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SECULARISM AND THE PUBLIC–PRIVATE DIVIDE: EUROPE CAN LEARN FROM LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the difficulties faced by European secularism in dealing with a Muslim diaspora of unprecedented size in the continent's history. It shows how this presence has highlighted contradictions in European conceptions of the religious and of the public–private divide. The paper does this by comparing Europe to Latin America where a quite different process of secularization seems to have taken place.

This paper explores two senses in which the presence of religion, namely institutionalized religion, in the public sphere, is a matter of concern. One sense is the most straightforward one, namely the perception that religion is affecting political life. The other is the more analytical sense that there exists, or should exist, a frontier between religion and the public sphere in a secular society—for there is much anxiety in Europe that this frontier, which is an artefact of convention but also a product of the law, is changing, collapsing or being perforated in disconcerting ways. It is my fear that Europe is poorly prepared for the changes which are already taking place in the frontiers between religion and the public sphere. This, of course, is the result of a Muslim diaspora whose growing—but not unjustified—assertiveness is challenging many inherited but implicit, unspoken assumptions, and also posing serious questions for both supporters and critics of multiculturalism.

Ironies of Liberation

Institutionalized religion is unavoidably political—though of course not *only* political. Here I want to put to you the somewhat counterintuitive

relationship between some religious movements and the world of secular politics, contrasting the impact of the explicitly ideological messages of some movements with that of others, which claim to eschew politics while in fact becoming deeply involved. My main—but not only—examples, are the Theology of Liberation and *basismo*—i.e. the political and religious sensibility which confers a privileged position on the culture, interests and practices of the *base*, or grass roots—which it inspired, and the evangelical churches.

Let me start in Latin America. In that region a whole generation of activists of all religions (and none) were inspired by the Theology of Liberation (TL), a movement inspired by the ideas of Vatican II, of the subsequent Latin American Bishops' Conference at Medellín in 1968, and the writings most notably of Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, as well as others such as Jon Sobrino.**<add Sobrino ref?>**[1] The theology inspired and was dynamized by the Base Christian Communities (or CEB) movement[2] which was in the forefront of grassroots struggles against dictatorial regimes, especially in Brazil, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Its approach to the Divine emphasizes the prophetic dimension, locates the construction of the Kingdom of God on this earth;**<comma not semi-colon?>** defines salvation as a collective enterprise of social justice rather than of personal piety, looks to the poor as a source of religious inspiration, and prioritizes Bible study over the cult of saints. In Brazil and Central America its followers called themselves "The People's Church" or the "Church of the Poor." The triumphalism of TL activists—for some of whom, incredibly, the Sandinista revolution heralded a new reformation—eventually gave way to a mood of depression in the face of Papal hostility and also of the growth of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal.

John Paul II, in fact, stole some of the *basistas'* **<what is *basistas*?>**clothes: the preferential option for the poor, notably. But his number one mission was to overthrow Communism in Eastern Europe and the followers of Liberation Theology distrusted that mission because they identified it with the anti-communism of the Latin American right and their allies in the United States and big business. They may not have supported the ideologies and philosophies of the

1. Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973); Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power* (London: SCM Press, 1985); David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996).

2. Ana Maria Doimo, *A vez e a voz do popular: movimentos sociais e participação política no Brasil pós-70* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1995).

Soviet Union, or Cuba, but to attack those was to associate oneself with the forces of capitalism and imperialism, which were seen to be more directly relevant and harmful in Latin America.

Once Communism had, so to speak, been dealt with, the Pope brought back to life the Church's age-old distrust of markets and capitalism. One factor in his posture may have been the suspicion, or even the evidence, that the People's Church was not bringing people into Church, and he may have thought that the fall in recruitment into the priesthood was related to the emphasis on social issues in the training offered in their seminaries. The seminarians, after all, may well have thought that the way to construct the Kingdom of God was not to become a priest but to become a political activist or development worker.

In fact the founding father of TL, Gustavo Gutierrez, quite soon switched his "line" especially on Marxism: although his foundational text, which had originally entered circulation in 1968, was definitely not a call for socialist revolution, and has nothing of a materialist ethical position, it is certainly littered with Marxist jargon and uses a broadly Marxist approach to the interpretation of Latin American society—and this is something he quickly regretted, partly because it encouraged others to claim one could be a Marxist and a Christian at the same time, and partly because it created a distraction from the main purpose of the book, which was to bring issues of poverty and faith to the top of the Church's agenda, enabling those who did not want to hear the message to focus on the question of Marxism. Thus his second major work, on Bartolomé de las Casas,[3] does not mention the word Marx, or the phrase social class, but focuses on las Casas and his time, on the way in which he and his contemporaries thought about indigenous peoples, and also on issues of gender and race.

