

The role of religion in establishing social cohesion

by
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With the enlargement of the European Union on the agenda, and at a time when there is a manifest need for a “European voice” to make itself heard on the world arena, it seems particularly appropriate to consider the role of religion in establishing social cohesion and creating European identity. The question has been raised explicitly in the current debates as to whether or not the introduction of the future European Constitution should refer to transcendent matters and/or Europe’s religious heritage. At the root of these debates, however, is not just a simple matter of comparing divergent principles or achieving the difficult task of reconciliation necessitated by the different ways in which the religious and political domains are organised in the various countries involved, whether already members of the European Union or about to join. In fact, the question of religion has implications that extend beyond the realm of religion itself, inasmuch as it provides an opportunity to examine – under the microscope, as it were – a number of issues inherent in the project of *cultural* European integration, supporting the emergence of genuine European citizenship.

The purpose of the discussion which follows is to point up a few elements to help clarify various aspects of the question from the point of view of the sociology of religion.

1) Secularisation as a unique feature of European society

The obvious starting point for any examination of the position of religion in Europe is the long-standing observation that the process of secularisation is extremely advanced throughout the continent. The most readily available (and most widely used) indicator of the advanced degree of secularisation is the level of religious practice. There are, it is true, considerable differences between the countries of the European Union in terms of religious observance, and it is only in certain countries where churches are deserted at all times of the year other than the main religious festivals (Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands) that structures seem to have weakened to the point of collapse. In general, though, the level of religious observance is considerably lower in Europe than in the United States. The general trend observed in major quantitative and comparative studies of religious belief is that belief in a personal god (with the attributes of the Judeo-Christian deity) is waning in favour of a vague belief in a “power” or “supernatural force”. There is no diminution in the belief in a life after death but it is becoming clearly dissociated from the Christian vision of salvation in the world hereafter. While the number of Europeans declaring themselves convinced atheists, rejecting any belief in life after death, remains relatively low everywhere (with nonetheless significant national variations), it is still much higher than the 1% rate recorded in the United States.

Comparison with the United States is valid here because this erosion of religion in modern societies was long held, across the entire spectrum of sociological thought, to be an unavoidable feature of modernity itself and even to be a condition of modernisation. The European situation could thus be viewed as a model prefiguring the general development of advanced societies. When it was observed that American society, whose classification in the ranks of modern societies could hardly be questioned, did not adhere to this model of the loss of religion, it was the unique nature of the American experience, with reference to the historic conditions under which the Republic was founded, that was interrogated rather than the universal nature of the European situation. That point of view was reversed after the 1970s, when it became clear that religion was a powerful presence in public life everywhere except in Europe, the only cultural area where the paradigm of secularisation found a real application, and then in ways that varied from country to country. This reversal in points of view now leads us to examine, instead, the exceptional nature of the European experience in the light of the prevailing tendencies in the rest of the world.

The first effect of the shift in attitude to the paradigm of secularisation was to enable the “loss” at issue to be reassessed, including in Europe. For a long time the thinking was that the decline in religious practice was in itself an indicator of the parallel retreat of religious belief. This school of thought acknowledged that the combination of the spread of scientific and technical rationalism, the affirmation of individual autonomy and the increasingly specialised nature of spheres of human activity led to the modern world’s deep-seated loss of illusion, and consequently the definitive loss of plausibility of religious belief. The drawback of this description of a rationally disillusioned modern world was that it disregarded the structural insecurity into which societies driven by the imperative for change were thrust, an omission which meant that the need for order engendered and stimulated by that insecurity was not identified. The proliferation of new-wave religious movements recorded as of the end of the 1960s has shown that religious belief is still thriving in European society, even if it is liberated from the control of mainstream organised religion in terms of its symbolism. The intensity of different faiths (and their multifaceted nature) is a response to the scale of the expectations, aspirations and frustrations engendered by the typically modern promise that individual accomplishment is available to everyone in this world.

Another reading of secularisation in Europe has gradually come to the fore. The problems of the loss of institutional religion which dominated the 1950s and 1960s were followed by an approach *deregulating* institutional religion. The emphasis was switched to patterns of individualisation of belief, leading individuals independently to determine a personal credo which would give meaning to their existence, according to their own frame of mind, interests, aspirations and experience. This emphasis on the do-it-yourself approach to religious belief and practice does not mean that conventional religious traditions lost all their cultural relevance in European society. It is simply that these traditions increasingly served as symbolic tool stores, repositories of meaning available for individuals to use and reuse subjectively in different ways. Less and less are the major religions “codes of meaning” imposed on individuals from above; and less and less are they “natural communities” within which individuals inherit their religious identity down the generations. In modern societies, particularly in Europe, religious identity is increasingly a matter of personal choice. Individuals make their own choice of religious allegiance – often after a long spiritual journey – either for good or just for a short time. More than any other people, Europeans are moving away from the model of the “practising” believer, who receives his religious identity from the community to which he belongs from childhood and within which he complies with the rules of religious observance set by the institution responsible for the transmission of faith. They most closely follow the pattern of two descriptive models which I have elaborated in order to take account of contemporary patterns of faith in the modern world: the *pilgrim* (who follows an individual spiritual path involving a series of phases) and the *convert* (who chooses the religious family to which he belongs).¹ These models do not apply just to the European situation, but they are the most appropriate description of the trend towards religious individualisation in Europe, which disrupts the organisation of conventional forms of religious allegiance, particularly the traditional forms of involvement in religion at parish level and the transmission of religion through the family. The British sociologist Grace Davie’s expression *believing without belonging* best characterises the state of secularisation in Europe.² Let me point out, in passing, that this formula can be turned around to give *belonging without believing*, another expression which typifies Europeans’ attitude to religion, an attitude to a distant shared memory, which does not necessarily entail shared belief, but which still – even from a distance – governs collective reflexes in terms of identity. The Danish citizens who do not believe in god and never attend church but who faithfully continue to pay the tax that goes to the Lutheran Church because they like to see religious buildings properly maintained

