

DEMOCRACY AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: THE RIDDLE OF PLURALISM

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SUMMARY

I divide my paper entitled “Democracy and Religious Communities: the Riddle of Pluralism” into two parts: “Democracy and Religion: The Problem” and “Democracy and Political Islam: Pluralism under Siege.” A number of themes are treated and several arguments are presented. At one level the paper is an investigation of different manifestations of pluralism and their implications for democracy. In the era of globalization the urgent need to address problems arising from differing types of pluralism is heightened. Many forms of pluralism do not imply that values are relative. They only mean that there are different paces of development towards the acceptance of, or an accommodation with, the principles and tenets of democracy. The slowness of particular cultures necessitates practical measures in the interim to safeguard vulnerable groups – usually minority communities – and to try to speed up the reception of democracy in hitherto hostile settings. Often the manner of presenting democracy to an unfamiliar culture is crucial in avoiding injustice. For example, exporting democracy to an Islamic, or predominantly Islamic, milieu requires that minority rights be stressed over majority rule. This, coupled with the principle of subsidiarity, helps to neutralize the threat of the heresy of “numerical democracy” which is nothing more than the tyranny of the majority.

I begin in Part One by investigating the latent tension between democracy and religion in relation to the question of the nature of truth. For democracy, numbers determine what is right and true conduct; for religion, truth is utterly independent of numbers. In the secular West concepts of natural law have been steadily replaced by positivist approaches that render relative and subjective and “situational” the determination of moral behavior. A recent work by Cardinal Ratzinger is used as the launching point for my critique of secular humanism’s discrediting of traditional metaphysics. Developments in Europe that brought about this state of affairs are briefly surveyed. Turning to America, the figure of John Courtney Murray is invoked as a defender of religious liberty in the face of the American brand of secularism. Both Ratzinger and Murray are to be placed in the tradition of Pope Leo XIII, who back

in 1888 condemned the metamorphosis of liberty into “boundless license” in modern society. Whether in Europe or in America, the situation in the West is generally one of pluralism underneath the all-embracing umbrella of a unifying worldview – one with clear Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian roots and liberal/secular humanist (even post-Christian) extensions. Regardless of the inner tensions between the old roots and the contemporary branches, this sort of pluralism is very different from the kind of situation that obtains beyond the West and which I deal with in Part Two: the plurality of antagonistic worldviews without the benefit of an overarching and unifying civilizational umbrella. The clash of cultural values in non-Western settings can be far more abrasive than similar clashes occurring within the secure confines of a democracy. I then move to discuss what Michael Novak has called the “conundrum of pluralism,” namely how to maintain diversity within a unified polity and find common grounds of agreement on the level of basic values. In other words, the question of the universality of values. Relying on the tradition of Thomas Aquinas’s philosophy and its revival by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, I affirm the permanent presence of universal moral precepts that are accessible to human reason and are a part of human nature. These form the basis for natural law and can serve to connect different cultures and religious beliefs. The example often cited for proving the existence of universals that cut across cultural and religious barriers is the consensus displayed in 1948 at the United Nations around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Referring to Maritain’s writings about human rights in the 1940s, I argue that while this is an important case it came about during quite exceptional historical circumstances. The abstentions of the Islamic nations mainly over Article 18 also require careful consideration as regards their implications, particularly in predominantly Muslim environments.

In Part Two I turn to an in-depth analysis of the detrimental effects that Political Islam has had historically, and continues to have today, on pluralism in its midst. The inherent connection between Political Islam and violence predisposes Muslim rulers to assume a position of hostility towards native non-Muslim minority communities living in their lands. This is especially unsettling in relation to the treatment of Jews and Christians, or what Islam designates as the “People of the Book.” They are given an inferior, second-class status and are known as *dhimmis*; however, contrary to some popular notions as well as certain accounts by Western scholars, the *dhimmi* category is not one of benevolent tolerance but of subtle and relentless persecution leading to gradual liquidation of the targeted communities. When it comes to Islamic attitudes towards the different other there is a remarkable degree of uniformity and it is not an oversimplification to speak of Islam and Muslims as a monolithic whole without taking into account the internal diversity found within Islam. Islam has a dualistic view of the world. Muslims inhabit the Abode of Islam

while the other, the non-Muslim, is automatically classified as a citizen of the Abode of War. History is nothing but the grand triumphant story of the expansion of the Abode of Islam at the expense of the Abode of War. Where Muslims live in a majority and exercise political power, non-Muslims (especially Jews and Christians) must exist as *dhimmis*. Even after measures were taken starting in the nineteenth century to abolish the *dhimmi* category from the law books, the psychological imprint of dhimmitude on both victim and oppressor remained and in many cases intensified. *Jihad* or holy war, massacres, and a host of other forms of persecution have recurred throughout the centuries including during modern times. I argue that in the West's enthusiasm to package and export democracy to the wider world it would be highly irresponsible to emphasize the notion of majority rule and downplay, or not stress enough, the other side of the democratic coin, namely minority rights. This would be tantamount to an invitation to Political Islam to continue to persecute its minorities with impunity. Nor should the attempt be made to export secularism in a forced and artificial manner to parts of the world that are either not ready for it, or continue to actively resist it. Whether we like it or not, religion in a place like the Middle East continues to be the ultimate indicator of individual and group identity. It is not ethnicity, not nationalism, and certainly not secularism that determine people's final sense of belonging and of who they are. Imposing secularism from the outside in a predominantly Islamic context is like trying to change the given reality with a magic wand. It is a sure recipe for further violence. This enhances the extremes in Islam and tends to render Islamic moderation somewhat pathetic and marginalized as it is caught in a tug of war between repressive regimes and fundamentalist options. Worst still, when Westerners are attracted by the moderate Muslim voices usually living in self-imposed exile in the West they forget how unrepresentative these voices really are of what Salman Rushdie has called "Actually Existing Islam" out there. Attempting to conduct dialogue with Islam by engaging with these lonely moderates is a non-starter, and opting for mere platitudes in the name of dialogue with Political Islam can be harmful. At best it is a political exercise with limited benefits.

I end the paper with a call to the Western democracies to offer the democratic message to mixed or composite societies beyond the West in the form of a carefully formulated federalism. This would be in keeping with the all-important Catholic social doctrine of subsidiarity. It need not be a federalism based on geographic districts. The concept is flexible enough to be tailored to the givens of a particular situation. I take Lebanon as my focus in this regard because it represents an interesting and fairly unique case of a divided and differentiated society within a wider and largely Islamic setting. Lebanon is ideally suited for applying the democracy of heterogeneous religious communities, in other words for a federation that takes

such religious communities as its basic building blocks. Lebanon is also home to the last remaining native and free Christian community anywhere between Morocco and Indonesia. Lebanon's Christians over the centuries have proudly and largely successfully resisted the *dhimmi* system. Both they and the Muslims have legitimate fears; however, there is a clear asymmetry of phobias between the two groups. While Muslims express socio-economic grievances and complaints, Christians harbor existential fears of survival. As it is today, Lebanon contains eighteen officially recognized sects or religious communities and is based on a power-sharing arrangement among them as well as a constitutional recognition of communal autonomy at the level of matters of personal circumstances: marriage, divorce, inheritance, and the like. I maintain that democracy in Lebanon is not possible outside the current system of political sectarianism or confessionalism. A satisfactory response to the secular critique would be to create a separate legitimate category for people who do not want to be associated with any of the existing and recognized religious communities. This would safeguard pluralism while remaining loyal to the given historical reality of the centrality of religion in the lives of people in that part of the world. Taken together, the eighteen communities and the secular non-denominational category would solve many problems in terms of voting, running for office, education, etc. Perhaps a Lebanon refashioned along these lines in a post-peace Middle East could serve as a useful model for other similarly divided societies around the non-Western world. The positivist concept that Islam will eventually evolve into a more benign version of itself and become more accepting of the different other is not necessarily wrong; the practical problem is the prohibitive time scale this is likely to follow, i.e. moving very slowly. In the meantime, security guarantees are required for protecting indigenous non-Muslim minority communities in Islamic lands. In my view the federal formula provides the best chance for this to occur. And an experiment in a federalism of sorts has occurred fairly successfully in recent Middle Eastern history with the millet system under the Ottoman Turks. Nor is a pure reliance on the essential universality of moral laws – as one might safely do in a Western context – enough of a guarantee that Political Islam will not engage in repression. Again, federalism here is the answer.