But the question remains: People's Church activists often demonstrate total commitment, by creating Base Communities, or placing themselves at risk in land struggles, like Sister Dorothy Stang who was murdered on February 12, 2005 in the Amazonian state of Para. Why then have they remained, as far as the Church is concerned, a faction rather than evolving into a broad-based movement? Why have their efforts to develop a modern language of religious commitment which confronts the contradictions and indeed the painfulness of capitalism and modernity not been able to find a religious response and link up with Latin America's traditions of popular religion?

3. Gustavo Gutierrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Religious Style and Political Involvement

The experience of Liberation Theology raises the doubt that religious mobilization for political ends tends to polarize between two sorts of manifestation: at one extreme it mobilizes emotions and even hysteria around single slogans tapping deeply rooted and long-held beliefs or practices, from late medieval witch-hunts to the banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe which inspired the early nineteenth-century Independence struggle and innumerable later movements and wars and every popular movement in Mexico.[4] At the other extreme intellectual figures from the religious world, concerned with doctrine, have a significant impact but not on the masses and not even principally on the practices of religion or the beliefs of the religiously active themselves. This would be the case for Liberation Theology and also, for instance, for the Church of England.

It is often said, in connection with this contrast, that Liberation Theology lacks "mystique." I think one should rephrase this, for such things are said by people who oppose it and deplore what they see as the politicization of their Church by radical priests. For it is a defining feature of Liberation Theology and the *basismo* it inspires that they look to the needs of those who do not participate in the formalities of Catholicism, because they are too poor, too ashamed, too shy or indeed too distant from God, because there are no church-like buildings where they live. The activist lay people, nuns and priests go to the slums, to the countryside and to the Amazon, tending to the needs of the outsiders. In these circumstances they tend to work with small groups, not with the techniques of mass communication, and they adopt a didactic style rather than joining in the established ritual and festive rhythms. They have created a popular intelligentsia whose activist role in local mobilizations may have little or nothing to do with religious ritual, or liturgy, or personal devotion. Had the idealism of *basismo* been hitched on to the powerful engine of popular religion, that connection might have empowered the People's Church movement immeasurably, but although Liberation Theology did set aside its early dismissal of popular religion[5] as a manipulation of the people's naïveté, its activists never could translate their organizational and consciousness-raising work into the sort of rhetoric which achieves mass appeal. Briefly, they hate anything with even a hint of demagogy.

In its pastoral work, the People's Church **<add:**

4. Enrique Florescano, *Memoria Mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).

5. Gutierrez spoke of "bourgeois manipulation" of the people.

movement?>places more emphasis on doctrine than the mainstream, and gives more time to consciousness-raising, to training leaders, to debate. Its ideas have had substantial influence far beyond the Church, and beyond Christianity: participation and popular self-determination have become the orthodoxy of development policy and good governance, and many pupils of Liberation Theology are now in power with Lula in Brazil.[6]

While the People's Church movement eschews ritual beyond absolute essentials of church services, emphasizing the message and didactic, leaving little to chance or allusion, popular religion relies for its appeal precisely on what might be called "expectations of the unexpected" and multiple allusive references.[7] Latin American Catholicism continues to revolve around rituals of salvation and healing, and the annual calendar of fiestas and saint's celebrations. Followers of the People's Church have on occasion tried to co-opt indigenous or popular religion, but with uncertain results: in Brazil during the 1980s one anthropologist observed the counter-productive effects of bringing samba drums into Church: practitioners of samba and Afro-style religion and dance felt they were being used or mocked.[8] Such stilted or "over-theorized" contrivances, rather like choreographed multiculturalism, are unlikely to gain mass appeal. In contrast, the under-theorized Charismatic Renewal, a cousin of evangelical Protestantism, has plenty—but in the end experience shows it is unlikely to bring much change in social structures or in politics, save perhaps in the very long term.

These reflections lead me to ask whether there may not be a trade-off between religion driven by ideology or doctrine and religion drenched in the life of ritual and cyclical celebration. People who want to bring about structural change in society have had difficulty marrying their

6. It would be unfair to say that John Paul II was indifferent to these issues. For example, in 1983 he made a visit to Central America which included Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The Nicaragua leg was marked by clear gestures and words of criticism against the Sandinista government and the People's Church movement, many of whose prominent figures were in the government or close to it. But it should be recalled that during the same trip he paid unqualified tribute to the memory of Archbishop Romero and also denounced fiercely the executions which the Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (a member of the tightly knit evangelical Church of the Word) insisted on carrying out: it was a calculated and extremely shocking affront.

7. Pacal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (New York: Heinemann, 2001).

8. John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

cause to religious ritual and sensibility. Instead they have to rely on institutional resources. Base Christian Communities are notoriously dependent on the parish priest or the Bishop for their development and tend to follow the line of those authority figures. In the 1980s CEBs tended to be more involved in consciousness-raising and social activism in places where the Bishops were so inclined—like São Paulo. So when the hierarchy began to change its line or its personnel—as with the retirement in 1998 of the Archbishop of São Paulo, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns—the CEBs are said to have lost dynamism; on the other hand the Landless People's Movement (MST—*Movimento dos Sem Terra*) is still going strong. Popular religion, in contrast, produces its own resources and is not materially dependent on external support from hierarchy and institution, even if it exists in symbiosis with official, institutionalized Catholicism.

