

WHAT CAN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES TEACH US ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CULTURAL IDENTITY, RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

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1. Premise

Every human being who comes into the world finds myriad religious options, established over time within different territorial and cultural contexts already waiting for him or her. The pre-existence of these options is, to a large extent, also their strong point, consisting as it does in a heritage handed down from generation to generation almost without interruption. As centuries and millennia pass, we may find in them signs of decline or growth due to particular circumstances, but it is unlikely that a religion which has been sufficiently institutionalised will suddenly lose its consistency or its appeal. People and organizations, beliefs and rites, values and symbols, traditions and acquisitions are capable of standing the test of the most drastic changes though they may also alter in the face of minor events. Thanks to this, in the course of history, in the various societal contexts of the north, the south, the east and the west, the salient features of religions have become consolidated and remain, as a whole, a more or less important reference point for millions of individuals as well as for more restricted groups of people.

2. The hereditary process

The transmission of ideals, norms and values from one generation to another within the same society, is a hereditary process which does not occur simply upon the death of one's predecessors but takes shape much earlier, evolving over the years and decades, very slowly, minute by minute, step by step, without ostentatious and/or extravagant leaps. Metaphorically speaking it might be said to be a gradual distillation which takes place over a considerable period of time and the decantation of which is as gentle and almost as imperceptible as drops of water which will eventually wear out the hardest of rocks. This transition, moreover, has a typical connotation in that it is global, not fragmented and, at least tendentially, systemic in its organic unity and completeness. Parents pass on to their children what they in turn

have been taught by those who are now their children's grandparents and the progenitors of contemporary educators and inculcators of culture.

Initially, the impact of the cultural inheritance of adults may be mild, even soft, but as young people develop so too does their spirit of criticism which questions the meaning of everything. Subsequently there may be estrangement from acquired attitudes and behavioural models, yet, a trace of them persists somewhat like a Karst process, unexpressed, yet ever present. An overflow of inherited values may occur at a later stage, at the least predictable moments or on the most problematic occasions when the very value and meaning of existence is called into play.

It is unlikely that a patrimony of values be partial or segmented in form. In short, a set of values does not break up into a fragmented set of disjointed events or interventions but enjoys a basic unifying strength of its own. Hence, no one value is an isolated 'bequest' limited only to its specific sphere, but each one belongs to a coherent set capable of containing multiple principles, of providing guidelines and specifically targeted aims. It is precisely this interconnection between values that seems to represent the effective solution in that it is capable of directing the actions of the social individual in a tendentially uniform way.

Obviously, as time passes, new choices and actions present themselves so that individuals may put aside certain elements and attribute importance to others as life proceeds. Rarely does one's received inheritance remain identical to itself never waning never waxing. What is more, one's inheritance is not always transmitted in its entirety, intact in every detail, but tends to mature within a given cultural context, to replicate the tendencies of the past, the same traditions as those of an earlier age and, basically, the same essential values. Its global comprehensiveness is, likewise, a guarantee of its greater holding power compared to other more fragmentary processes.

Succession in inheritance does not simply mean making inspiring principles and behavioural patterns work; it also implies the transmission of the means by which to perform the role of inculcator of culture-education-training. Therefore, passing the baton in a hypothetical relay race of life involves both passing on a set of values and assigning a responsible role for retransmission of one heritage to a succession of future generations. The multi-century sequence of a cultural legacy, handed down from generation to generation, entails, in fact, implicit duties rather than the right to ensure the continuity of a common reference frame capable of providing for the identification and collective needs of future members of the community. In this respect Durkheim (1912) hit the mark.

If we think about it, every set of values people inherit contains aspects and styles belonging to the past from which it derives its legitimacy. But

the transition from generation to generation may be compared to a kind of avalanche which picks up much of what it encounters on its downward journey, thus delivering to the plain below a much more conspicuous and varied inheritance than when it started out. By way of example, it suffices to recall the house-museums (Besana 2007) of numerous families who have collected the heirlooms and memorabilia of their lineage and of the religious faith to which they belong (photos of ancestors, works of art, sacred artefacts), to bear witness to the existence of a cultural capital that is precious and versatile and worthy of being preserved not only for future generations but, above all, for future inculcators of culture-education-training.

3. Culture and socialization

The inculcation of cultural values in children by parents is based on a complex of ethics, traditions, principles, values, ideas and spiritual elements which, in fact, lay the foundations of what these young individuals will use when, later, they come into contact with education systems; in other words the children are directed intentionally by their nearest and dearest to fit into and learn to behave within society and hence face the challenges of interpersonal socialization outside of the family circle and interact especially with their peers and with the adults who act as educators (at school, during free time, in religious practices and in forms of communication that are increasingly globalized).

The chain of cultural inculcation remains, generally, unbroken, even in cases where parents – presumed educators – deliberately and explicitly abandon their role/task as transmitters of a cultural inheritance, which may or may not include religion. Indeed, even in the presence of a deliberate refusal to transmit given ideas, that is, an ideological – in the neutral sense of the term – refusal, it may be argued that some kind of cultural inculcation occurs just the same, because the very absence of a message is, in itself, a signal indicating the non-relevance of certain ideas held by others and a means of proposing alternative ones which are never devoid of ideological content and always imply value judgments, regardless. In other words their content of some kind is always conveyed to the person for whom it is intended: the infant, the child, the adolescent, the young adult.

In the field of sociology, the impact of intercultural relationship-education-formation should not be underestimated or overlooked since it represents the chief birthright a religion offers to both its practising faithful and occasional practitioners who claim not belonging to any religion at all (Davie 1994).

Thanks to the results of a previous research project (Cipriani 1992), we have argued that the religion of values embraces vital issues [...]. In particular, the area ascribed to the religion of values extends from the

category known as *religious (church) critical* to that described as *religious (distancing self from church) critical*, and thus includes both a part of church religion (the less indulgent part) and the whole gamut of diffused religion, along with all forms of critical religion. Thus the framework of non-institutional religion appears much broader than that of the institutional kind, being, as it is, based on shared values which are represented essentially by choices acted upon, according to interviewees, because considered the guiding principles of their lives, due to the education they received up to the age of about eighteen.

It is reasonable to maintain that we are faced not only with a set of beliefs based largely on shared values since they have been diffused chiefly through primary and, later, secondary socialization, but these very values may be considered intrinsically a form of religion. This religion has non-confessional, profane, secular threads.

In brief, we have gone from a dominant church religion to a diffused majority form of credo, to a religion composed of mixed values. [...] the conclusion is that religion can be considered as a means of transmission and diffusion of values; indeed, that it performs this task in a particularly functional and efficient manner (Cipriani 2001: 300–301).

Now, the very cultural bequest transmitted to children is itself subject to interaction, in that the education carried out by adults is subject to the personality of the young learners and their ability to react to and re-examine the values received. In any case, we cannot ignore the fact that what is experienced in the family, especially during the earliest years of life when values are being transmitted, makes young people a party to the values they receive right from the start and almost always induces them to identify with the teachings thus acquired.

4. Religion and socialization

Fundamentally speaking, sociology did not emerge as a comfort zone for institutions nor did the sociology of religion, in particular, act in its own interests, in the pay, as it were, of churches and religious congregations. The aim of sociology remains critical analysis regardless of the topic examined, and, therefore, the discipline is no slave to the defence of any aspect of the *status quo*. Indeed, the critical role of sociology is that of casting a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree field light on the past and the present. Sociological research is, necessarily, at the service of science *tout court*, but of science as a correct methodological approach. Especially in a field such as religion, a professional ethical code is required to guarantee the utmost quality and act as a procedural and disenchanting buffer against facile, institutional

sirens, against the temptation of kowtowing to any momentary victor or jumping onto the bandwagon of this or that powerful figure, who, going beyond the specifically religious sphere, seeks to invade other domains.