I *Democracy and Religion: The Problem*

On the occasion of being conferred the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa by the LUMSA Faculty of Jurisprudence in Rome on 10 November 1999, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger addressed the issue of what he termed “juridical positivism” and the more basic philosophical and

theological question it raises regarding the nature of truth. In an era when the “end of metaphysics” is solemnly proclaimed by a broad contingent of modern philosophers, the implications for law have been dire. Since metaphysics can no longer serve as the source of law in the eyes of contemporary thinkers, the concept of the democratic consensus has replaced it as both the source and expression of collective values. Today, under this juridical positivism, asserts the learned Cardinal: “The majority determines what must be regarded as true and just.” “In other words,” he continues, “law is exposed to the whim of the majority and depends on the awareness of the values of society at any given moment.”

In the secular West this trend manifests itself in a variety of expressions all of which represent conscious departures from the traditional Christian conception of law. Marriage, for example, has ceased to be the exclusively accepted form of sanctioned conjugal relationship. “The sense of the sacred no longer has any meaning for law,” declares Cardinal Ratzinger, and he points to the disappearance of Sunday as a time for rest and contemplation in order to illustrate the secular rearranging of the use of free time. Even the hitherto sacrosanct domain of human life has been rudely invaded and secular laws today protect such practices as abortion and euthanasia while allowing for genetic manipulation. “A limitless liberty in speech and judgment” appears to have been unleashed with the result that profanity and moral relativism have become the unquestioned privilege of the liberated individual. In effect, the modern secular state has succeeded in undermining metaphysics and Natural Law thereby precipitating a crisis in human dignity and compromising the human person’s essence.¹

From the outset it becomes evident to anyone investigating the relationship between democracy and religion that there exists a basic tension, indeed an incompatibility, between the two when it comes to the question of the nature of truth. For democracy it is all ultimately a

¹ The text of Cardinal Ratzinger’s speech was obtained from ZENIT, an international Catholic news agency located in Rome. See infoenglish@zenit.org; see also www.zenit.org.

matter of numbers, of majorities, of statistics, of votes. The “right and the true” becomes that which is acceptable to the largest number of people who happened at any given point in time to have bothered to express an opinion. Low voter turnout – a phenomenon increasingly prevalent in parts of the West and related to a rising political apathy in some affluent societies – indicates that vocal “majorities” are growing smaller over time. Religion, on the other hand, views truth as independent of numbers and as something relying upon no form of human consensus. Truth is sacred and absolute, meaning it has divine origins and is ontologically grounded in the Creator Himself. Truth can therefore reside in a numerically small group – even in a minority of one.² The imperium of truth is not and cannot be democratic. There is no escape from the inherent opposition that pits political notions of democracy and what they assume about truth against the unchanging and universal concept of truth offered by religion.

Given the Christian precept of leaving to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s, and given the eventual failures of medieval Christian theocracies (Christendom, politically understood), it was inevitable in modern times that Europe, and the West in general, should embark on the road to secularization. Pivotal historical stations along the way such as the Protestant Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, the “minimal government” political philosophy of John Locke, the “rights” movements and declarations of the American and French revolutions, the rationalism and deism of the eighteenth century, and the anticlerical outbursts of the nineteenth century, all contributed to the secularizing trend. With the separation of church and state and buttressed by the nineteenth century idea of progress came the ascendancy of positive law over Natural Law. After Protestantism dethroned ecclesiastical authority in matters of dogma and favored instead an often-

² In the Bible this is made clear over and over again. The Jews of ancient Israel, as God’s Chosen People, were usually outnumbered by their enemies. Christ stood alone in the face of the Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities. The Book of Revelation speaks of the remnant of 144,000 who will remain faithful to the truth. Other examples of truth not being numerically determined abound in scripture.

unbridled individual liberty, the stage was set for an easy acceptance of democracy in which proper norms of conduct are decided by the ballot. Along with the secularization of Europe came the promotion of a degree of moral subjectivism and relativism as the legitimate basis for legislation. As church and state went their separate ways, government's view of the role of religion in society also underwent a metamorphosis, a development well captured by the eminent historian Owen Chadwick:

Government likes religion to bless its acts, crown its dictators, sanction its laws, define its wars as just, [and] be decorous master of ceremonies. And since on grounds of religion religious men may criticize acts or laws or wars or modes of waging war, government prefers quietness and contemplation to excess of zeal. Though religion is important to government, it does not value excess of religion. It is happy with general morality, reasonable and moderate, but is uncomfortable with too much enthusiasm.³

Whether authoritarian or liberal democratic, secular governments throughout Europe since the nineteenth century have opted to keep religion and the ethics it entails at arm's length. It is true that Christian democratic parties have flourished in European politics, but they have been strained attempts at a synthesis – albeit a Protestant one in inspiration and conducted on secular terms – between hollow vestiges of religion, and democracy, respectively. The parting of church and state in the contemporary period in the West appears all but irreversible.

Worse still is the consistent refusal by secular humanism to admit where its ethical roots lie and from whence much of its moral inspiration derives. This unrecognized patrimony – humanism's lost Christian heritage as Solzhenitsyn has called it – finds itself increasingly under siege today in the democratic states of the West where (again Solzhenitsyn) a total emancipation appears to have occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries.⁴

³ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 117.

⁴ Ronald Berman, editor, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: The Address, Twelve Early Responses, and Six Later Reflections* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980), p. 17 and p. 18.

In America the equivalent of Cardinal Ratzinger's critique of secular democracies came forcefully and recurringly from a young and dynamic Jesuit priest: John Courtney Murray. The American brand of secularism, as a creative response to the religious pluralism of American society, posed in the view of Murray and others a distinct danger to religious liberty. Murray advocated an active engagement by the Church in the day-to-day affairs of the public square and he regarded the state's duty as ensuring the freedom required for religion in general, and the Church in particular, to articulate its message to society. "The role of government is to see to it, by appropriate measures both positive and negative, that the Church is free to go about her creative mission; and likewise to see to it that such conditions of order obtain in society as will facilitate the fulfillment of the Church's high spiritual task." Government is not to dictate the content of this task, Murray emphasized, but within limits government "can make possible or impossible, easier or more difficult, the Church's exclusive task of caring for the needs of souls."⁵ For this reason Murray, ahead of his time, saw the need for Catholics, Jews, and other Christian groups to combine their efforts to rehabilitate a moral authority that is independent of the secular state.

Nowhere are the foundations for Cardinal Ratzinger's critique of democracy's approach to truth, or John Courtney Murray's defense of religious liberty, more in evidence than in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical of 1888, *Libertas Praestantissimum*. If human reason makes of itself the measure of all things and democratic states derive their authority from the people, then, concluded the Pope, the greatest number would determine what is right. It follows that we would have "the doctrine of the supremacy of the greater number, and that all right and all duty [would] reside in the majority."⁶ Similarly, he continued, "the law de-

⁵ John Courtney Murray, "Leo XIII and Pius XII: Government and the Order of Religion," in *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, edited by J. Leon Hooper, S.J. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 79.