It is not so different in Islam. Political Islam is well known for its extreme hostility to sufism, to magic; in other words to popular religion. European and North American analysts of Political Islam tend unfortunately to be political scientists and include little sensitivity to ritual or religious feeling in their writing. But it may be worth noting that some of the most prominent among them insist on the lack of popularity, even failure, of Political Islam—and thereby explain its occasional lurch into violence.[9] Kepel argues that although for a time, in predominantly Muslim countries, political Islam found a broad appeal among the devout bourgeoisie and the mass of unemployed, their turn to violence has cost them that support—especially among the bourgeoisie.

Contrast this with the enormous success of Islamic revival movements such as *Tablighi Jama'at*[10] which determinedly turn their back on politics, have no agenda of social transformation, and have literally millions of followers. Jama'at followers dress in a uniform style, follow a daily timetable and calendar of observance and a stringent way of life, and attend vast annual gatherings, notably in Pakistan. The *Jama'at* shares features with the Pentecostals and with the Chassidic Jewish sect Chabad, notably stringent lifestyle requirements and invasive demands on the time of their followers. None of these has ideological involvement in politics, even if all make sure they keep on the right side of governments of any colour.

9. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

10. Gilles Kepel, *Les banlieues de l'Islam: Naissance d'une religion en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Barbara Metcalf, "'Traditionalist' Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis and Talibs," *ISIM Working Papers* no. 4, 2002.

As an example of this ideological atonality, Latin American evangelicals vote as their pastors instruct them. This is not because of blind obedience, but because it is often to their advantage. Evangelical churches tend to create tightly knit congregations who spend a great deal of time together and make many sacrifices for their church. They proclaim as a matter of doctrine that religion and politics must be kept firmly apart, and this posture is borne out by the absence of an evangelical "line" on most major issues, with the exception of freedom of religious worship, the death penalty (which they oppose) and homosexual marriage. Nonetheless, they do need the support of politicians. They need it to gain access to the media, to set up radio and TV stations, to buy land and obtain building materials for their churches, to get help with, or contracts for, social programmes, and so on. In highly clientelistic political systems with proportional representation, a small but reliable vote bank is worth a great deal to politicians—more than its absolute size, because investment in winning these votes is very profitable. Reliability is the key. Pastors—like ultra-Orthodox Rabbis in Israel or indeed in Brooklyn, London and Montreal—can reliably deliver the vote of their congregations. In contrast, priests of the Catholic Church—or for that matter mainstream Orthodox or Reform Rabbis—for some reason, cannot offer similar guarantees. So evangelical pastors are like honey pots for the politician-bees. In Brazil there used to be many scandals surrounding the political presence of the churches, but it has all died down. Now "everyone" is after their votes: Lula, the current President, whose Workers' Party's foundation was inspired by Liberation Theology and was once regarded as a threat to the very existence of evangelical churches, now has an evangelical Vice-President; the present and former Governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro (husband and wife respectively) are relatively recent converts; the same former Governor was a candidate for the Presidency etc. etc. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God alone has sixteen Federal Deputies and a Senator. Nonetheless, the influence of evangelicals and Pentecostals in Latin America and elsewhere in poor countries is small when compared with their numbers and rapid growth. They do not engage with the intelligentsia—for whom the pastors have scant regard—or with political-ideological debate, they are apparently little interested in establishing footholds in universities, even those with a Protestant identity (like the Methodist University in São Paulo), and they have not established seminaries of their own to train future pastors, preferring to use those of the older-established Methodist and Baptist churches. Even in the US, much as their votes evidently count for a lot, their influence on political debate seems

largely confined to the question of abortion.

A similar argument can be applied to the small but highly effective Ultra-Orthodox parties and their leaders in Israel, whose political activity is very tightly focused on their exemptions and entitlements. On issues of economic policy and even of national security they say little if anything. Even the Sephardi Shas party, with 11 out of 120 Knesset members, which does have a mass electoral base beyond its ultra-Orthodox core, is principally concerned with channelling benefits to its clientele.

Thus far we have sharply contrasting examples of minority religious movements with a strong ideological bent and influential political voice, and mass-based movements with little ideological interest—but often much material interest—in politics. But this picture is based on too simplified a model and crudely drawn variables, and needs to take into account factors which have changed the place occupied by religion in the contemporary world, the changing definition of the religious (from heritage to a more complex mix of heritage and conviction/belief) and the shifting boundaries between the religious and the non-religious. Among these, obviously, are the scale of human migration and the intensity of global communication which have encouraged the formation of diasporas and a disembedding of religious traditions from their more stable, sometimes original, geographical and institutional niches. The most egregious example is Islam, which for the first time in its history has to exist in secular societies and under religion-blind states,[11] in Europe. For not only has the European system confronted Muslims with an irreligious public space to which their heritage is ill-accustomed (cf. the Rushdie affair which so perplexed many British Muslims and now the polemics about women's headscarves and other forms of concealment)—with explicitly political international issues which directly affect their lives, and also with a situation in which they find themselves at low levels of social and economic status. This may be the reason why religion itself has acquired a political tinge: it is one thing for religious tendencies to favour some political trends and to oppose others, but now we find that religion itself is a political issue.