The most effective action on the part of religions and churches, in the past as in the present, is the creation and promotion of conditions capable of encouraging millions of people to embrace a religion. The number of those who actually practise a professed faith is, generally, much lower – a ‘vicarious’ religion in Davie’s (2000, 2007) terms – than the number of believers in or sympathisers with a particular creed. This, however, does not mean that the influence of a particular religion loses in vigour proportion to the numerical difference between its faithful and its less convinced supporters. The best working solution for churches and religious groups is to intervene at the early stages of life and, generally, within the first fifteen years – in other words at the dawn of development when many of choices are made.

The future of an individual, roughly up to the age of 15 or 16, depends on his/her social and educational schooling up to that moment. It is during these formative years that the bases of the future social agent are laid. This means, obviously, that the socialising efforts made by adult-parents with regard to their offspring is strategically important. But other people involved in the process are also vital: teachers and other academic figures (whether religious or not), individual friends, groups of friends and peers, various other educational agencies, such as cultural entertainers, lay and religious figures, group leaders etc.

All these people, working together or separately, prepare the ground for the course that the adolescent will then take alone.

Usually, it is during this phase that the diffusion of a religion, prevalent within a given context, broad or restricted as it may be, takes place. Hence the acquired religion, sown by the biological family, develops throughout the following generation and takes root. From one generation to the next the religious creed is passed on almost uninterrupted except in cases of personal modifications on the part of one or other of the parents or educators.

Without this initial phase during which religious content is transmitted, it is unlikely that specialised catechists or religious instructors can intervene significantly. The seeds of initial religious socialization bear immediate fruits upon the initiation of young people and their participation in public religious life. Later on, one may note a further investigation of the reference values of the religion, or even partial withdrawal from the faith in more or less ostentatious terms. However, despite this, at a much later stage, the values inculcated by the family and the environment external to it will begin to operate, to discriminate between alternative actions, between one choice and another, between a virtuous and a non-virtuous deed.

5. Diffused religion

Diffused religion today is not so different from that of the past. Indeed it is its very persistence that gives it that peculiar, almost structural, characteristic which Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967) would have conceived as a hard core not easily altered by time, but subject, nevertheless, to variations that may not always be easy to perceive. If anything has changed, it has occurred at a secondary level where detail rather than substance is affected. Diffused religion is the result of a vast process of religious socialization that continues to pervade cultural reality and not only that. The pervasive character of beliefs endures because it is an intrinsic aspect of religion itself, strongly imbued with religious connotations.

Even atheism, for example within a Catholic country, is not an ineluctably anti-Catholic phenomenon just as it is not such in other contexts where a given religion is dominant and has become diffused, as in the case of Islam or Hinduism, Shinto or Buddhism. It is also true that a person who adheres to a diffused religion is usually not very devout and pays greater attention to teachings which produce immediate practical results than to those of a more general nature.

Furthermore, reference to religion found in the speeches of politicians – whether they be American or Iranian, Russian or Israeli, English or Italian – confirms the existence of a specific characteristic, both emotive and persuasive, of diffused religion the strength of which is certainly not lost on those seeking levers to boost political–electoral consensus. It should be pointed out, however, that there is no direct link between the civil (not *civic*) religion of the United States and the diffused religion of Italy, for instance, even in metaphorical terms. What Robert Bellah (1970) says on the basis of concepts such as ‘exodus’, ‘chosen people’, ‘promised land’, ‘New Jerusalem’, ‘sacrificial death’ and ‘resurrection’ with reference to a presumed national and cultural inheritance of the American people, cannot be applied elsewhere and less so in Italy or in Europe where historical events are chronologically very different and are transmitted from generation to generation without any reference to an exodus or to a divine predilection for a nation or to a palingenesis after the destruction of the ‘Old Jerusalem’ or after choosing the supreme sacrifice in hopes of rebirth and renewal. These are scenarios that are extraneous to the European cultural heritage or which, at least, are not prevalent. This means that, in the long run, we must recognize that there are many ways of inculcating culture or of transmitting values from one generation to another and therefore of considering a religious inheritance, diffused in the past, operative in the present and destined, one way or another, to continue in the future.

6. The strength of religious belief

The buoyancy of a religion, or, in other words, its ability to resist crises, is usually greater in creeds with larger numbers of followers, but careful handling of periods of difficulty can permit even quantitatively smaller or so-called minor religious groups to rise above the difficulties, the anguish and the suffering encountered. Especially in cases of religions confined to a specific locality, devoid of worldwide diffusion, progress can be rather unpredictable: their numbers might, perhaps, remain constant for quite some time only to witness a sudden and numerically exponential growth due to an extraordinary event or to the influence of a particular leader and the movement founded by him or her. In the case of the so-called new religions, a court case receiving massive media coverage, for example, might generate suspicion and diminish the number of followers. On the other hand, the positive outcome of civil and penal trial regarding religious expression might well rekindle a spirit of proselytism and attract people who no longer harbour doubts about the trustworthiness of a given group. From a longitudinal historical perspective in some instances, religions, once prevalent in a particular context, have later dwindled so much as to become barely ascertainable, sociologically speaking. In the case of other religions, there have been unforeseeable developments leading to an increase in influence and diffusion. Generally speaking, it is not possible to pinpoint the exact reasons underlying these two tendencies without investigating each one in depth.

The fact remains that, when we observe a growth in religious allegiance, we might be led to envisage a system of communicating vessels whereby an increase in one religion corresponds to a decrease in another, as though the overall number of religiously-oriented subjects did not change significantly but simply redistributed itself in a different fashion because of specific connections existing between the various religions.

The content of religion is grounded in the very meaning of existence and in the decisive directing influence that values have on action. In short, we can consider actions that do not normally enter into any historically recognised religion as religious. However, to avoid unjustifiable diversions, we should emphasize the fact that the presence of values is so relevant as to assume a pre-eminent position as regards thinking and acting. With reference to this, it is appropriate to draw a line between other ways of thinking, suggested by authors such as Thomas Luckmann (1967) for example. This non-religious outlook permits investigation of historical and innovative experiences that have been commonly recognized but which should also be included *ex cathedra* in socially oriented religious phenomenology. Hence, we leave the beaten track of the officially recognized religions to address the problem of the dis-

inction between religions and non-religions (where Buddhism has often paid the price, being recognized as a philosophy rather than as a real religion, sociologically speaking). And so we reach a different perspective which does not exclude *a priori* any religious group with even a semblance of religious content. Often in the past, even among the most advanced sociologists, the idea of a sort of official definition of religion to be taken for granted insofar as it entered the historically legitimate canons of churches, sects, movements, communities or any other self-proclaimed religious group, prevailed.

It does not, moreover, appear indispensable to establish beforehand what religion is supposed to be. We can start from simple 'theoretical sensitivity' towards religious modalities and then proceed to collect and analyze data to which we may finally apply certain 'sensitizing concepts' deriving from the data themselves. In short, an approach in the manner of the *Grounded Theory* (Glaser, Strauss 1967), re-elaborated and modified, might turn out to be very useful in when seeking to free ourselves from the trammels of a predefined, preordained and pre-oriented sociology of religion.

In actual fact, human action is motivated by many factors. Each individual is guided by fundamental values that influence his or her behaviour. Such values are deeply rooted in abstract ideas, even if they are susceptible to empirical validation.

Values are of the utmost important, because they are regarded as belonging to a superior level. They cannot be replaced very easily; they seem non-negotiable, and, at the same time highly desirable. That is the reason why individuals are prepared to undergo all kinds of sacrifice and difficulties for their sake.

On the basis of the consideration we attribute to values, we establish our practical behaviour. One's appraisal of good and evil, right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate depends on the organization of one's set of values. Values can be either a starting point or a target to reach, an idea to be implemented, a goal to be achieved. Therefore, we might say that values always inspire human behaviour whether as a goal or as a source of inspiration.

At present, it seems more apt to assume a connection between inspiring value and practical action, that is to say, between value and choice (or a refusal to choose). In other words, the implementation of a value, that is to say the behaviour preferred, involves the need for a distinction between what is desirable from what is possible, and therefore reasonable consideration of actual contingencies.