⁶ See *Libertas Praestantissimum* (Human Liberty) in *The Great Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII*, translations from approved sources (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1903), p. 145.

termining what it is right to do and avoid doing is at the mercy of a majority.”⁷ Throughout the encyclical Leo warned against the degeneration of legitimate liberty into “boundless license” and unrestrained excess.⁸ He saw such a development proceeding in parallel with a rising intolerance of religious liberty, particularly freedom for the Catholic Church.⁹ What perils Leo in his day detected looming on the horizon have become a sordid reality in our era.

Returning to America, the issue there is, and has always been, one of religious pluralism versus a steadily pervading and uniquely homogenizing secularism. Yet this pluralism, when examined carefully, discloses a broad range of common values and terms of reference precisely because it has been molded over two centuries in the streamlining crucible of American culture. American pluralism therefore, as the historian Daniel Boorstin has described it, is “a self-liquidating ideal.” This means that in the very process of celebrating the rich diversity that makes up America, ethno-religious variety is sublimated into the amazing unity that defines the American experience and out of which emerges a truly *American* type:

Of course, there were other regions of the world—the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia—which also were a melange of peoples and languages and religions. What would distinguish the United States was that we would give our varied peoples the opportunity to become one. As they were dissolved in the American ‘melting pot’ they would become part of a single country.¹⁰

Such a process, while unique to America, shares with Europe the fact that in both instances a single overarching worldview – a secularized humanism resting on firm though often unacknowledged Judeo-Christian foundations – forms a western civilizational umbrella of collective values covering a vast tapestry of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socio-cultural particularisms. In the case of the United States the particulars

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, especially p. 155 and p. 161.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-59.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Boorstin, *Democracy and Its Discontents: Reflections on Everyday America* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 87.

were largely churned and homogenized, while in Europe there were fewer of them to begin with and these remained for the most part distinct within the rubric of the single unifying civilization.

Throughout the democracies of the West, whether European or American, there operates an undeclared assumption that differences arising from the existing pluralism in society are to be aired under the sway of three non-negotiable premises: the rule of law, a tolerant civility, and a modicum of universally accepted moral norms of conduct. These are the rules of the game, as it were, taken for granted by all players no matter how far apart they might be on other essentials. The reason this is so is clear, as stated earlier: the presence of the all-embracing worldview consisting of Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian roots and liberal/secular humanist branches. This formidable cultural synthesis has entailed at once a separation of religion and politics and a simultaneous creative interpenetration of the spiritual and secular to produce universal practical affirmations. Cardinal Ratzinger, Father Murray, and many prominent religious intellectuals before or since can lament irregularities and unresolved tensions, warn against constraints on religious liberty, deplore excesses in secular assertion and the decline in morals, and challenge the over-prominence of positive law. They are absolutely justified in doing all these things and the power of their critique serves as an enriching corrective to further abuse and extremism. They do so, however, knowingly within the comfortable confines of the prevailing and overwhelmingly accepted worldview that defines the West.

While observing closely mid-nineteenth century America, Alexis de Tocqueville took note of the pluralism manifested within the dominant religion:

Each sect adores the Deity in its own peculiar manner, but all sects preach the same moral law in the name of God....Moreover, all the sects of the United States are comprised within the great unity of Christianity, and Christian morality is everywhere the same.¹¹

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, revised by Francis Bowen and edited by Phillips Bradley, 7th edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 314.

Yes, it was a straightforward and less complicated America upon which de Tocqueville directed his discerning gaze in those days. Today, a century-and-a-half later, the worldview forming an all-encompassing tent above the complexity of America and the West as a whole has surely been modified, in certain instances expanded, in others altered (some would insist disfigured), yet the crucial fact is that a single unifying civilizational reference point continues to exist and subsume all within its broad perimeter. This is certainly not the case beyond the West, particularly in those areas with divided or composite societies and mixed religious communities where democracy has had a hard time securing a foothold. The opposition between radical secular humanism and traditional Judeo-Christian morality that one witnesses being played out in the West, while stark and even vicious at times, pales in its implications for public life before the more awesome clash of values among differing religions in non-democratic settings. This is not to make light of the dizzying multiplicity of moral and amoral positions obtaining in the West on vital issues like abortion, nor is it to neglect to applaud the admirable moral consensus that emerged, for example, against racial discrimination in America in the sixties. It is simply to say that the debates and disputes generated by pluralism in a democracy that is underpinned by considerable cultural cohesion and the recognition of some shared values – these debates and disputes are less threatening and more easily manageable than their counterparts unfolding in an environment poorly receptive to democratic ideals and exhibiting a plurality of antagonistic fundamental outlooks.

There are those who assert correctly that no matter how heterogeneous any given pluralism might be there exist universal moral precepts accessible to right reason that will always constitute a firm meeting ground for disparate views and beliefs. Advocates of this position enjoy an eminent historical lineage and can refer to some highly respectable authority figures. A case in point is the example of the revival of Thomist philosophy within Catholicism following the famous call by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) for Catholics to return to the thought of Thomas Aquinas, the An-

gelic Doctor.¹² Neo-Thomism, as it has been called, maintains the Natural Law tradition which appeals to the timeless and divinely ordained moral universals that imprint human nature and that are discernible through reason. It is here that the “conundrum of pluralism” is supposed to find its ultimate resolution.¹³

In fact one example often cited is the unanimity (counting only the favorable votes without the abstentions) that was displayed in the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 when the final draft of what became the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. This is an important case because here you had representatives of some sixty member nations embodying and reflecting nearly all the cultures, languages, ethnicities, and religions of the world – the ultimate pluralism. Moreover, what was being voted upon was no ordinary document advancing a perfunctory set of propositions; it aimed at nothing less than defining what it means to be human and to have rights and be entitled to freedoms, in other words a value-laden document with profound philosophical and political implications.

If wide-ranging differences could be transcended and the people holding them could agree on a nucleus of basic principles such as are found in the Universal Declaration, then pluralism ceases to be the insurmountable obstacle to national and international harmony that some have made it out to be. Writing about rights in the late 1940s around

¹² It can be safely argued that next to Pope John Paul II, Leo XIII has been singlehandedly the most influential Catholic figure of the last hundred-and-fifty years. By ending the *Kulturkampf* against the Church in Germany, launching the First Vatican Council in 1870, reviving scholastic philosophy (Aquinas’ perennial philosophy that harmonizes faith and reason), and presenting a series of powerful and far-reaching encyclicals on a variety of pressing issues—for example *Rerum Novarum* (1891) on the social question and *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888) on the political question, Leo represented a watershed in the history of modern Catholicism and became the architect who laid the foundations for crucial developments in twentieth century Catholicism.