People following different religious traditions living cheek-by-jowl in the crazy-quilt modern urban space, find that those features of their religious practice which serve to mark out frontiers (dress, sexual regulation) become political and their ethnic character accentuated. Muslim leaders, ultra-Orthodox Rabbis and evangelical pastors, too,

11. I use this term to avoid "secular state" because while some European states are secular (such as France) others are not (like the United Kingdom).

find they have to engage in political or quasi-political activity, but for the Muslims it is an unfamiliar context—namely that of a secular state or at least of a the **<?>** tacit secularist contract which has characterized modernity and which, in Europe, transcends the very different prevailing regimes of religious regulation. The resulting friction is not inevitable, but it is more likely than would have been the case when religious communities were embedded in long-established geographical and institutional niches. It is an uncertain environment, for it is hard to pinpoint the circumstances in which friction is sharpened. For example, ultra-Orthodox Jews, who exhibit their markers very ostentatiously, have almost no problems in Europe,[12] whereas in Israel their territorial and demarcating activity arouses much irritation and even hostility from Jews of different tendencies. The remainder of this paper pursues the themes of belief and heritage first elaborated in the context of Latin America and of the Catholic Church, in the light of these observations.

Religion and the Public–Private Divide

If we compare Europe to the US, it is noticeable that although religious attitudes clearly are playing a prominent part in US politics at present, fuelling sometimes almost violent rhetoric, there are, however, no serious running disputes about the *place* of religion such as we have in Europe. The US can have ideological disagreement with and among religious people without disagreement about the place of religious institutions in public or private life, whereas in Europe the institutional issue has not been solved. Thus we have the apparently paradoxical observation that, broadly speaking, Muslims seem to face far less day-to-day hostility in the US than in Europe even though anti-Muslim rhetoric finds many more public outlets there than in Europe.[13]

Discussion of these matters usually proceeds on the assumption that, in spite of all the differences, all European societies are secular. That is, they share the assumption, enshrined in their legal systems, that religion is a matter of personal, private choice not to be dictated by the state, and that the state, while ensuring religious freedom, does not enforce a particular set of religious practices or beliefs. The words "private" and "choice" here can be construed in a negative sense (the state should

12. In Stanford Hill, North London, there is **<a? the?>**Jewish-Muslim Council in which the Jewish side is principally, if not exclusively, ultra-Orthodox.

13. There are mundane reasons for this, to be sure: Muslims in the US tend to be much more middle class than in Europe, even if that is changing somewhat. See A. Mohammed Arif, *Salaam America: South Asian Muslims in New York* **<hyphen = sic?>** (London: Anthem, 2003).

keep out) or in a positive one (the state has to enable people to exercise their freedom of choice against undue interference). The controversy is not hard to see coming. They **<what is the subject of 'they'?>** can be taken to imply that the state will, in addition to its own non-interference, ensure that individuals' religious choices are free of undue constraint imposed by others: that is, that the state will protect individuals from wrongful interference by others in their private choices. Thus, just as in the economic sphere it is wrong to force someone to work for another under an arrangement such as slavery or debt peonage, so in the sphere of religion it could be held to be wrong to use religious arguments to prevent children from learning about Shakespeare, as occurs in a London Chassidic school for girls, which views him as an anti-semitic writer, or indeed to impose a headscarf on young women who, in the eyes of a certain influential strand of opinion, are victims of unreasonable parents or religious authorities. In both cases it could be argued that a handicap is being imposed on a person and his or her choices are severely curtailed by coercive means, and maybe that the state should not allow these situations to develop.

Such judgments rest on very difficult and essentially contested assessments—that is to say, contestation is "essential" to their nature. It is very hard to judge whether there are clear and agreed criteria for deciding what is coercion and what is not in such circumstances, and this difficulty is not the only one. In contrast to the view implied by the previous paragraph, consider this multicultural or even extreme liberal-secular objection: why should the national curriculum (the core curriculum imposed on all state schools in England and Wales) be preferable to a curriculum dominated by Rabbinic study plus a little bit of maths, English and French? If the latter is in accordance with a particular tradition then to withdraw recognition from it as legitimate education may be construed as a violation of a human right. Who is to say that parents are obliged to educate their children for secular careers?