7. Diffused religion and religion of values

On the other hand it should be kept in mind that diffused religion can easily fall prey to exploitation since calls to religious values can nearly always

have a very strong appeal. Rather than refer to sacred scripture or other religious texts, politicians often avail of simple, popular reference to well-known personages associated with the diffused religion of their region: Padre Pio or a pope, a Madonna deemed as the protector of a certain area, a saint believed to be a miracle worker, a holy man or a guru, an ayatollah or a prophet, a charismatic leader or a marabout, a rabbi or an imam, a shaman or a bonze.

In any case, it is not easy to distinguish between diffused religion and the religion of values: the former is included in the latter which, in turn, embraces a larger section of any population characterised by different levels of belief. Diffused religion as such concerns, in fact, a category of people who do not regard religion as their *raison d'être* but who, nonetheless, fall back on the values of religion when they have to make important decisions that require more ethically relevant choices.

Conversely, the religion of values concerns a wider spectrum of attitudes and behaviour that may be more or less superficial regarding the so-called official model of the religion adhered and/or referred to. Hence, in the religion of values we can find orthodox forms of religion as well as forms that are more critical, if not actually opposed, to the credo and the official rites of that religion. But the widespread effect of a religion as a whole is not limited to its own environment alone. It also manages to influence areas of thought and action outside of its specific ambit, areas which have been estranged from it. Here we are talking about contexts where forms of morality, although not in line with that of the pre-eminent religion, still preserve traces of it – at least as an expression of a universal ethical afflatus not altogether alien to some previous contact with religious values, the result of personal, family history or of education or of the kind of socialization experienced.

In the long run, political circumstance and, above all, election results cannot be explained in terms of confessional support or reference to religious issues: many more complex factors that go beyond official and/or private religious pronouncements are involved.

Starting from a theoretical proposition of this kind, which may be summed up as religion diffused through values, it is possible to choose an empirical procedure to build up an ulterior, basically medium-range theory; a theory with reduced powers of implementation, as far, essentially, as, the data obtained during research are concerned. To this regard we can speak of a new form of triangulation between quantitative and/or qualitative methodological instruments, but first and foremost between the basic and the research theories (in other words, one based on data, in fact *Grounded Theory*).

This leads to a double scientific guarantee derived from a dual, converging theorization both of basic and research approaches and also from a method-

ological triangulation that is usually a harbinger of a more in-depth and more convincing theory, one better supported than usual by research results.

Following a similar path, the idea of a religion diffused through values might acquire a more adequate overall profile corroborated by a wide-ranging examination without preclusions of any kind.

8. Values as cognitive dimension

Many authors agree that values have a cognitive dimension. At first, we have to remember the work of Kluckhohn (1951) who, besides the cognitive dimension (related to either positive or negative judgment and to facts and behaviour) includes an affective dimension (regarding acceptance or refusal of those conforming or not conforming to values) and a selective dimension (that highlights the solid influence that values exert on human behaviour). This third dimension remains abstract and general in the case of reference values in particular, but it becomes a normative rule when related to particular and contextualized actions (Sciolla 1998: 751).

An ethical and political dimension may be added to the cognitive one. As such it is more closely connected with structures and organized institutions. It is therefore necessary, in order to strengthen individual positions, to connect them with shared values, to avoid explaining each time – at interpersonal level – attitudes and preferences, habits and behaviour, criteria and procedures. As a matter of fact, institutions do not often support individuals sufficiently when facing similar responsibilities; therefore, it is quite common for single social actors to provide explanations, motivations and reasons for certain personal evaluations and actions. This way, they are obliged to address the plurality of diverse values and positions, a clear clash of points of view, of operational choices and evaluations. The relationship between subject and society is also brought into discussion, as well as the connections between citizens and the state, social actors and their socio-political and economic context.

In situations of this kind the debate concerning the ‘crisis’ or ‘end of values’ emerges. In fact, all kinds of social realities tend towards disorganization, towards the abdication of forms of cohesion in favour of facile solutions, even of an undemocratic nature, in that they are wanting in adequate legitimizing consensus. If the malaise thus generated is further complicated by high levels of massified communication processes and socio-political influence, a utilitarian kind of action prevails over communication, according to Habermas (Habermas 1984; 1987). Thus, values become obsolete and meaningless.

In the end, individuals find themselves operating in a vacuum of values or in a context that does not take them into consideration, because values, even if commonly shared, should emerge as precise and non-negotiable. The pos-

sibility to establish criteria, to this regard, is quite difficult, because the risk is that of providing remedies that are not feasible in practical situations.

Sociologists, and especially sociologists of knowledge, have no doubt about the cognitive content of values. The Weberian approach entails attributing sense to every single aspect of reality so that values and meanings seem either to coincide with or overlap each other, or, in any case, to be very closely connected.

Identity is another *Leitmotiv* of the phenomenology of values. It is through values that people identify with a movement, a religion, a political party or an ideological faith. At the same time, historical and sociological dynamics are such that individual characters are taken into consideration, together with a proportional development of freedom and autonomy.

One last constant is the guiding role social structures, political and legal institutions, and collective organizations assume for social actors. Processes creating legitimization and identification consolidate a feeling of belonging through rational and affective motivations. The core of similar consolidation of social relations consists in a number of basic values which bestow specificity on a sense of community participation.

Modern and post-modern notions have destroyed the presumed certainties of the past and have opened up the way to 'alternative' values, less predictable and more flexible than solid traditional ones. However, these novel values pave the way to new quests for alternative knowledge based on different certainties, because truth becomes a process to build rather than a certainty to believe in.

Many different possible outcomes of this pursuit of non-traditional values emerge, seeing that the new values are not handed down vertically by previous generations, that is, by consolidated custom which is the bastion of pre-existing values.

Contemporary societies have a very original challenge to face: they have to find new and reliable paths based on grounded reasoning and solid motivation. This calls for a finer kind of knowledge and adequate experience. There are no easy ways out in a similar kind of diversified society. The social actor's mode of behaviour is submitted to analysis and produces new terms of comparison capable of provoking a more and more complex, problematic and articulated type of reflexivity, interacting with values, knowledge and social practices.

9. Values, interests, habits

Alongside values, shared interests alongside habits and custom also exert considerable influence on social and individual action. However, values occupy a special position within the socio-dynamic context that promotes

and supports them. From the earliest stages of life, individuals interact with a number of older social actors such as their parents (sometimes only their mothers), their relatives (siblings, but also more distant relatives), the citizens of the same country (who normally speak the same language or dialect), their neighbours (in adjacent houses or jointly-owned buildings). All these people surround the newborn, not only physically but also with their culturally common modes of behaviour, as well as their way of speaking and acting. This is how the fundamental phenomenon of early communication begins: the newborn receives a variety of inhomogeneous messages, which are, despite this, convergent to a certain extent because they all belong to a similar cultural pattern; that is to say, to a shared opinion about life, about how to face it and about opportune social behaviour. Finally, even before they are officially registered, the new social subjects are *de facto* 'objects': the objects of attention and care, affection and worry, to whom the content of meanings, emotions and symbols has to be transmitted.

Actually, those who worry about newborns underwent the same experience when they too were infants. That is how ideas, habits, attitudes and behaviour are transmitted from generation to generations, creating a sort of continuous chain (except in some rare cases). There is no other explanation for this continuity, too often taken for granted, and therefore not adequately considered as an essential influence on one's education, and, therefore, on one's *Weltanschauung*. This is, more often than not, seen as a 'natural occurrence'.

The world is, thus, accepted 'naturally', as it is, it does not represent a problem, and it enters daily life becoming as a habit where nothing is to be discussed. A typical *Leitmotiv* is 'that's the way the world wags'. Therefore, mothers usually feed their newborns or take care of them, fathers generally look after material and economic affairs while the elderly provide a link with the past, representing continuity of existence. However, we must also consider the fact that values fit into pre-established, fixed frames. History shows a community how to accumulate experience, institutional organizations emerge and develop and a solid knowledge is acquired. This is the milieu where the new social actor is expected to live and grown up.

As fresh water from the spring follows the course of former streams and river beds, so do socializing individuals follow the path traced by those who go before, a sort of compulsory track with no possibility of choosing an alternative route – especially during the early phases of life. Only at a later stage will it be possible to follow unorthodox pathways. Only when one reaches the age of reason and full autonomy does it become possible to pursue uncharted paths, innovative ways and opt for previously unpredictable solutions.