¹³ The phrase is taken from a talk by Michael Novak given in Beirut, Lebanon on 7 December 1998 at an international conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the pivotal role played by Charles Malik in the elaboration and adoption of that document. See Michael Novak, “Human Dignity, Human Rights,” in *First Things*, edited by Richard John Neuhaus, 97 (November 1999), p. 39.

the time of the adoption of the Universal Declaration, the French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain stressed the primacy of the practical over the theoretical domain: “The question raised at this point is that of the practical agreement among men who are theoretically opposed to one another.”¹⁴ Maritain related how proponents of polarized ideologies at a meeting of the French National Commission of UNESCO to discuss human rights had explained the fact that they had managed to come up with a single accepted listing of rights: “Yes, we agree on these rights, providing we are not asked why.”¹⁵ Indeed this is what transpired within the UN’s Human Rights Commission and during the final voting on the proposed document: “...the advocates of a liberal-individualistic, a communistic, or a personalist type of society,” said Maritain, “will lay down on paper similar, perhaps identical, lists of the rights of man.”¹⁶

Both the practical incentive to agree in order to act concertedly and the presence of underlying and abiding moral imperatives shared by all resulted in the spectacular consensus around the Universal Declaration that was witnessed in 1948. The “common tenets,” as Maritain called them, cutting across the myriad outlooks and beliefs, guaranteed the possibility to build out of the existing pluralism “a society of free men.”¹⁷ In Western democracies, also, where any pluralism is firmly ensconced in the bosom of the prevailing worldview, “common tenets” can be relied upon to provide the necessary binding glue for building and sustaining the polity: “The reality of an objective moral order that can be discerned from a careful reflection on human nature and human action thus provides a crucial layer of the moral-cultural foundation on which pluralistic democratic political community can be built.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁸ George Weigel, *Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 166. Weigel continues:

There have been tremendous instances of peaceful pluralist accord in the lands where democracy originally sprouted and matured, yet matters tend to be very different elsewhere around the world. Historians and scholars concur that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was born under highly exceptional international circumstances, namely during a rare window of opportunity between the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War – a rent, as it were, in the otherwise turbulent fabric of history. The impressive consensus achieved there can hardly be taken as a model for other cases of pluralist *rapprochement* when they involve a multiplicity of antagonistic total outlooks. Furthermore, the abstentions in the final voting on the Universal Declaration merit closer scrutiny. The Islamic states, for example, were on the verge of voting against the passage of the document because of a single provision in Article 18 declaring the right of anyone to change his or her religion. Islam regards this as tantamount to sanctioning apostasy (*ridda*), which is a crime punishable by death according to strict *shari'a* law. Thanks to no small amount of effective lobbying, diplomatic cajoling, and some last-minute behind-the-scenes persuasion, the Islamic delegations backed away from voting against the document and decided instead to abstain.¹⁹

Much of what has been said earlier regarding religious pluralism in the West needs to be tempered, if not seriously qualified, when talking

“The moral obligations of others—including racially, ethnically, and/or religiously different ‘others’—are a mirror in which I can discern my own moral obligations, and indeed my own humanity. And that sense of common moral obligation is the basis of democratic community in a civil society, a society in which the chasms of racial, ethnic, and religious difference are bridged for purposes of achieving the common good.”

¹⁹ Actually the Islamic states voted in favor of each of the 30 articles separately. They only abstained on two articles: Article 18 endorsing the freedom to change one's religion, and Article 16 offering equal rights for women. Credit for this outcome must go to the liberal-minded delegate from Pakistan, Zafrullah Khan, and to Charles Malik of Lebanon, the chairman of the Third Committee that saw the Universal Declaration through to the final vote and adoption by the UN General Assembly. For more on this fascinating process and the personalities behind it see the upcoming book by Mary Ann Glendon on the making of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights tentatively entitled *Rights from Wrongs* (New York: Random House, 2001).

about predominantly Islamic environments containing indigenous non-Muslim minority communities. This is a stark and sobering reality. It does not mean that universality of moral values somehow stops at the outskirts of Muslim societies – not at all. The human mind and the human conscience will respond to the beckonings of moral universals and of Natural Law anytime and anywhere regardless of context. What it does mean, however, is that in certain settings:

– and the Islamic world is one of them – awareness is awakened more slowly and the temporal pace of this awakening, the response time, is often far too incremental and even glacial to affect the here and now. In other words, the rate of receptivity of universal values by the receiving culture is crucial. Therefore practical arrangements, in particular democratic ones devised for the peaceful coexistence of heterogeneous religious belief systems, cannot always rely in such environments on the ubiquity and universality of values readily asserting themselves. In the West we are dealing with pluralism within an intelligible, coherent, largely unified cultural context and historical experience. In the East, particularly the Islamic world where you do not have the separation of religion and politics nor a two-hundred-year secularizing trend, one encounters at best an uneasy agglomeration of a plurality of contentious, religiously defined worldviews, but more pervasively one comes across the active subjugation of differing religious communities by a dominant Political Islam.

II *Democracy and Political Islam: Pluralism under Siege*

In his seminal work on the clash of civilizations, Samuel Huntington employs a phrase that evokes a world of meanings: “Islam’s Bloody Borders.”²⁰ Indeed it seems that wherever the Islamic world comes in contact with a different other, there is blood to be found. More arresting is the fact that in today’s world this appears to be true *only* with

²⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 254-65.

respect to Islam – no other “other” is encased in a circumference of red the way Islam is: From Egypt to Kashmir and Mindanao, from Bosnia and Kosovo to Chechnya, from southern Sudan to East Timor and to Ambon and Maluku in the Moluccan islands; not to mention Lebanon and Israel – the list is a long one. This phenomenon is not due principally to the many enemies that surround the Islamic world and constantly harass its edges as a number of Western apologists and conspiratorially minded Muslims would have us imagine. The primary reason for the “bloody borders” is inherent; it is the organic connection that has always existed between Political Islam and violence. In other words, the inability of Islam to view the different other except in adversarial terms.²¹

There are many variations of Islam and a correspondingly diverse community of Muslims. It is certainly true that to speak of “Muslims” or “Islam” in blanket fashion or in monolithic terms can be misleading. However, one encounters a remarkable degree of uniformity when it comes precisely to Islamic portraits of “the other” – especially the Christian, and even more so, the Jew.²² In this context, therefore, it is not as much of an oversimplification to refer to an “Islamic view” or “Muslim outlook.” And nowhere is this streamlined Muslim attitude towards the non-Muslim more in evidence than in situations where non-Muslim communities happen to live under Islamic rule. The historical record is replete with instances of the active reduction by Muslims in power of those non-Muslim communities to second-class status. The habitual and

²¹ It is necessary to state here that such a culture of violence is not always directed against the non-Muslim; it preys as easily upon the sons and daughters of the faith as it does on the outsider. Witness as an example the case of intra-Islamic violence in present-day Algeria or Afghanistan.

²² In the *Fatiba* (The Opening) of the Koran, the last two lines refer to two groups not “in the straight path”: “those against whom Thou art wrathful” (meaning the Jews), and “those who are astray” (meaning the Christians). See Koran, sura of The Opening, 7. All English translations of Koranic verses are taken from *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. Arthur J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). For the authoritative source that offers this interpretation, see the Koranic exegesis of Tabari (c. 838-923) in Abi J’afar Mohammad Bin-Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami’ Al-Bayan ‘an Ta’wil Aay Al-Qur’an*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Mustafa Al-Baba Al-Halabi publishers, 1954), pp. 79ff (on the Jews), and pp. 83ff (on the Christians).

oft-repeated “anecdotes of tolerance” that have become stereotypical in so much of the specialized literature on Political Islam cannot mask the deplorable conditions that native non-Muslim communities living in a predominantly Islamic environment have had – and continue – to endure.²³

Several ingredients in the Islamic worldview, particularly as it relates to non-Muslims, explain why pluralism has had to steer such a rough course in Muslim lands. Islam’s classical division of the world into two sharply defined and segregated realms, known respectively as the Abode or House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) where Muslims live in a majority as an *umma* (Islamic community) and exercise political power, and the Abode of War (*Dar al-Harb*) which includes everywhere else outside and beyond the first realm, serves to anchor an *a-priori* attitude of hostility towards the non-Muslim. This dualism was spawned and nurtured during the early period of conquests when Islam confronted and overcame its surroundings through the sword. But the primordial dichotomous outlook of the two antagonistic abodes survived the turbulent birth and spread of the new faith to become ingrained in the official, as well as popular, Muslim mindset. The Abode of War was looked upon as the realm where confusion and falsehood reigned, and hence as the natural and legitimate expansion ground for *Dar al-Islam*. In fact history was no more than the account of the triumphant extension of *Dar al-Islam* at the expense of *Dar al-Harb*. A religiously sanc-