Some might be surprised to learn that the state of Israel has taken, in the end, quite a firm view of such things—though since it relates to state-funded schools the case is obviously not the same. The Israeli Ministry of Education subsidizes vast networks of ultra-Orthodox religious schools and hitherto has had little if any influence on the content of what is taught in them. Finally, after decades of non-intervention, the Ministry sought to require the teaching of a certain minimum of secular subjects as a condition of funding, and in 2005 the Supreme Court upheld the Ministry's decision. So in this state defined by its religion, the state has intervened to protect the interests of children of religious families whose parents and Rabbis want to educate them in such a way

that they cannot join the modern economy.[14] The spokesman for one of the ultra-Orthodox parties was furious: "this," he said in characteristically apocalyptic style, "is the end of the Jewish state."

The French *loi anti-sectes* embodies a robust view of such matters. This law (dated June 12, 2001) allows for the dissolution of any organization which has engaged in the psychological or physical subjection of any person taking part in its activities when it has been found to have harmed a person's freedom, dignity or personality, which has illegally practised medicine or pharmacy, or which has engaged in misleading publicity, fraud or forgery.[15] This law assumes that people's choices are often not free, that this is a meter of interest to the state, and that the fact that a choice is described by the chooser as "religious" is not sufficient to guarantee that it is a free choice, nor is it a reason for exemption from the state's legitimate concern. The state is entitled to protect individuals in these circumstances. So long as the objects of this, to some people exaggerated, concern were the missionaries of the Reverend Moon, the debate could be thought of as concerning a tiny minority. But that is no longer the case: it is now quite common to encounter people who have radically altered their lifestyles in movements whose leaders exercise power unrestrained by the normal rules of bureaucracy or rational authority, and whose followers lead tightly regulated lives which minimize contact with outsiders. The particular circumstances vary: I would not claim, for example, that *most* charismatic or evangelical churches, which require core members to follow quite strict norms of modesty and austerity (in dress, in avoidance of tobacco and alcohol), are tightly closed and inward-looking. But there is a range of quite clearly identifiable situations and organizations in which restrictions are so tight that it is not clear where they fall with respect to the line between free choice and undue influence or abuse of power.

The representatives of Islam in Europe are caught: the culture they

14. There are indications that in response to tightening economic conditions and reduced state subsidies, the ultra-Orthodox community may now be relenting in its hostility to the provision of training for the labour market to its members.

15. The language of the law deserves quoting for its trenchancy and to illustrate its very firm, even brutal, psychological assumptions: it permits the dissolution of any organization ("personne morale") whose aim is "to perpetuate or exploit the psychological or physical subjection of persons" ("ayant pour but ou pour effet de créer, de maintenir ou d'exploiter la sujétion psychologique ou physique des personnes…") and as examples it cites attacks against the liberty or dignity of a person, or indeed against a persons' "personality," as well of course as endangering young people, illegal practice of medicine and deceptive or fraudulent advertising ("publicité mensongère, de fraudes ou de falsifications").

have inherited and the people they speak for do not on the whole recognize the notion of a private religion, or even of a public–private divide. Yet they are obliged to defend the notion of a private sphere to keep the state out of their families and institutions and marriage practices, now that they are a diaspora in secular Europe. The issues which arise from this difficulty are unavoidably political and highly sensitive for all sorts of historical and contemporary reasons—for example, the implicit place of Christianity as a dominant faith even in secular states, and the Christian origins of so many now-secular European institutions like hospitals and charities and universities, not to speak of secularism itself.

In addition to the diasporic phenomenon, these issues are given added urgency by the unprecedented prominence of what I call conversion-based movements, and their increasing influence over the mainstream—if indeed in these changing circumstances we can be confident that we know where the mainstream is. Converts, including reverts or returnees, namely secularized people adopting strict or charismatic or fundamentalist versions of the faith of their forebears, do much more than change their inner beliefs and swap their place of worship: they undertake a wholesale change in every aspect of their lives and contemporary circumstances seem to make it easier for them to do this than has been the case previously, or indeed than is the case now in many contemporary societies. Conversion-led movements themselves are wielding increasing influence, placing the mainstream on the defensive, as evidenced by the *t'shuva* movement in Judaism, by evangelicals in the Church of England, and by revivalist movements in Islam. The mainstream, for its part, is having to make concessions, as evidenced in the Pentecostalization of Catholicism by the Charismatic Renewal and in the adoption of aspects of the ultra-Orthodox way of life by modern Orthodox Jews who previously would have drawn a clear dividing line between themselves and the ultra-Orthodox.

Eventually, following the law of church institutionalization, these "extremisms" may be domesticated, that is they may be brought into the secular fold where religion is a private matter. But it is also possible that, in these new circumstances, they will add to the Muslim diasporic challenge by questioning deeply embedded assumptions in secularized societies about religious affiliation. This is an important question. Religious affiliation has been historically assumed in European societies to be a matter of tradition and a characteristic received by people in their childhood from parents and school.[16] But in European secularized

16. Of course, European missionaries pioneered conversion in their colonial possessions—but that was for the colonies! Interestingly, it is the migration of populations from the

society that conception exists in tension with a different one which conceives of religion as belief and only belief—an individual and private matter.