The constitution of interests precedes the creation of sets of values. The interests of neonates, besides a number of primary needs common to all infants, do not seem to be innate. Essential needs are, for example, self-preservation, protection, maintenance, the pursuit of pleasure, avoidance of unpleasantness and physical harm (or affective harm, associated with the loss of something cherished or retained essential for living). As a matter of fact, the values provided by exterior stimuli are likely to act upon previously defined interests, or interests the subject is well acquainted with.

The same may be said of deeply rooted social habits. They become a sort of *habitus* for all subjects who tend to conform to existing attitudes, or avail of common-sense solutions to favour acceptance by others. Finally, even before their own values, social actors are obliged to attend to external habits having the same basic interests and which are likely to become their own and exercise considerable influence when they need to make choices.

According to Ronald Inglehart, who has carried out systematic empirical research into values in America and Europe, abilities and structures should be considered as the pre-existing independent variables influencing social change. When Inglehart talks of 'abilities' (Inglehart 1977: *Introduction*), he refers to people's tendency to be interested in politics, to understand it and to participate in it, as an aspect of a 'challenge to elites'. When referring to structures, Inglehart means the economic, social and political organization of the countries that were the object of his comparative studies (France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Denmark, Ireland and Great Britain).

Inglehart adopts the same attitude (1997) in the subsequent research he carried out in 43 countries. This investigation focused more precisely on the modern and post-modern processes which have placed greater emphasis on the quality of life and self-realization, and the role of individuals. The outcome is a kind of reflexivity which induces single actors to stand back from absolute values and direct them towards a more subjective context, based on individual preferences.

This occurs following degrees of uncertainty, hesitation, effort, expectation, contradiction and disappointment. However, the final outcome elaborated by the individual is the one where new rules and new laws are more in keeping with the problems of social actors, especially the younger members of society.

As such, the primary socialization process remains in the background, while the secondary process intervenes in a more decisive way. It enhances horizontal inter-generational change, where the younger generation replaces the older one.

The sociological consequence of this dynamic shift is a ‘polytheism of values’, as well as of the reasons and motivations underscoring values, therefore of all the actions deriving from it, as Bontempi underlined (2001).

Despite the diversity of the variables to be taken into consideration, there is essential agreement concerning the kind of sociological discourse to be applied to values, because empirical findings confirm the interpretation provided. While Inglehart emphasized the role of education above all, here we suggest a preference for the phase preceding socialized schooling. This secondary socialization phase seems obviously less important than the primary family one, which involves a long-lasting period of introduction to life, a sort of initiation that cannot be ignored.

10. Values and ideologies

Ideologies tend to deny solutions derived from the ethics of discourse (Habermas 1990). This critical attitude concerns both religious and lay perspectives, because both are anchored in their own deep-rooted convictions. This two-fold (religious and a-confessional) attitude leads to fundamentalism which is harmful to communicative action and seeks solutions which caters for the needs of only a number of social subjects. Hasty solutions are not desirable from any point of view, because all solutions should obtain explicit and general consensus. Furthermore, many useful solutions may be those forwarded by minority groups. The most important thing is to avoid coercive imposition of values and all forms of legal, military, and affective blackmail. Swift and easily reached goals with no promise for the future should be avoided. Only consolidated praxis, the steady outcome of tradition and custom, respectful of the interests of the social actors, can hope to become widespread consensual reference frames.

However, an awkward issue is that related to individual interests. When similar interests become diehard habits and traditions, they are difficult to overcome. Regulation of subjective requests seems necessary to avoid harming collective expectations.

Nowadays, there is an evident increase in the importance attributed to individual rights, which are often disjointed from the social context and difficult to harmonize with issues of solidarity. The notion of the social-actor is an attempt at seeing individuals as the true hubs of relational network, thus underlining their human ability to socialize, engage in dialogue and confrontation, accept shared values, all from a point of view which is neither utilitarian nor purely functional.

The dynamics of migration, which assume multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic forms, emphasize the urgency of common values and

adequate ethical principles capable of resolving conflict, misunderstanding and strife. The hypothesis of universal values, widely accepted by different ethnic groups seems exceedingly utopian. On the other hand, the idea that social subjects belonging to different religious faiths with visions of life neatly divided into good and evil with no possibility of dialogue, mediation, or discussion in an attempt to find shared, compatible positions is equally unacceptable. Sometimes there are rules, adequate behaviour and coherent attitudes which can be universally accepted, without the mediation of the transcendental dimension of a religion. That is why, speaking of ethical values, it is worthwhile reading Weber (1946) once more, this time, however, accepting his suggestion that values should be seen in terms of an ethic of responsibility, such as to take into account the immediate situation, the need to resolve problems without harming people, or, at least only to a minor extent and for the sake of the common good; this means considering the consequences of certain actions, or the effects some actions produce. Therefore, choices always produce consequences which are determined by the desire to achieve the greatest advantage for the community at large on the one hand, and what can feasibly be achieved, on the other.

11. Universal and local values

The issue of universal values is by no means secondary. The need felt by some to spread the values of certain organizations and nations is directly related to this issue. An eloquent example might be that of bringing freedom or democracy to others. We should ask ourselves if it is ethically desirable to export such values through war which is in se an implicit denial of freedom and democracy itself.

As we can see, determining which values are universal is not an easy task. Anything we say may be contradicted by empirical results. Individuals and communities decide if a value is 'good', has a true bearing on everyday life and really is worth adhering to in the long run.

Universal values to be diffused worldwide and commonly shared by all cultures is a simple hypothesis; from an operative, practical point of view it can appear as a failure, as soon as a careful empirical survey proves the opposite.

We may discover, for instance, that human sacrifice, voluntary or involuntary, stands at a very high premium in certain cultural milieus, that in given ideological and religious realities it may even be associated with everlasting rewards, a position in contrast with that of cultures where a totally negative view is taken of violent death whether chosen or coercive.

Moreover, within a sole social reality we can also surmise clear distinctions between majority and minority group values. This is a typical of de-

viant or marginal religious groups, which often follow a rationale quite different from that of the majority.

No classification such as 'universal values' can claim to be either all-inclusive or general. It might be advisable to refer to quasi-universal values rather than adopt such a categorical assumption and avoid radical and self-referential positions. Values do not depend only on the ability of a dominant group to impose them on other individuals and social groups.

Respect or lack of respect for values depends frequently on not easily foreseeable variables. In the field of values in particular, prediction is often destined to fail. The number of variables underscoring the persuasive powers of a value or set of values can be numerous indeed. In some situations values are commonly shared; in others they are not; in some situations they generate clear division; in others they are not evidently opposed to 'counter values'. As human beings are variable themselves, so too are the dynamics of values. This fact depends on the degree of importance that each value has for single individuals and groups. It is no accident that the most difficult decisions to take are those regarding more than one value, values equally present in people's cultural and personal backgrounds, related to more or less conscious taxonomies, but which become evident when there is a decision to reach.

However, even if a certain value is more influential than others, it cannot be taken for granted that in the future, under similar circumstances, the same value will prevail again. Situations, real conditions and other factors, including affective issues, can assume significant importance, often independent of the scale of values of single social actors.

Today, greater human mobility throughout the world is noticeably increasing occasions to share values as well as occasions apt to provoke clashes between different cultures and religions (Huntington 1996). This is one reason why political and governmental structures are competing, as it were, to devise constitutions, laws and rules to protect basic local principles from other cultural values imported by immigrants. In the meantime, more effective ways of solving value clashes are under consideration.

The United States initially attempted the melting pot strategy, which meant trying to mix all cultural peculiarities and hopefully attenuate the differences. Later they tried the salad-bowl strategy, in an attempt to favour respect for the different values without changing them. Neither of these two attempts brought about positive results. At present the patchwork approach is being attempted.

Europe, and not only Europe, is trying to enforce laws based on the particular local values of the member countries. However, every single country

has the right to adjust these values according to its necessities even if it cannot refuse shared European values.