²³ Invariably, one comes across descriptions of the moderation, the gentleness, and the humanity of Islamic rule—its tolerance of non-Muslims living under its writ. The late Albert Hourani, for example, barely touches on persecutions and tends to emphasize harmony of Christians and Jews under Islam in the urban areas (cities); see his *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 117-19. See also the rosy accounts of Sir Adolphus Slade (1802-77) of the life of Christian subjects under Ottoman rule, taken from his *Records of Travel in Turkey, Greece, etc.*, in two volumes (London, 1832; reprinted 1854) and quoted in Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), pp. 69-71. This type of account, despite its defects, remains far superior to more recent ones that squarely lay the blame for persecution on the victim. See as an example Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). See also Habib C. Malik’s critical review of Cragg’s book in *The Beirut Review: A Journal on Lebanon and the Middle East*, no. 3 (spring 1992), pp. 109-22.

tioned xenophobia resting on an “us and them” division of believers and unbelievers took hold. Infidelity, or *kufr*, was the prevailing feature of the Abode of War where the unbelievers dwelled. The *shari’a*, or Islamic law, makes *jihad* (holy war) a sacred duty for all Muslims and in several places the Koran exhorts the believers to *jihad*, namely to fight or kill “in God’s way.”²⁴

Despite Islam’s claim to be the final fulfillment of both Judaism and Christianity, with Mohammad being proclaimed as the Seal (the last) of the Prophets, the standard Islamic designation of everything that preceded Islam is *jabiliyya* (the age of ignorance). Such a concept represents a radical break with history and an abrupt discontinuity in its progression. It automatically cancels the intrinsic value of the predecessor, who is then never studied on his own terms nor assessed through the prism of his frame of reference.²⁵ This disruption of history in effect predisposes to violence: smashing idols, battling the vestiges of ignorance, and rectifying by force religious waywardness become compelling obsessions for the zealous Muslim believer. Hence there is no permanent peace with the forces of infidelity – only temporary truces to be broken by the Muslim, and *jihad* resumed, whenever more favorable conditions prevail.

Islam distinguishes between two main categories of unbelievers: whom the Koran designates as the “People of the Book” (namely Jews and Christians; Koran, sura of The Table, 76), and all the rest (members of other religions and pagans). Being grounded in a reworking of certain Old Testament stories as well as in Christian heterodoxy (specifically Arianism and Docetism), Islam from the start was very self-conscious of its Jewish and Christian roots. From the earliest Islamic period provisions had to be devised to accommodate the presence of

²⁴ See as examples Koran, sura of the Cow, 215 and 243; sura of the House of Imran, 168; sura of the Women, 73; sura of the Ranks, 3; and sura of Repentance, 110.

²⁵ It is amazing how much ignorance there is of both the Old and New Testaments in learned Islamic circles. One scholar called it “Islamic Self-sufficiency.” See William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 41-44.

non-Muslim minority communities belonging to these “People of the Book” within the Abode of Islam. Members of these communities were called *dhimmis* (those under the protection of Muslims) and included Jews, Christians, and later – when the authorities needed additional revenues from taxation – Zoroastrians. Specific rules attributed originally to the Caliph Omar were instituted governing the daily life of *dhimmis* under Islamic rule and their relations with Muslims.²⁶ Although it became customary, both in Islamic sources as well as among Western apologists for Islam, to view the *dhimmi* system as compassionate and humane (simply because it eschewed direct physical violence against those classified as *dhimmis* who strictly observed the rules), this system was in fact discriminatory and demeaning. Not only did it legally institute a second-class status for these conquered non-Muslims (a kind of religious apartheid); *dhimmi* prescriptions taken collectively constituted a subtle form of religious persecution.

Over time the *dhimmi* system has functioned not as a system of tolerance but of liquidation, with the expectation that it would eventually lead to *hidaya* (bringing the lost to the right path, i.e. conversion to Islam). Entire communities toiling under the *dhimmi* burden were reduced in numbers either through wholesale conversions to Islam to escape the stifling restrictions of the system, or through emigration out of *Dar al-Islam*. There is nothing benevolent about *dhimmi* status. The reputed economic prosperity of some non-Muslim minorities living in

²⁶ These rules, known as the Pact of Omar, eventually received wide approval by doctors of Islamic jurisprudence and were initially collected and published by Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) in his book *Abkam Abl al-Dhimma*, 2 vols., ed. by Sheikh Subhi Saleh (Beirut: Dar Al-‘Ilm Lilmalayin publisher, 1981). They cover such matters as a compulsory special poll tax (the *jizya*, or literally “penalty tax”); special dress; rules for subservient behavior so as to remain in perpetual humiliation in the eyes of the Muslim; a prohibition on building new places of worship or renovating existing ones; a ban on the ringing of church bells, the sale of alcohol, the display of crosses, or the open celebration of religious festivals such as Palm Sunday processions; and an interdiction on the carrying of weapons and an exemption from military service. In addition, a *dhimmi*’s testimony against a Muslim was not accepted at a court of law and *dhimmis* were not allowed to marry Muslim women whereas the reverse was possible. It is evident from this cursory profile of the *dhimmi* category that the concept is in urgent need of demythologizing in order to cease to connote tolerance in the mind of the misinformed.

predominantly Islamic urban areas, in the sporadic instances when it occurred, was due to two main factors unrelated to any supposed good will on the part of the authorities: the state needed the expertise of these unbelievers, and they did not constitute a political threat since, in the nature of the case, they could not have any aspirations to the Caliphate. Upon deeper probing therefore, no set of redeeming nuances emerges that somehow justifies the ravages of *dhimmi* degradation. "Dhimmitude," as the scholar Bat Ye'or aptly calls it, becomes with time a state of mind embodied as much in ideology and legal texts as it is in collective perceptions:

Dhimmitude can be defined as the totality of the characteristics developed in the long term by collectivities subjected, on their own homeland, to the laws and ideology imported through *jihad*. Dhimmitude represents a collective situation and is expressed by a specific mentality. It affects the political, economic, cultural, sociological, and psychological domains—all these aspects being interdependent and interactive.²⁷

Most striking about dhimmitude are the lasting psychological scars it inflicts on the victim communities and which long outlast any political and/or legal liberalization in Islamic lands. Thus the *dhimmi* syndrome, according to Ye'or, is one of "psychological conditioning" and "represents a collection of mental attitudes and behaviors linked to dhimmitude and common to the different groups which express them with greater or lesser intensity depending on circumstances. The basic components of the *dhimmi* syndrome lie in the combined psychological effects of vulnerability and humiliation."²⁸

In the modern period, beginning with the Ottomans in the mid-nineteenth century, attempts were made to proclaim equality in citizenship between Muslims and non-Muslims and to institute legal and ad-

²⁷ Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From 'Jihad' to Dhimmitude, 7th-20th Centuries*, trans. (from French) by Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p. 221.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

ministrative reforms. One would have reasonably expected such developments to ease the burden of discrimination and persecution suffered by the non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically, the opposite occurred and the roster of massacres perpetrated against various Christian populations of the empire from the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of World War II speaks for itself.²⁹ Such was the sad record of this so-called “era of emancipation” when *dhimmi* status was abolished from the books by imperial order, but hardly eradicated from the hearts and psyche of both victim and oppressor. The same is true in many contemporary Arab and Islamic countries where discrimination against native non-Muslims persists and threatens to erupt into active persecution at any moment despite modernizing overhauls to the constitutions and legal systems.

