary, it is the essential condition for sincere and authentic dialogue between persons”. This means that monotheistic absoluteness is the origin of religious tolerance. This concept is the radical alternative to any ‘political theology’. This concept is radically alternative to the actual, more postmodern conceptions of a transcendental absoluteness in Hick or the idea of a ‘non-violent’ free market of religions. To the contrary, it could be an interesting project to analyze how these latter concepts – apparently more adequate for a dialogue because more ‘soft’ – bear a higher risk for religious fundamentalisms. The concept of ‘civil theology’ which has as point of departure the religious subject, and in this sense heritages the important contribution of modernity, does not see the religious affirmations of the absolute as a potential risk for violence and against dialogue, but as the very presupposition for any recognition, tolerance and religious love: and exactly on this point the civil theology approach declares its limit and refers to mysticism which is the second part of our conference.