Among the major values are: gender equality, freedom of speech, freedom of education, the repudiation of recourse to war as a means by which to resolve conflict, the promotion of peaceful coexistence between people from different cultural backgrounds, the abolition of the death penalty, the promotion of racial acceptance, of school integration, of ideological and religious pluralism and last, but not least, freedom of conscience.

To this regard a number of official declarations and documents already exist (Blau, Moncada 2005: 44-49). The sections in these documents which define the parties also reveal the clear intention to safeguard religious creed and practice, as well as national identity.

The status thus accorded to religion is based on the long course of history during which maximum power was afforded, initially, to God (sovereigns were considered God's anointed). Only at a much later stage were democratically elected leaders chosen to legislate in the name of the whole community.

In the not too distant past breach of the law was considered a sin against God; nowadays similar infringement of rules is called crime and is seen as committed against individuals and society. A change in the mentality of the Catholic Church, which is one of the foremost universal religions, has led to a renewal of vocabulary which now defines as crimes major social sins such as fiscal fraud, negligence at work, drug dealing, gambling, mystification of public truth, mendacious statements, and other forms of 'anti-social' behaviour.

However, many of these declared values are often disregarded because the damage they cause the community is not considered a truly harmful. Only a limited number of reference-values are truly shared and acts such as homicide, theft, sexual harassment and a few others are generally considered as real crimes.

Notwithstanding this, society continues to be viewed in a sacred, superior and almost metaphysical light. Social values seem to be mandatory, imposed as it were, by some kind of compulsory authority which obliges individuals to respect them. This happens when values have been interiorized and deeply accepted by individuals.

Global values and local values may enter into conflict with one another, especially when the same individual has to play more than one different role. In this case interests and habits clash causing conflict between value-oriented and goal-oriented choices, as well as between the interests of the community and those of single individuals and/or families. Other factors may come into play such as interpersonal and/or class relations (no easy issue to lay aside, regardless of the outcome of Marxist theories) as well as awareness of one's role within society.

It is clear enough that some of today's so-called 'universal' values (also called 'global') are actually representative of the interests of one social class only, that is, of the bourgeoisie. In other words the French revolutionary triad of freedom, brotherhood and equality is now undergoing a general and thorough adjustment.

When all comes to all, the social actor also decides whether or not to accept certain values rather than others on the basis of personal convenience, in other words he or she can make a 'rational choice' (Coleman 1990).

We cannot ignore the fact that values are often more a matter of irrational individual choice and of personal preference than of other factors. Social actors may, in fact, opt for certain values simply because they mean something to them, or because they are attractive and convincing even when they do not represent a rationally convenient option.

One last point concerning individual interpretation of values must not be forgotten, that is that values can lose all true significance and become liable to all kinds of further interpretation and implementation.

The present-day scenario reveals a general tendency for individuals to seek self-realization and autonomy, post-materialist values according to Ronald Inglehart (1997).

The commonly voiced opinion that values are vanishing completely is not convincing either. We are well aware of the role that values still play within the contemporary world.

Not even the Weberian world-disenchantment concept (Weber 1946) has led to an ultimate turning point, and Weber's idea of awareness of the polytheism of values seems to have created more difficulties than anything else. This theory did not solve the problem of social ethics at all, because to have too many different principles is like having none.

The Weberian *Wertfreiheit* idea has led to keen debate, however. Weber's idea insisted on the distinction between facts and values whereby it required social scientists to stand back from their own values, and refrain from expressing any sort of judgement concerning the scientific 'objects' they were investigating. The outcome of this position was that the work of social scientists was ideally that of gathering and interpreting mere data alone.

The main objection made against the idea of perfect impartiality in scientific approaches, against the presumption that any theory of knowledge can be truly neutral, is that one must assume that behind all proclamations of neutrality, however sincere, there is always value frameworks and ethical bases underscoring and influencing researchers whether they are aware of them or not.

In actual fact, underlying methodically correct research, even that claiming neutrality, there are principles, which, because they are varied, polymor-

phous, prove that pluralistic values exist from the start, *in nuce*, even before investigation of the universe begins.

The Kantian idea of a universal ethic, from which common values capable of creating harmony in the world and among men stem, has lost credence and is no longer in vogue. Contemporary sociologists cannot ignore the fact that there is something more (or less, depending on one's points of view) than 'a starry sky above us' and more than the 'moral conscience inside of us'.

The demand for rationality simply complicates matters further. What rationality should be applied? The secular rationality born of the French-speaking Enlightenment, perhaps? The history of Europe (and not only of Europe) has revealed the limits, the idiosyncrasies and, ultimately, the tragic consequences of that kind of approach. Not only, but history has shown us that the thinking, however attentive, of small elites cannot guarantee the rights of all. Shall we renounce research, which may even prove vain, until we find common ethical references? Or shall we choose to compare various ethical systems of inquiry, to come up with those we consider the most acceptable because most frequently applied?

Habermas (1990) advocates an ethic of discourse: a two-way open communications channel between peers, where those involved trust each other and are reciprocally open to criticism, without believing that they alone hold the key to absolute truth and are receptive of the opinions of others for the sake of on-going research aimed at favouring the common good and promoting the interests of the scientific community as a whole.

12. Values and social change

In general, a single value does not change without creating significant modification around it, especially adjustments to other value sets. Let us take a look, by way of example, at the value of freedom: changes perceptions of freedom inevitably lead to relative changes to how the State is considered and the form democratic participation in the affairs of the nation should take.

At times combinations of values, as they undergo development, can be quite difficult to detect, even harder to formulate. It can happen too, that conflicting values coexist and produce changes in modes of primary socialization. One should not forget that the will of every single individual is sovereign and inscrutable in its intentions, in its fundamental motives, in a chosen course of action.

The most commonly shared global and local values also undergo modifications, confirmations and adjustments. The very idea of democracy and freedom may be interpreted differently according to different cultural frames of reference and/or initial ideological and political perspectives.

When we say ‘*Cuba libre*’, for example, that is, ‘Free Cuba’, two contradictory interpretations may spring to mind, the first is the idea of the liberation of the Island from the government of Fidel Castro (considered by many a dictator), the second implies setting Cuba free from the economic, military and capitalistic hegemony of the United States.

This kind of dichotomy suggests a tendency to counterpoise opposite values so that what is most desired by one party is least desired by the other and vice versa. Chosen options are the consequence of decisions operated in favour of approaches which may be emotional or neutral, individual or collective, particularistic or universalistic, specific or widespread, ascribed or acquired (Parsons 1951).

In actual fact, concrete value decisions are not the outcome of all these possible options, but tend to focus on particular topics and issues. Here the central role is played by a cultural and social interweave of values. From a Durkheimian point of view, we can establish the existence of some sort of collective morality (Durkheim 1925) which lies at the very basis of society itself and is shared by the individuals belonging to the community whose utility seems to be directly proportionate to the respect its members have for the social consortium. This is not tantamount to a critical endorsement of Durkheim’s concept of a ‘collective consciousness’, a characteristic typical of a ‘sacred’ society where respect for society is achieved by the practice of its moral norms, without criticizing them. One immediate effect of this approach is respect for individuals, which, according to Durkheim, occurs as a secondary result. Moreover, according to this theory, the individual can make only a minimum, almost non-existent contribution, because with it and through homage is paid only to a generic and abstract collectivity – a collectivity lacks any serious individual contribution to the construction of its common morality not particularly authoritarian but devoid of any true consensus.

There is certainly no dearth of studies or theories suggesting alternative interpretations indicating relationships between values and attitudes (in favour of a functionalist approach see Brewster Smith 2006) or placing great emphasis on moral values (Hartmann 2002) and the possibility of teaching them, a view forwarded by a number of international publications like the *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, the *Journal of Moral Education*, *Issues in Religious Education*, or dedicated research centres like the University of Wales’s *Centre of Beliefs and Values* at Lampeter.

Recently the issue of a public ethic regarding the visible behaviour of individuals at collective level and its impact on common interests, upon administrative bodies, at managerial, political, trade-union and economic level,

has gained considerable ground. Nowadays, public opinion and the media in general tend to emphasize events and episodes that threaten the widespread expectations of citizens at local and national levels.