* * *

The lofty nobility of the democratic ideal, along with the dedicated urge to spread it far and wide, are without a doubt two of humankind’s greatest achievements. So many today chant with Thomas Carlyle: “Why should not all nations subsist and flourish on Democracy, as America does?”³⁰ The late-twentieth century was marked by the proliferation of democracy in many countries such as Eastern Europe hitherto deprived of the benefits of free expression, free markets, and political participation. We see the established democracies actively seeking to propagate their systems of government and their open markets all over the world. Under such slogans as “yes to the market economy, no to the market society,” leaders of Western democracies think they have presented the

²⁹ The Christians in the city of Damascus were massacred in 1860; Mount Lebanon saw the outbreak of sectarian hostilities that same year; Bulgarians were massacred in 1876; Armenians were repeatedly slaughtered in 1895, 1909, and 1915; Syriac villages in southern and southeastern Turkey were razed to the ground on several occasions and their inhabitants killed in 1895, 1915, and 1918; and Assyrian and Chaldaean communities in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq were targeted in 1918 and 1933.

³⁰ Thomas Carlyle, “As to a Model Republic,” from “The Present Time” in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850), reprinted in *The Faber Book of America*, edited by Christopher Ricks and William L. Vance (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 176.

essence of their message while simultaneously warning against the dangers of excessive materialism and its social consequences.³¹

As the euphoria about democracy explodes and the enthusiasm to package and export it in every direction becomes a driving obsession, care needs to be exercised to understand accurately the peculiarities of the recipient cultures and their societies. Many of these potential “consumers” of democracy are far less prepared (or inclined) to accept it than Eastern Europe was on the eve of the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. They were never under the umbrella of the separation of church and state and the relentless secularization of two centuries. This is painfully true, for example, of the world of Islam. There, whatever pluralism is to be found in these overwhelmingly Muslim societies is for the most part squashed, or drained of any creative vitality by centuries of subjugation and dhimmitude. One invariably comes across versions of oriental despotism among the ruling regimes in these lands, or, on the other end of the spectrum, militant fundamentalist extremism. Caught in the crossfire between these two vicious forces are the beleaguered non-Muslim communities and the pathetic Muslim moderates who hardly ever seem to affect the course of events in their own societies.

This generally sorry state in which Islamic moderation finds itself renders it for all practical purposes an elusive mirage in the quest for international dialogue between the West and the Islamic world. Sure the Saudi dynasty is classified as “moderate” in Washington because it acquiesces to the demands of American foreign policy in the Middle East. At home, however, the same dynasty is anything but moderate on every level that counts in the daily lives of its citizens. Politics alone does not determine moderation and never has. Liberal-minded individual Muslims, while very sincere in most cases, are usually an unenviable and lonely lot. Sooner or later, if they survive physically, these liberal Muslims discover it is almost impossible to continue to exist in

³¹ Statement made by French prime minister Lionel Jospin at the Six Nation Dialogue held on 21 November 1999 in Florence, Italy.

an environment governed by the writ of Political Islam and remain outspokenly critical. They either have to become silent or tone down the rhetoric appreciably, or they have to pack and head for freer pastures – meaning the West. Often so-called moderate Islamic regimes find they are compelled to restrain, or even clamp down on, critical liberal voices in their midst in order to placate a more dangerous and determined extremist faction or fringe. The pull factor towards repression is very strong in an Islamic setting, and the underpinning ideological rationalizations and justifications for this behavior are all there to be invoked when needed. Lone liberal Muslims here and there, especially at “dialogue conferences” or among exile émigré communities in the West, will speak of the need to reinterpret doctrines like the “Two Abodes” dualism, the *dhimmi* designation, the oppressive edicts of the *shari’a*, the fusing of religion and politics, and so on. The Islamic establishment by and large, however, is conservative and unyielding, remaining impervious to such overtures and refusing to entertain seriously these reformist outlooks. The result is that the liberal voices eventually discover how unrepresentative of Islamic realities they really are. *They* may discover it, but their Western audience – including apologist academics, ecclesiastical officials reaching out to conduct religious dialogue, or policy planners attempting to soften the image of some of their brutal allies – either out of ignorance or wishful thinking or design, more often than not does not. “Actually existing Islam,” as Salman Rushdie calls it (and he of all people ought to know) exhibits “granite, heartless certainties” (again, Rushdie’s words). It can be defined as “the political and priestly power structure that presently dominates and stifles Muslim societies.”³² It is what this author has chosen to refer to throughout as Political Islam.

³² Quoted from a speech given by Salman Rushdie in December 1991 in New York City entitled: “What is my single life worth?” and later printed in *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches*, ed. Brian MacArthur (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 485. Rushdie goes on to declare: “Actually Existing Islam has failed to create a free society anywhere on earth.”

The travails of Islamic moderation also create problems for those in the West seeking to engage in meaningful dialogue with Islam. In the abstract, almost any form of dialogue is preferable to the complete severing of contacts. However, dialogue with Islam requires clearly defined goals and an *a-priori* idea of the built-in, and therefore inescapable, limitations of such a dialogue. Both the clarity of goals and the awareness of limits are woefully lacking in the kinds of contacts that take place nowadays between Christians and Muslims and that pass for dialogue. When the Churches of the West, in particular the mainline Churches, engage in dialogue with representatives of the Islamic faith the outcome, at best, is usually a form of least-common-denominator ecumenism expressed in a string of platitudes: we are both Abrahamic-monotheistic religions; we worship the same God; the Christ of Christian faith and the Jesus (Issa) of the Koran are really one and the same; and so on. Aside from being essentially dishonest, such platitudes serve nothing but the respective *political* agendas of those exchanging them. This is dialogue conducted at any cost. It is dialogue for the sake of dialogue. It is politicized dialogue.³³ By serving to legitimize a repressive status quo, this form of dialogue is providing Muslim authorities, whether religious or political, with tangible political gains and an image face-lift. To add insult to injury, the dialogue process is often predicated on the Christian side by an assumption or premise that the only valid form of Christian existence in Islamic settings is the *dhimmi* one. This is tantamount to condoning persecution and canceling out a rich and entirely other experience in history: that of free and dignified Christian existence in a Muslim environment.

Dialogue between two worldviews riddled with glaring mutual incompatibilities has clear limitations and therefore must have as its modest objective the honest and open presentation of each position *as*

³³ Naturally, politicians can engage in this form of "dialogue." During the Kosovo war in spring 1999 many American officials did just that. See as a shameless example of this the remarks made by Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Samuel R. Berger, before the American Muslim Council, on 7 May 1999 in Washington, DC. (Text obtained off the internet).

it is in itself with little regard paid to points of intersection (real or imaginary), and with the aim of increasing understanding of the other. This would also open the way for “witness through dialogue,” or the kerygmatic dimension of dialogue, which is what the Christian Churches ought to be doing anyway in a situation like this. And caution needs to be exercised lest one holds contacts at conferences with Muslim liberal intellectuals living and writing in the West, and interprets these contacts as dialogue with Rushdie’s “Actually Existing Islam” out there. As an occasion for witness, dialogue above all must entail compassion that does not degenerate into patronization, comprehension that does not stop at admonition, and an honest exchange that is not satisfied with platitudes. Instead of these, inter-faith dialogue ought to have as its top priority the practical goal of helping to resolve tensions in situations of historico-civilizational encounter among differing religious communities – for example in the Balkans, Lebanon, Sudan, South Asia, and Indonesia, to name a few.

If dialogue with Islam has unavoidable built-in constraints and if Islamic moderation is constantly under pressure from both authoritarian rulers and radical zealots, how then can the political terrain in question be induced to become receptive to democracy so that pluralism may be protected and nourished? One unfortunately common approach must be avoided because it represents the height of irresponsibility. This is when democracy is presented to the Muslim world as mainly, if not exclusively, a system of majority rule. So much misery has resulted from this truncated presentation of democracy in a Muslim context where there exists a propensity towards numerical determinism. Certainly democracy involves the rule of the majority, but equally (and in the Muslim world this requires special emphasis) the other side of the democratic coin entails rights and protection – not of the *dhimmi* kind(!) – for minorities. If this is taken for granted in the West, it is largely foreign, or at best feeble, in the lands of Islam. Hence the awesome challenge of seeing any democratic experiment to its final successful conclusion in a Muslim country. Equating democracy solely, or even principally, with majority rule becomes therefore a ready recipe

for persecution of ethno-religious minorities.³⁴ The West would be doing a great disservice to human rights if it neglects this simple but lethal nuance.