Conversion-based movements have destabilized this balance and revealed it to be more delicate than was once assumed in Europe: it has not in the past mattered what a person believed—or, better, what a person *really* believed. People's religious affiliation was classified by the company they kept, by their surname, by their colour, and other outward and indexical signs—not by their beliefs: social class, region or locality, language together with religious affiliation, all contributed to a gestalt. In the searing best-seller *Angela's Ashes*, by Frank McCourt (also made into a film) we see the hatred of Limerick Catholics in the inter-war period for their Northern cousins who, in their eyes, were somehow tarred with a Protestant brush by the mere fact of being Northerners, even if they fought with the IRA. Religion in this perspective is not a choice but a fate.[17]

As conversion and reversion have become epidemic, so the pressure is for frontiers to thicken be they social, ethnic or religious and even if one can tell the difference. Fortuitously, this is happening at a time and in a place where the state offers resources to accentuate some of this thickening, and it is a peculiarly European phenomenon: the claim for entitlements on grounds of belief can be used to thicken frontiers by invoking the right to religious freedom and expression, laws protecting ethnic minorities, and the state does not claim to take a decision on what counts as religious belief and what does not.**<check sentence structure, it doesn't flow very well>** So**<Change to 'In this way'?>** conventional boundaries and assumptions of secularism are shifted. To emphasize how important this is, note how in Latin America, which shares Europe's republican and secularist traditions, the state simply does not have the capacity to interfere with children's upbringing or with other family matters, even though it might have reason to do so, so that many issues about what goes on in the private sphere simply do not arise, whereas in Europe, with its pervasive apparatus of social workers and their heavy responsibilities, the state can

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colonies, especially from Africa and the Caribbean, back to Europe that has contributed much to transforming conversion from an exception event to a leading feature of religion in Britain.

17. During fieldwork in North London in 1998 a Jewish community leader told me how she had approached a civil servant to discuss the possibility of using ethnic minority provisions to set up a Housing Association. The official had responded by saying "but being Jewish is a religion, it is a choice" to which she had given the immediate response: "And what about Hitler—did he ask?"

reach into the heart of the family. This destabilizes concepts of the private sphere, and may be seen by Muslims as an excuse to attack some of their most deeply rooted and never-questioned traditions. Some practices among ultra-Orthodox Jews might also provoke controversy, such as the insistence on making small boys study Rabbinic learning for hours every day irrespective of its suitability for all of them. But for the state to question such things would be to provoke a terrible public controversy—so the implicit biases of the state are also present.

The involvement of the state in the management of boundaries between secular and religious requires trust, and more especially trust that people's religious affiliation is authentic.[18] But how can one establish authenticity, and how far can one go in testing it, without invading someone's personhood unreasonably?

For example: a person who claims exemption from certain rules—like school dress or a day off on Saturday—on grounds of religious belief, is assumed to be sincere. Since religion is held to be a private matter, it is not really legitimate for the modern state—in the person of a judge or a social worker, for example—to pronounce on whether an individual sincerely holds to a religion. But sincerity is a hard one to call, and, in order to pre-empt a challenge, the individual may prefer to invoke the language and norms of multiculturalism, namely tradition, instead of claiming, so to speak, "religious immunity" on grounds of belief. This is because in "multicultural speak" it suffices to say that "this is the way it is *done*." The question of sincerity of belief, or of authenticity of interpretation, does not arise. The Electoral Commission in Israel heard this sort of argument from the Shas party, which distributed tiny bottles of oil during an election campaign, inscribed with a picture of a revered Kabbalist and a play on the party's name to make it read like "remedy oil." The party claimed this was no different from distributing t-shirts, which is regarded as acceptable campaigning, but the Commission, accepting the arguments of an anthropologist that the distribution of the liquid fitted in with a North African custom of gift exchange, said it was bribery. Multiculturalists disagreed.[19] In England they would probably have got away with it.[20]

Now there is no point in scaremongering: convention and the law

18. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

19. G. Barzilai, *Communities and Law: Politics and Cultures of Legal Identities* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

20. So much, by the way, for Israel as a theocracy! Or rather, so much for any attempt to classify Israel on a theocratic-secularist axis.

impose limits, and tradition is not and will not be used to justify absolutely anything. But the use of tradition as a plea for exemption is causing trouble. Within diasporic communities there is usually a strand of opinion which fears controversy and desires not to "rock the boat." But not all share this view. Many Jews are taught that this was the suicidal mistake of previous Western European generations. The strand of opinion which does challenge the system, however, can now invoke contemporary concepts of religious freedom which, after the Holocaust, place far fewer limits on cultural difference than would have been the case a few decades ago.

Furthermore, in a religion-blind state, even where there is an implicitly recognized dominant faith, there is no source of recognized religious authority: is a judge to say that a Bishop is more entitled to pronounce than an evangelical preacher on the legitimacy of this or that practice?, or that the Chief Rabbi is more correct than a Chassidic *Rebbe*? Such matters are arising, for example, in the daily practice of Britain's National Health Service: one hears accounts of ultra-Orthodox Jewish families physically preventing their elderly relatives from being taken to hospital because the food there is not kosher, or because the Sabbath laws might be violated. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools may in theory conform to the minimum standards prescribed by the authorities, but a school which bans Shakespeare as in the example mentioned above must surely be sailing close to the wind. These cases remain in penumbra for all sorts of reasons, but eventually they will come into the public domain.