It seems that, at present, managers and policy-makers are increasingly more inclined to steer clear of individual and institutional control. At the moment, it has become quite difficult to detect any ethical bases behind economic and political decision-making.

The neo-contractual or neo-utilitarian stances which appeared on the international scene, significantly and not surprisingly, simultaneously with the new waves of conservatism called *neocon* (neo-conservatism) that has taken a foothold all over the world, have reduced the ethical issue to mere correct application of rules and norms, without posing the issue of accountability.

The imaginative proposal of Niklas Luhmann (1982), centred on a purely procedural conception of society determined by cybernetic algorithms and formal rules, belongs to this para-bureaucratic vision which sees society as a huge machine, devoid of self-awareness and of a historical consciousness from both an individual and a collective point of view.

The attempts made and the implementations carried out in this sense have not produced significant results, on the contrary, they have increased levels of non-participation by social agents in the direct management of the social realities to which they belong. Contractualism, utilitarianism and functionalism, however revised or embellished, have all failed to enhance (or, contrariwise, to alter) values among members of social networks.

13. Crisis of values?

It is difficult not to accept the idea that values underscore human and religious rights. Actually, according to *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (1995: 886), 'human rights are those liberties, immunities, and benefits which, by accepted contemporary *values* [emphasis by R.C.], all human beings should be able to claim 'as of right' of the society in which they live'.

Values, intended as such, may also represent a normative criterion, a valuation parameter to which to adhere. Values, in fact, guide the choices of human beings and interact, therefore, with pre-existing interests, customs and habits (and so, values are not immune *per se* from conditioning factors which tend to emphasise a given range of interests and consolidate a number of specific customs, preferred to the many other possible options available within the ambit of interests, habit and custom).

A distinction between values as ideals (which orientate individual existence) and values as concrete practice (aimed at achieving goals) must always be made, were it only for the sake of description. As a matter of fact, both

of these aspects are present in empirical situations, where it is usually impossible to establish which is *prius* and which *post*. Neither values as ideals nor values as practice are mutually identifiable. To be more precise, we cannot analyse the situation from a behaviouristic point of view only. We have to go a step further and consider a broader cognitive range involving entire networks of interactions between individuals and society, subjectivity and social structure, attitudes and patterns of behaviour.

One is often told that 'there are no values left these days', that is to say, that people no longer behave as they used to, when, it is held, people acted upon 'sound' principles. First of all, the reliability of such a statement needs to be verified. History presents numerous accounts of slaughter, repugnant torture, wild hatred, and catastrophic wars. This is certainly not a reassuring picture of the 'good old times'. Therefore we are obliged to accept the fact that in the past too family and social issues were not always resolved by recourse to peaceful methods.

The question of the true nature of contemporary social dynamics is still wide open. In other words, we are not sure whether they lead to conflict or to peaceful, non-conflictual solutions. And even were one to establish that conflict is of greater consequence than consensus, it still remains to establish whether the present inclination towards contention, hatred, revenge and boundless competition, is greater today than in the centuries and decades gone by. The problem is, therefore, how to devise markers capable of defining their differences and levels, that is, indicators of their percentage rate per inhabitant in a given territory, in relation to available economic resources, without taking into consideration the presence or otherwise of norms and sanctions, enforcement of law and order, detention centres, repressive measures, but also of educational, preventive and conciliation agencies, aimed at arriving at solutions grounded in reciprocal respect, in recognition of the equal dignity of the abilities and needs of others, within a context open to solidarity, to disinterested donation of the self and to interpersonal interaction of a non-utilitarian nature. A long time has elapsed since social and anthropological research first revealed the existence of societies, communities and groups informed either by consensual or by conflictual modes of behaviour. We have to admit, however, that even within situations of this kind some form of collaboration exists, just as contention is not completely absent from peaceful conditions.

Therefore, individuals and groups adjust according to the continual ebb and flow of the culture they belong to and may decide what to do each time in a different way, according to inherited values and the convenience of the moment or prospects of an immediate or future gain.

However, one datum remains unquestionable: all social actors are motivated by the values and guiding-principles which inform all forms of law whether oral or written, and are continuously in conflict with emotions, affection, the expectations of family and friends, sudden mood swings, conditions of temporary (or long-lasting) stress or pressure. If, on a daily basis, the press and the media present us with lengthy and detailed accounts of embezzlement, fraud, cheating, physical and psychological violence, scandal and all kinds of heinous deeds, this cannot be regarded as a marker of an abnormal or unpredictable lack of values. It suffices to browse old newspapers to read about similar or even graver happenings.

We cannot appraise social maladies in order to discover whether contemporary social milieus are more or less unsound than former ones. The same may be said when trying to compare two or more contemporary social realities, whether they belong or not to Western culture.

As a matter of fact, each social reality has its own fundamental set of values, with behavioural rules, traditions and practices, regulated by its own particular laws. Too often we tend to judge other people and other societies by the yardstick of our own ideas, our own *Weltanschauung* and our concept of reality, through the lens of our chosen values or principles. But these are not, and cannot be considered, universal. In actual fact, each social group has its own fundamental values, its own mores, traditions and customs. We are often led to judge other individuals and social groups on the basis of our own ideas, our own *Weltanschauung*, our own notions of reality, that is, on the grounds of our own values. But our values are not and cannot be universal. Each cultural framework has its own particular attitudes towards action, its distinctly complex and detailed cognitive heritage, not always accessible or interpretable in all their manifold aspects.

That some values belong to a specific territory, to a given 'ethnos', to a particular religion, a precise linguistic group or shared experiential context, is an indubitable empirical datum, which can be observed scientifically.

A totally different kind of approach is the ideological and/or confessional one, which passes judgement (mostly negative) on the behaviour of others deemed out of line with the values of the person expressing judgement.

On the other hand, however, a number of values are shared by rather large socio-territorial ambits. Democracy, for example, is a value acquired and taken for granted by nations where citizens are free to express their opinions regarding the political and institutional choices of the government. This does not mean, however, that democracy as a value is experienced always and everywhere, even within the same social context. In actual fact, apparent democracy may be riddled with bureaucratic authoritarianism or

upheld by ruthless policing or due to the power held by a privileged few who remain substantially the same although the formulae or coalitions which oversee public affairs may vary somewhat.

The relevance of the values of public awareness, of a sense of the state, of responsible citizenship appears vital. But all this does not bloom spontaneously or bear fruit of its own accord; it needs to be planted and cultivated. In other words the value of 'active citizenship', like that of democracy or other values, are the final outcome of long, on-going, meticulous and prudent preparatory action, that is, of education and training, which does not cease suddenly when formal schooling ends but continues throughout one's entire life, guaranteeing a 'fruitful harvest' to the seeds sown in early childhood. Such action of recognition, of legitimization (or incessant re-legitimization) and of motivation (even flexible in certain circumstances) is hazardous, failure-prone, pressured, as it is, by opposite thrusts, associated with individualistic choices, family and corporative interests with purely opportunistic motives.

All told, it appears quite clear that the history of values involves a long series of clashes between collective ethical issues and the subjective ambition. When the latter prevails, acceptance and resignation set in causing withdrawal from and avoidance of public service.

All told, it appears quite clear that the history of values involves a long sequence of clashes between ethical references and the subjective will. When the latter prevails, it gives rise to attitudes of resignation, summary statements and hasty decisions. The fact is that the struggle between more or less collective values and the anarchy of individual wills is a salient feature of the history of men and women. The story of Adam and Eve like that of Cain and Abel, or of Romulus and Remus and many other real or legendary figures, is emblematic of the cyclical flux of human history. An excessively strong spirit of conservation, which can turn into one of domination and abuse, clearly marks the different and manifold stages of life, in the past and in the present, and most probably, in the future as well.