Echoing Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, George Weigel is correct when he says "the fact of minority communities (which is an unavoidable aspect of modernity) does not preclude the formation of democratic political community *if*, as John Paul puts it in *Veritatis Splendor*, 'social coexistence' is based on 'a morality which acknowledges certain norms as valid always and for everyone, with no exception.'"³⁵ This applies everywhere and always, with the Islamic world being no exception. The only problem is the time scale, which in this case may have to be measured in decades (optimistic), but more likely in centuries (realistic). Positivists, to whose ranks neither the Pope nor Weigel belong, and other worshippers in the Temple of Progress, confidently assure us that Islam like everything else will evolve and change to become more in tune with the requirements of the modern world. They employ the ever-present and misleading analogy with the historical development of Christianity. This is the idea that Islam today is roughly where Christianity was in the Middle Ages; it is slowly heading for a more benign presentation of itself. Such an analogy is flawed on two counts: because in essence it involves a comparison of apples and oranges (i.e. Islam need not develop the way Christianity did); and because even if correct, the time scale is prohibitive, thereby rendering the point irrelevant for devising practical arrangements of coexistence and the safeguarding of pluralism in the present and near future.

What then is one to do about divided societies in predominantly Islamic surroundings? What form should democracy assume in such societies knowing that Political Islam throughout the wider region will

³⁴ Even contemporary Turkey, a declared secular state and the only democratic country with a Muslim majority, continues to have problems with its Christian and Kurdish minorities.

³⁵ See George Weigel, *Soul of the World*, p. 166. See also Weigel, "Roman Catholicism in the Age of John Paul II" in *The Descularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, edited by Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 30.

not take too kindly to secular political structures that accommodate pluralism? Here the only viable approach would be to erect a political system that can be defined as the democracy of distinct and semi-autonomous religious communities. Focusing on the religious community as the basic building block and nuclear unit comprising the intended democratic polity of a composite society is not, as some secularists maintain, a regressive step. On the contrary, in areas of the world where the ultimate identity of both individuals and groups has been and remains religious, a democratic order based on recognition of this inescapable fact would be more authentic than one that either neglects it or deliberately conceals it or tries artificially to bypass it. The Middle East is precisely such an area where an individual's deepest identity, and that of his or her community, continues to reside in and be derived from religion. Neither nationalism nor ethnicity nor nowadays secularism have managed to displace religion as the source of people's primary allegiance and identity.³⁶ Not even families and clans – two strongly entrenched features pervading Middle Eastern societies – can overcome the more primary religious distinctions and classifications. This fact about the Middle East may be strange and embarrassing to the modern Western mind; it is admittedly unpalatable to the secularists. However, it is a historical given and as such it needs to be faced and dealt with.

A number of countries in the Middle East manifest religiously grounded multi-communal agglomerations in varying degrees of differentiation. Syria has Alawis, Sunnis, and Christians; Iraq has Sunnis (both Arab and Kurd), Shi'as, and Christians; Egypt has Sunnis and Coptic Christians; and Lebanon has a bit of everything. Take for instance the case of Lebanon. This is both instructive and fairly unique since much about Lebanon is *sui generis* and peculiar. To begin with, Lebanon has

³⁶ Shared passions of Egyptian nationalism and Egyptian identity between the country's Sunnis and Copts have not protected the latter from periodic persecutions by the former. And the prevailing myth in some Palestinian circles that their common national identity and common enemy supercede whatever religious differences may exist in their society is simply not supported by the behavior of Mr. Arafat's Palestinian Authority where Christians continue to be marginalized, nor is it the case throughout Palestinian society with the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism.

a mixed society composed of eighteen officially recognized religious sects falling mainly within the two broad categories of Christian and Muslim.³⁷ Unlike the Christian communities scattered throughout the rest of the Middle East who are all *dhimmis*, Lebanon contains the only native Christian community that has succeeded historically for the most part in eluding, and often actively resisting, dhimmitude. Between Morocco and Indonesia, Lebanon is the only place where indigenous Christians have managed to remain considerably free. Also, Lebanon's Christians today make up around forty percent of the country's population, in other words a very large minority.³⁸ Despite the ravages of war and external occupation since 1975, Lebanon in many ways can still boast of a society that is freer than the other surrounding Arab societies where freedom remains a scarce commodity. Lebanon, both politically and socio-economically, has a respectable historical track record of freedom. Alone among the Arab states, Lebanon has a system of government that is a distinctive mixture between an adaptation of the French parliamentary form of democracy and a homegrown version of consociational democracy based on communal consensus and clan compromise. Its free market economy has demonstrated considerable dynamism during the periods of political calm.

The reason for taking a closer look at Lebanon is because it offers the chance to study possibilities of reviving and anchoring democracy in a Middle Eastern country with a religiously heterogeneous population. It is a hybrid country, not belonging strictly to the West yet at the same time not typical of the Arab East. It is also a country that is neither an integral part of the developed world, nor qualifying for an automatic third world designation. A fractured Lebanon slowly on the mend in a post-peace Middle East requires a carefully thought-out ap-

³⁷ These are: Maronites; Greek Orthodox; Greek Catholics (Melkites); Roman Catholics (Latins); Armenian Orthodox; Armenian Catholics; Syriac Orthodox; Syriac Catholics; Protestants; Copts; Chaldeans; Assyrians; Jews; Sunnis; Shi'as; Druze; Alawis; and Ismailis.

³⁸ See William W. Harris, *Faces of Lebanon: Sects, Wars, and Global Extensions*, part of the "Princeton Series on the Middle East," edited by Bernard Lewis and Heath W. Lowry (Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 60.

proach to safeguard its fragile pluralist society within a specially designed democratic political framework. Otherwise, this unique experiment in freedom and religious coexistence will relapse into chaos leading to fragmentation and disintegration, or remain the coveted target of expansionist despotic regimes as well as an eyesore for those wishing to entrench versions of Political Islam with its “victor/vanquished” mentality. If a secure and prosperous coexistence among the disparate elements in Lebanese society is to be attained, the asymmetry of fears and threat perceptions prevalent among the different religious communities has to be recognized and addressed. While the Muslims by and large express grievances and complaints – often very legitimate ones – about issues of power-sharing and socio-economic equality, the Christians for their part harbor deep-seated phobias of the existential kind, namely the “to be or not to be” variety. This asymmetry simply means that whatever system is to be worked out has to offer solid security assurances and alleviate any impending sense of threat felt by minorities.³⁹

The religious community in Lebanon is recognized by the constitution as the irreducible social and political unit and the wellspring of identity. It is the basis for the existing system of political sectarianism or confessionalism whereby key posts in the government are apportioned to representatives of the largest religious denominations – for example, a Maronite Christian president, a Sunni prime minister, and a Shi’a speaker of parliament. The constitution also stipulates that matters having to do with personal circumstances (i.e. marriage, divorce, inheritance, religious courts, and the like) be attended to within each community according to its beliefs, practices, and traditions. Two emphatic and important assertions need to be made. First, without the system of political sectarianism there can be no democracy in Lebanon. This does not mean the system as it stands cannot use reform; in fact, this is the topic under discussion right here. It does mean, however,

³⁹ For more on this see Habib C. Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem: Lebanon and Middle East Peace*, Policy Paper no. 45, 2nd updated edition (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), especially pp. 1-24.

that the wholesale abolition of political sectarianism, either in favor of a purely secular system, or in order to usher in the tyranny of an Islamic majority, would be detrimental to freedoms, would lead to abuses of human rights, and would thwart the chances for democracy to thrive. Second, this is admittedly not the best possible system; however, it is in harmony with the objectively given realities on the ground and, until the Islamic world demonstrates a more serious openness to secularization, it remains the best system available to preserve a healthy communal pluralism.