These issues of both authenticity and authority came into the public domain in the case of the Muslim schoolgirl from Luton who insisted on wearing clothes which reflected a strict version of modesty. The clothes she wore to school were even in violation of the modest uniform which the school had prescribed after consultation with local Muslim bodies.[21] Her complaint became a court case and reached the Appeal Court, which decided in her favour, not on the substance of the case but largely because the school had failed to take into account the European Convention on Human Rights. Instead, the school had focused exclusively on its own authority in prescribing the uniform and the reasonableness of its consultations with the religious authorities in Luton. The judges implied it might have been possible for the school to maintain the decision, but the school had been at fault by not taking the Convention into account in their decision-making. The Convention, in Article 9(1), spells out the principle of religious freedom, but also the

21. http://www.courtservice.gov.uk/judgmentsfiles

circumstances in which limits can be placed on religious freedom:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom in public or private to manifest his religion or belief.
>
> Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Note the following: the vast—though slightly declining—majority of the pupils in the Luton school were Muslim; local Imams differed in their opinions on the correct or acceptable dress for girls, and one of them expressed different opinions in his private capacity from those previously expressed as Chair of the Luton Council of Mosques. One Appeal Judge engaged in a brief disquisition on Islamic Theology to discover that there were broadly two traditions, one stricter than the other. I could never have imagined before how such a discussion could take place in an English court, but it was relevant because so much of the case revolved around fine qualitative social judgments of what was acceptable Muslim dress. The judgment had to stray into essentially political judgments as well: to decide what is necessary to protect a democratic society, as stipulated by the Convention, or to assess (in the judge's words) the "fair balance that must be struck between the various interests at stake," is a political matter. The European Court judgments quoted by the judges as precedents likewise involved political judgments. For example, the European Court had discussed whether enforcing a headscarf ban might be permissible if thereby a state was taking a stance against "extremist political movements" in general—thus automatically of course triggering a political debate about the definition of extremism, not just about whether a particular organization was engaged in violence. And in any case, the very political declarations of the plaintiff with reference to Islamophobia and the "post-9/11 world" as she left the Appeal Court after her victory revealed something of a political motive underlying the origins of the whole affair which judges and lawyers, of course, could not mention.

From the point of view of a sociologist, at least, the Luton case was riddled with confusion: the Judge in the High Court had said he accepted that the girl's "motives and beliefs…were completely genuine"—but on what basis could he find otherwise? He had also said that the school's Governing Body were entitled to find that the uniform policy "satisfied all the requirements of the Islamic dress code." But what business do school governors have discussing such matters? They are

not an authoritative religious body—and even if they were their conclusions would be "essentially contested." For that matter, there is no such thing as an authoritative Muslim body in a secular society: the issue is settled in predominantly Muslim societies by constitutional arrangements whereby the state controls religious courts, for example. In Britain, such matters should surely only arise in a Muslim school, not in a non-denominational state school.

Secular Liberalism under Pressure from Conversion

There is a tension between the concept of religious affiliation as free personal choice and the ready-made everyday acceptance that most people's religious affiliation is derived from their home background and their ancestry. The secular-liberal cast of mind gets very confused here, and its implicit assumption, which we can hear underlying everyday conversation, is tolerant of, or at least understanding towards, religious affiliation as a way of life, but has great difficulty coming to terms with religion as a belief. Secular-liberal conversation is mystified by those who have made an active choice of religious affiliation, as converts or "reverts," whereas it can, so to speak, "forgive" people who inherit their affiliation and retain it as a matter of habit or social convenience. Although believing without belonging, which has become the governing slogan of the sociology of religion,[22] may be what people say they do, for the true secularist, as far as the public is concerned, belonging without believing is a "cool" religiosity which can be lived with.

The secularist attitude has opened the way to a potentially ungovernable situation in Europe. It is hard to contest a claim for state protection for anything which is even alleged to be traditional, and it is impossible to contest the claim of traditionality itself because that is not for the state to decide. Even in the United States issues are arising (again) over Darwinian evolution and intelligent design, which among other things challenge the state to distinguish between religion and science, or even to adjudicate between their rival claims.