These historico-sociological considerations give rise to necessarily conflictual, contrastive interpretations of human attitudes and behaviour. Even a type of education focussed on the transmission of values, even if particularly efficacious and scientifically directed, can always give rise to foreseeable deviant variations, to actions harmful to the set of values it is based on. Moreover, if reference to values is particularly wanting in a given environment, it is most likely that the system will force all subjects to accept the situation, also to prevent 'defensive' responses against coercive decisions, which although not accepted are difficult to oppose.

Only a strong, solid and convinced person, with a strongly rooted set of values, can resist an environment lacking in ethics, and devoid of respect for others. It is clear enough, therefore, how crucial, strategic and decisive a value-oriented kind of education, such as that envisaged in the Weberian ethics of responsibility (Weber 1946) or in the Habermasian idea of the replacement of exploitation by communication (Habermas 1984, 1987) can prove. Therefore, before speaking of the 'end' or 'crisis' of values it is necessary to think of the importance of education and of serious commitment to values.

14. Religions and values

All the so-called universal religions, from those 'of the book' (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to those of Oriental origin (Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism), offer sets of values, each centred around a specific conception of the world, the meaning of life, and the fate of humanity.

A value-centred attempt at syncretism might concede a certain degree of convergence between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, despite the fact that many past and present events show how difficult it is for these religions to reach consensus despite official, organized efforts.

The Oriental and Chinese religions provide the remarkable experience of *Ju-Fu-Tao* which blend Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism into one religion. *Ju-Fu-Tao* is widely practised especially by the Chinese.

Elsewhere, in Japan, some people have taken a step even further, not only by adopting rites and values belonging to other Asiatic religions (especially Shintoism and Buddhism) but by including elements of Christianity, thus determining a combination of values and practices which are often varied, according to the personal life choices of individuals, families and communities. It is no accident that during the first decade of the last century attempts to amalgamate Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity were made.

Among the values most widely spread in the Orient one of the foremost is certainly profound veneration for former generations, which often takes the form of a veritable cult of the ancestors. One of the salient features of this tradition is filial piety, which is often extended to embrace the respect due to all human beings. In some cases respect for people is more highly rated than love of the divinity, so much so, that great men, called masters, enjoy far more consideration than divine entities.

Compared to the ethical-social features of Confucianism, Buddhism attributes greater prestige to spirituality. But one must add that with the proclamation of the Chinese Republic, at the beginning of the last century, a system advocated by Sun Yat-Sen, based on three new values: nationalism,

democracy and socialism took hold. It assumed more ideological and militaristic connotations under Maoism.

Hinduism and Buddhism, on their part, continue to appear more sensitive towards eschatological issues, in particular the destiny of humans once they have reached the end of their life cycle. The focal values of Hinduism and Buddhism are, in fact, concerned with the dynamics of the transmigration of the soul, which make them more spiritual in outlook.

Hinduism is, however, characterized by the caste system which has provoked several responses including an important reform which actually led to the birth of a new religion, Sikhism, set up by Nanak, five centuries ago. At practically the same time, Kabir tried to overcome ritualism and idolatry by attempting a fusion between Hinduism and Islam, later introduced in political terms by the Muslim Indian emperor Akbar. In the end Islam became prevalent, also thanks to the military feats of the Mogol ruler Shah Jahan.

Hinduism regained ground when it took an even more spiritualist turn (derived from Brahmanism), which created the basis for the proclamation of the value of goodness, backed by Devendranath Tagore, father of the more famous poet, also a fundamental reference figure for Hindu culture.

Further thrusts towards the union of different religions appeared from time to time: first Ram Mohan Roy, advocate of what is known as Unitarian Hinduism, a result of British reformism in India; then there was Keshab, who tried to amalgamate Christianity and Unitarian Hinduism; later Ramakrishna attempted total syncretism between all religions.

The liveliness of the internal dynamics of Hinduism owes much to its exaltation of the vegetarian life-style, as preached by Dayananda Sgravati, active in the USA and Europe. Finally, the Mahatma Gandhi preached the values of non-violence and passive resistance, purity and truth. Later the idea of religious tolerance gained considerable credit, although very often tolerance can prove to be tantamount to non-acceptance.

Buddhism, on its part, has insisted down through the ages on the concept of absence of desire, associated with control of one's own body, and the principle of self-help.

The birth of the Theosophical Society owes much to age-old strands of Eastern religion especially Buddhism and Hinduism on which it is based, fundamentally. Meanwhile the history of mankind is studded with myriad examples of religious philosophy: from the Arab Averroës to the Jewish Maimonides and the Christian Thomas Aquinas. In the field of literature Chaucer exalts the value of human communion and social brotherhood in his *Canterbury Tales*. Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More espouse the value of a simple lifestyle. Rousseau insists on freedom of thought. The philosophers Lessing

and Herder see potential for human development in all kinds of religion. Wordsworth emphasizes the spirituality of a commune-style life. Felix Adler founds the Ethical Society in New York and Stanton Colt the English Ethical Society. Horace Bridges is associated with the Ethical Society in Chicago. Tolstoy and Kropotkin advocate the values of social justice and human brotherhood. Rauschenbush too deserves being recalled on account of his 'Social Gospel', John Dewey for *A Common Faith* and J. Middleton Murray for 'Religious Socialism'. Albert Einstein is also worthy of mention thanks to his defence of the intrinsic worth of human life and ethics. Martin Buber attributes great significance to the dimension of individuality. Given these premises, the idea of the first International Congress of Humanism and Cultural Ethics organized during the first half of the 20th century comes as no surprise.

Hans Küng, who recently completed his trilogy on the so-called 'book religions', underlines the numerous points they share, stating that there is a common basis: do not kill, do not torture, do not violate; do not steal, do not corrupt, do not betray; do not lie, do not bear false witness; do not use sexual violence. These principles are found in all these religions. Generally speaking, Catholics agree with them fully. The problem arises when one begins identifying respect for life with condemnation of contraceptives, when attitudes towards abortion are rigid, when homosexuality is discriminated against and questions regarding euthanasia misunderstood. He concludes that we need a moral basis. But this cannot be secularism, neither can it be clericalism; it cannot be the restoration of a Christian Europe like that envisaged by Karol Wojtyła, nor can it be the restoration of an Atheist State like the one founded after the French Revolution. We need sound ethical foundations, that is, acceptance of basic ethical norms, sustained by all the important religions and all significant philosophical traditions, which non-believers too can accept.

Religious values, intrinsically informed as they are by necessarily ideological apparatus, intended as a set of primary and binding ideas, often act as vehicles of censure, instructions and prohibitions. This does not prevent them from being rather widely accepted and shared. Sometimes, it happens that in the name of a religion, professed and practiced, some seek to promote their own standards, even claiming juridical constitutional status for them, their inclusion within the laws regulating religious practice, even their extension to questions alien to the specifics of religious belief. In times of evident crises of values, the restoration of those related to is often invoked as the only possible and feasible remedy.

The knowledge provided by sociological studies informs us that no value, whether religious or secular, is capable of satisfying *in toto* the exi-

gencies of social coexistence. The same is true of sets of values specific to a given religious creed. The law, state organizations and procedures are so complex that they cannot be implemented through reference to a single framework of values. It is extremely important to take into consideration that situations evolve, that they can appear unexpectedly, and can be rife with complicated and inextricable difficulties.

To base a juridical system on a set of specific religious values and oblige the whole of the community to mould its actions according to them, does not appear to be a truly viable option nor one capable of meeting the manifold exigencies of the entire milieu, one able to provide *a priori* solutions to resolve conflict, to foresee all possible developments of the democratic dynamics and political choices of the population

Furthermore, values, whether religious or not, do not execute their function or influence by means of any single normative scheme. They reach well beyond similar systems and banal simplification, and are informed, therefore, by vaster ranges of reference and sounder bases, provided by the social actors they affect, and offer strong critical principles by which to make choices.

Values are by no means a panacea for all ills. Their implementation alone requires an accurate analysis of the social reality. At most they provide general guidelines but they cannot replace the informed action of individuals thus depriving them of fundamental freedom of action. Values, besides, rather than a defence mechanism appear to be more of a viaticum, a set of instructions for behaviour in the world, to act upon wisely, not out of acquired fear. In actual fact, values resemble scientific theories somewhat: they guide without constricting, they leave room for autonomy with moderation, they avail of 'transcendence' but not in the strictly religious sense but as a means by which to overcome limited, fixed, indefectible principles. In other words, values too change, adapt, come to terms with social realities.