For political sectarianism to fall better in line with the concept of the democracy of religious communities, a special form of federalism needs to be applied in a multi-cultural and multi-religious kaleidoscope like Lebanon. That way perhaps Lebanon can serve as a useful future model for other similarly complex and divided societies. The principle of subsidiarity that comes straight out of the lexicon of Catholic social doctrine is the best expression for the kind of local communal autonomy entailed in this form of federalism. As Pope John Paul II puts it: “[T]he principle of subsidiarity...requires that a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its rightful functions; instead the higher order should support the lower order and help it to coordinate its activity with that of the rest of society, always with a view to serving the common good.”⁴⁰

Unfortunately, the word “federalism” has received much bad press in Lebanon. During the war years it unwittingly came to be associated in people’s minds with failed attempts at partitioning the country. Another misconception about federalism is that it necessarily has to have geographic extensions and expressions as one finds, say, in the Swiss Cantons. This is not so in our context. The beauty of the federal formula is precisely that it is elastic and flexible enough to be able to

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 48. See also the Letter of the Holy Father addressed to the Sixth Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (Vatican, 23 February 2000).

accommodate almost any set of givens. Federal arrangements and prescriptions can be tailored to the specific components and requirements of a particular situation. In Lebanon, for instance, a communally grounded federal formula would not be geographically determined but rather would be more of the personal/communal and legal/constitutional variety. Although the Lebanon war caused massive population displacements and communal segregation along religious lines, this would not be used as a basis for applying the federal prescription. More effective for Lebanon would be a federal structure that relies on the religious community as its essential foundation regardless of its spatial extensions. Such a federalism would be constitutionally anchored and would afford each religious community a measure of calibrated autonomy while guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of its members regardless of demographic growth or shrinkage.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty details, things no longer begin to appear so simple. Yet the demonstrated flexibility of the federal idea will rise admirably to the occasion. Some specific examples from the Lebanese context are indicated. To satisfy the desires and indeed the rights of citizens who do not wish to be classified under any one of the officially sanctioned eighteen religious sects in the country, a nineteenth category needs to be created that would take in everyone wishing for whatever reason to dissociate him or herself from any religious affiliation or stigma. This is the proper response to the secular critique of the existing system because it does not abolish political sectarianism.

Actually, two distinct legal and constitutional categories ought to be created: one to include all eighteen existing communities (category A); and one for any citizen not wishing to belong to any of the eighteen (category B). This mechanism would pave the way for allowing through category B civil marriages – today it is illegal to perform them in Lebanon – and a host of other matters pertaining to personal circumstances that the state would take on the role of performing. Such an arrangement would offer solutions to many problems that might arise from the federation of religious commu-

nities. In politics, for example, under the envisaged federal edifice each religious community would elect its own representatives to parliament according to a proportional scale based on the size of the communities – *not* according to geographic districts as the case is now. But a person need not be confined to running for parliament, or voting, exclusively *within* his or her community. People, even though they are registered in one of the eighteen communities of category A, could choose to run or vote as independents in category B. The same would apply to political parties which do not have to be restricted to specific communities but could be trans-communal and multi-confessional – again within category B. The significance of such a form of federalism with two independent categories is that it does not end up degenerating into a version of the caste system where people are born into a community and essentially stay stuck there for life with only seventeen other religious options to choose from.

Lest doubts linger as to the effects of a federal system on the cohesion of the state, it must be emphasized that the state's unity and sovereignty remain intact. One country, one government, one economy, one currency – all would not be compromised in the least by a federation of religious communities. However, trends of indiscriminate national homogenization across the board enforced from the top would be resisted and undermined by the local autonomy of the various religious communities, particularly in such delicate areas as private education and the creative pursuit of personal and communal self-realization and self-improvement. Federalism would immunize the communities against attempts to streamline them artificially according to a preset script dictated by the government – a clear violation of the principle of subsidiarity. One example of this is the current debate in Lebanon over the efficacy of a single history textbook prescribed by the state to be taught in schools. Naturally, such a book presenting a single version of past events prepared and imposed by the authorities in a composite society like Lebanon would be tantamount to totalitarian brainwashing. On the other hand,

providing a number of contrasting scholarly accounts of controversial historical epochs and episodes within the covers of a single-volume history textbook becomes an entirely different matter and one in keeping with the principles of pluralism intended to be protected by the federal formula. The whole point of federalism to begin with is to safeguard diversity and cultural pluralism without jeopardizing the cohesive integrity of the state. Since not all values are shared in a mixed and religiously heterogeneous context, and since awareness of universal values by some is at times delayed or slow in coming, local communal autonomy in sensitive enterprises touching on communal self-interpretation becomes imperative.

The advantages of federalism in mixed societies in a predominantly Islamic milieu are many. It protects minorities from the changing winds of demography by guaranteeing communal rights and freedoms independently of the size of the community. It allows for a more authentic and creative expression of individual and communal identities. It enhances communal security by alleviating to a large degree latent threat perceptions. It promotes economic prosperity through diversity and healthy competition. It is more realistically reflective of the differentiated cultural and religious ingredients of a society. It provides just enough room for overall national unity, yet at the same time permits considerable centripetal latitude. Significantly, communal federalism enjoys a modest history of success in the Middle East where, under the Ottoman Turks it was tried in the form of the millet system and found to work. The kind of federalism proposed here for Lebanon would resemble a neo-millet arrangement, minus of course the stewardship of an overbearing oriental despot such as the Ottoman Porte. Instead, the rule of law and a reformed constitution would guarantee the proper functioning of the system.

The only disadvantage is that federalism will be resisted by majorities bent on domination and subjugation. But then so will democracy in whatever form it is presented.

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Serious attempts to explore the applicability of the federal option to non-Western, religiously dissimilar pluralist contexts have not been made systematically or responsibly. This is so in particular with regard to the Islamic world. Nor have the limitations and anomalies of classic, specifically Western conceptions of pluralism been properly assessed. In what is often labeled a “post-Christian” society in the West sensitivity to the all-encompassing nature of the spiritual has been softened, if not lost altogether, in many quarters. How can people be expected to fathom the passions that drive other religions when they have lost touch with the roots of their own religious traditions in the West, regardless of whether they themselves are believers or not? With the plurality of worldviews universals do not vanish altogether, but awakening the various antagonistic worldviews to their common universals is usually a thankless and time-consuming task. If a person is placed in a cage with a tiger and told the tiger can be tamed, that is probably true; however, in the meantime that person is badly in need of protective measures to secure his wellbeing. And it could be a crocodile instead of a tiger, in which case no amount of waiting or taming will produce results. Democratic federalism in mixed cultural environments offers the best interim system until a heightened consciousness of binding moral universals manifests itself. Clearly teams of legal and constitutional experts will have to work out the details for every context. The reality in the twenty-first century is that we live in a multi-religious world and that there is evidence that outside the West at least religion is increasingly resurgent. The responsibility of democratic states is to improve people’s lot by propagating the democratic model. This is best done not by attempting to alter the given reality of the world at large, but by modifying the concept of democracy to better suit and fit the fixed givens out there.

List of Literature

The following is a short list of some of the key works consulted in preparing my paper. They are presented in no particular order, neither alphabetical nor topical.

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