In Europe, converts of various kinds are at the cutting edge of contemporary religious expansion, but and<?> they also place belief ahead of tradition. The challenge they present to certain implicit understandings which underpin the secular order is illustrated by the story of the two young teenage girls whose refusal to discard their headscarves gave rise to the latest wave of controversy in France, and

22. Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002).

finally led to the law banning obtrusive religious symbols in schools. These girls are sisters, their father is a lawyer and half-Jewish ("Jewish according to the laws of Vichy but not according to the Talmud" as he put it) while their mother is an Algerian convert to Catholicism (and very devout). They embarked on something like a research project and decided that the religious affiliation which most appealed to them was a particular Islamic tendency. So they started wearing their headscarves; the unfortunate Head Teacher of their school implored them to remove their headscarves saying they were losing him sleep at night, to which they replied that they were sleeping very well thank you! Their father supported them to the hilt and the word around the school was "don't mess with them, their father is Jewish and a lawyer."[23]

If religion is a choice, how far can that choice be respected? Are the authorities required to check on the sincerity, let alone the correctness, of the choice? Why do the requirements of religious observance have some special status over and above other requirements and rights? And why only religion? For the time being this question has been swept under the carpet. There are serious and persistent queries about what is religious and what is "cultural," and it is only a matter of time before a court will be called on to draw the line. Religious freedom allows no monopoly to any religious authority. However, a proliferation of definitions of what is proper in one or another faith may lead the state back into the fray, responding to pressure to define what is proper, or to regulate the exercise of religious authority. Interestingly, the famously *laïc* French state has set up a "Conseil français du culte musulman" in what seems to be a tentative attempt to institutionalize religious authority among Muslims.

Secularism Destabilized

The preceding section sketched some of the difficulties which we face in Europe. We do not know whether religion is tradition or belief, we do not know if religion should be privileged above culture or heritage, or whether indeed it is indistinguishable from them. In addition there are several background elements which must play a role: one is that, although diasporas are not in themselves a new phenomenon in Europe's religious institutional history, the scale and global context of Europe's most recent diasporas evidently present new problems; another is that however much European legal and institutional arrangements have shifted towards a separation of religion and state, we

23. *Le Monde*, 14 October 2003.**<author? article title? Page no. available?>**

are still heirs to a long history in which there was an implicit understanding that one religious institution was dominant, and this evidently complicates the incorporation of the most recent diasporas. Yet another destabilizing force is the rise of conversion-led movements which are redefining what religion means among the poor and especially among diasporic populations. Reality has moved on very substantially, and now we are in a mess.

The first part set out to contrast the influence of a mass-based religious movement—Pentecostalism or evangelical Christianity—with that of another—Liberation Theology—which sought to espouse the cause of the masses inspired by a religious belief and a theology but through political action. The paradox I wanted to point out was that although the evangelicals are much more numerous their influence in the political direction of society has so far been limited. I say "so far" because in the long run the cultural change brought by the conversion of so many people—up to, though not often more than, 20 per cent of the population—to an evangelical way of life may be far-reaching. Liberation Theology in contrast has, beyond the sphere of the churches in which it developed and beyond the sphere of religion, been the inspiration of social movements like Brazil's Landless People's Movement (MST), NGOs, international development policy and all sorts of consciousness-raising and participatory initiatives in Latin America and beyond. This should not surprise: the influence of religious thought lie**<delete 'lie'?>** on all modern secular ethics and political philosophy is also self-evident.

It seemed to me that here was a lesson about the place of religious belief in action, for Liberation Theology spawned a movement, *basismo* as I have called it, which taught a doctrine to its followers, while evangelicals seemed able to have much more success without bothering much about doctrine. Theirs may not be a political revolt, but it is at least a mass expression of cultural dissidence, with its social base clearly among low-income groups. But Liberation Theology was the sort of movement which secularists can live with and even welcome.

Compared with Europe it is quite surprising that this major religious transformation has taken place with very little conflict at all. There are exceptions, as in Mexican villages where evangelicals are punished for opting out of the traditional obligations of fiestas and cargos which are interwoven with Catholic ritual, or momentary incidents in Brazil which have sometimes ended up in the courts[24] but they are unusual.

24. Patricia Birman and David Lehmann, "Religion and the Media in a Battle for Ideological Hegemony," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18, no. 2 (1999): 145–64.

Somehow, Latin America has made a peaceful transition from an overwhelming dominance of Roman Catholicism to a secular constitutional and political settlement. The reasons are many, but the outcome is nevertheless incontestable. It is certainly an original version of secularization, and, because it has been peaceful, promises to be quite a successful one.

Yet when we look at Europe we see that the secular society may be established, but secularism as a regime governing the relations between religion and the state and between the private and the public domains is in trouble. One reason, obviously, is our difficulty in incorporating the Muslim populations: their leadership, reasonably, is looking for recognition; their levels of income, education and employment are distressingly low, and their heritage has not accustomed them to living in a religion-blind state. The resulting controversies have highlighted the inconsistency of Europe's regimes governing the relations between religion and the state and between the public and the private, and have contributed to the tense return of religion into politics. This return is not quite what modernity might envisage: instead of a struggle over ideas, such as has been promoted by Liberation Theology, we have, because of quite fortuitous circumstances, returned to a foundational type of struggle about the definition and place of religion in the state. Strangely, the regions where these institutional issues (as opposed to political polemics) have been resolved, like Latin America, and probably also the United States, are ahead of Europe in the secularization stakes.

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