However, it is not a diffused kind of relativism either, to be applied at all costs; it is, rather, an attentive and careful approach, which, in actual fact takes pluralism into account while remaining aware of the relativity of a variety of existing and feasible positions.

It is possible to postulate that social actors will not consider the flexibility of values as much as their basic weaknesses due to the fact that they are bound to come up against the hard facts of social life and people's future lives.

It is not by chance that the basic legislation of a state, that is, its constitution, although considered 'sacred', fundamental, needs updating, revision, also thanks to the quest for *tendentally* universal values, that is, for values which win sufficiently significant consensus concerning its indispensability *at a given moment, in a clearly identifiable community*.

All attempts at creating state religions, at stipulating agreements between religion and state are short-lived, fundamentally because individual social subjects are pretty much accustomed and inclined to re-elaborate personally what has been codified, thus arriving at interpretations of their own and, above all, at limited, critical and pragmatic application of the norms thus produced. Pacts between churches and the public administration, even if leading to concrete results favouring the religious organizations, at the same time they produce reluctance on the part of the citizens to accept them unconditionally because people are always inclined to claim their individual rights and exercise them regardless of legal concordats between top-level religious and political representatives: religion thus loses its function as bearer of values available to all and begins to be considered essentially as an instrument of ideology and power and as an imposition devoid of consensus. As a result, its value system, ostensibly in favour of human and civil rights and freedom, its stance against slavery, along with its refusal of totalitarianism, all lose credibility.

15. Secular values

It is not always possible to arrive at a clear distinction between secular and religious values. Some religious values are shared by people who declare being non- or a-confessional or non-religious. On the contrary there are many typically secular values which obtain the consensus of many who are guided by mainly religious principles.

The chief snag is that of identifying the depositaries of these two sets of values. If in the case of religious values one can suppose it to be the churches, the denominational organizations, non-religious values are usually considered a matter for the state. In the latter case perhaps it might be better to use a different definition because the values in question are secularist whereas secular values are a matter for the individual moral conscience, a question of individual freedom of choice.

At this point it is evident that individuals consider and behave towards both religion and politics, church and state, in a similar fashion. Absolutist value systems are not sociologically dominant also because values are different and multiform and because ethical purpose cannot be reduced to a sole religious and/or political system.

One must also take into account the fact that presumed unity of religious values does not automatically imply correspondence to a sole political formula. Vice versa a shared political solution does not necessarily give rise to a single set of values. In other words Weber's polytheism is applicable to religious and political milieus alike.

Because all institutions are founded on a number of shared values, they are never neutral or devoid of prejudice. An a-confessional or secular point of view has its own set of values. If a state simply claims being ethical and becomes the main value reference-frame for its citizens, they will turn to their autonomous capacities when reaching decisions, to their personal conscience and freedom of action.

If, however, the state is genuinely grounded in ethical principles and defends them, it becomes the true guarantor of freedom of conscience and action for its citizens, especially where the value of liberty is held at a premium, above all in matters concerning the disposal of one's body ('this body is mine and I will do as I please with it') and of one's non-material property ('these thoughts are mine and I will use them as I see fit').

Even a 'cybernetic' idea of social reality, such as Luhmann's (1982) neo-functionalism, might be seen as being based on the secular values of proper functioning, order, social balance and systematic regulation. Historical and social experience has revealed that this approach is not self-sufficient and has to cope with matters of individual autonomy and free choice just the same. When the values of the state and the inclinations of citizens are not reciprocal, a social crisis arises, causing conflict and an increase in anomic behaviour.

Only if the state organization through all its apparati and representatives, in all its basic values, is in keeping with the tendencies of its citizens can proper functioning be guaranteed, because it rests on shared values: individuals are not considered as 'moral strangers', as H. Tristram Engdhal might put it. In the background of this secular perspective stands the value of freedom of conscience, a basic characteristic that no state can usurp. That is why no state, whether worldly or secular (or 'secularist') can fail to take into due consideration the ethical autonomy of either religions or social actors.

Although this does not imply that politics depend on religion, the one and the other must take into account the value of reason, whose secular character is, certainly, the brainchild of French Enlightenment although not unknown to universal and non-universal religious traditions.

It is almost impossible to contest the fact that secular values are rooted in metaphysical beliefs. The history of philosophy is full of examples in this sense; many philosophers consolidated their values by making them 'sacred', a characteristic better suited to metaphysics than pure philosophical speculation.

The existing relationship between secular and religious values comes as no surprise, therefore. In order to understand value shifts, it is necessary to examine the origins they stemmed from. Therefore, certain traditional pathways have to be trodden once more, to obtain a clear vision of the source of many present-day values.

A similar study ought to reveal just how conspicuous the number of contemporary values rooted in antiquity and religious aspiration is.

From the point of view of the sociology of knowledge, one can say that longer-lasting religious institutions and their intellectual *élites* have been able to influence social dynamics more than fleeting political and state apparati, without, however, underestimating the durable effects of the norms, administrative systems, life-styles, the social customs of peoples, of the various languages which, by defining and distinguishing phenomena, people, events, objects and more, in actual fact recognize, legitimize and consolidate them, especially as far as the domain of values is concerned.

Yet, if religions lose their vigour and their influence, the values they express suffer and become less widespread; the same happens to values backed by political parties, trade unions or other movements, which can lose credit within the public sphere. One of the first markers of similar weakness is the emergence of new, more or less alternative, pluralistic values, accompanied by a strong oscillation of pre-existing values defended to the bitter end by dyed-in-the-wool militant groups with a tendency towards fundamentalism.

16. From values to rights

Values can be considered independent variables, that is, phenomena that underscore interests, habits, custom, processes of identity and social solidarity, as well as dependent variables, that is, derivatives of other social factors. In both cases the substantial issue remains that of values, which, in general may be called human because related to human beings and their basic bent, the fundamental beliefs, they avail of in order to make choices.

The range of human values is very vast indeed, practically comprehensive, so much so that it embraces various spheres of existence: from cognition to communication, from jurisprudence to morals and ethics, from politics to economy, from education to health, from religion to secularity, from personal to social life.

A distinction, made frequently, regards the difference between applied and finalized values (Rokeach 1973), that is, between practical individual and social values and values representing goals to be achieved.

Another rather widespread distinction is the one between general and specific values. But which values are to be considered general is still an open matter of debate. The discussion tends to superimpose universal values and universal rights, that is, human values and rights.

During the last century the human rights issue kept pace with 'scientification'. Especially by the end of World War II, the authority and influence of scientific research began to be taken into greater consideration (Drori,

Meyer, Ramirez, Schofer 2003) especially in the fields of medicine, economy and management.

Although the spread of democracy is increasing, it has caught up with the question of human rights which stands at the very top of the scale. Human rights are no longer the concern of the few nations and organizations which took an interest in them at the beginning of the 20th century; now they are a vital issue for over three hundred organizations and nations directly involved in the question. To this regard, the role of third-level education is of crucial significance (Schofer, Meyer 2005). The diffusion of human rights is now a matter for the world community. Therefore, it has become a fundamental feature of present globalization processes.

Problems of equality and exclusion are the object of constant attention today. The low percentages of some groups – especially minority, rural and low social-income groups – receiving higher education is a matter of keen concern to governments and international organisations.

Strong avocation of the values of individual equality and democratic participation has been in the foreground for some time now, thanks also to the United Nations' *Declaration of Human Rights*. One asks, however, if other real or presumed human rights exist.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, even if not endorsed by all the nations of the world, remains, nonetheless, a valid reference point.

Sociological research can simply offer data concerning the values most commonly found in different cultural and geo-political realities around the world. A worldwide study, availing of appropriate and meaningful methodologies, could provide general information about the existence of meta-values, that is, values monitored empirically in different social realities and of such a nature, that compared on a vaster scale, might be defined as universal.

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