¹ cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999 (Poche Champs, 2001); and D. Hervieu-Léger, *La religion en miettes ou la question des sectes*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2001.

² cf. G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, London, Blackwell, 1994; and G. Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, London, Darton. Longman, Todd, 2002.

for the ceremonies associated with rites of passage and the French citizens who are nostalgic for the beautiful church services of their childhood and complain about mosques being built in France but who never set foot in church until “the bell tolls” for them illustrate how one can “belong without believing” which in Europe is a counterpart to the expansion of beliefs without belonging.

For all these cases, Europeans’ shared religious identity nowadays is expressed through the general advent of a spiritual individualism which overturns established structures for the transmission of religious identity. This subjectivisation of religion is the latest stage in the long process of its gradual repression into the private domain. Historically, Europe was the place where political autonomy was affirmed (through processes that varied from nation to nation) in relation to the authority of any religious standard imposed from above. Europe was the test-bed which saw religion’s exit from the stage and the invention of political sovereignty, giving rise to a set of standards governing collective life dictated from below.³ It is now the test-bed for the absorption of the symbolic resources of religion into the contemporary individualistic culture. Even so, religion has not disappeared: it continues to exist as a personal option and as a means of individual identification, but it informs collective identity less and less and no longer, at least in any European country, provides the framework of ethical standards in the life of citizens.

2) Religion’s role in determining the values of European civilisation: the residual pluralism of different religious cultures

However, if we wish to describe the position of religion in Europe, it is not enough to simply record the objective indicators of loss (the decline in religious practice and the erosion of traditional belief patterns) and to strive to map out personal home-made symbolic systems. Such an approach does no more than skim the surface, revealing only the visible involvement of individuals with the “major religions”. We have to dig deeper if we wish to take the measure of the presence of religion in European societies, and look into the political and cultural structures and the ethical and symbolic structures which make up the framework for collective life in the societies concerned.

At this level, one can gauge the extent to which both institutions and mentalities are imbued with and shaped by religion, even in the absence of any explicit reference to the religious traditions involved in the development of the values of the civilisation. Civilised values have developed, broadly speaking, within a Judeo-Christian cultural context: we are aware, for instance, of what modern thinking, and specifically European thinking, on autonomy owes to the Jewish concept of the covenant (*Brith*) as the foundation for the relationship between the deity and humans on a quasi-contractual basis (binding the fulfilment of the divine promise to the elective loyalty of the people). The concept of the covenant is the opening page of history. Christian tradition makes the concept a twofold one: universal (the Good News is for all humanity) and individual (conversion is an individual choice). Yet this common context which lies in part, among other things, behind our concept of human rights, is diffracted and differentiated in different religious cultures.

It is common, and perfectly justifiable, to draw a distinction between a “Protestant Europe” and a “Catholic Europe” within which, for example, the construction of the modern problem of autonomy has taken different routes. The difference can best be illustrated with reference to the German and French experiences. The German treatment of autonomy, predating any concept of political autonomy, is born of the historical experience of the Reformation and is constructed through the affirmation of a religious individualism which radically challenges the foundations of authority in the Church and dispenses with the need for institutional mediation in the relationship between the believer and the deity. The concept of the individual and the sovereignty deriving from it is radically different from the essentially

³ cf. M. Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

political construction established in France thanks to the joint struggle against despotism and religion which came together in the revolutionary experience.⁴

If we wished to make a more detailed analysis of the differentiated ways in which religion contributed to the development of the values of civilisation in Europe, we should have to look further into relevant subdivisions within the Catholic and Protestant spheres of influence. So, within "Protestant Europe", the British, German and Scandinavian issues of the Enlightenment, themselves rooted in different Protestant structures, engendered political cultures, concepts of the relationships between the State and the citizen, interpretations of sovereignty and of representation that were far from homogenous. The key point is that each European society is now characterised by its own specific religious roots. In a country such as France, where the historic effect of secularisation was particularly far-reaching and where the objective and subjective loss of religion may be specifically illustrated, the phenomenon of the Catholic encoding of culture, institutions and mentalities continues to be extraordinarily significant. As Sartre maintained, in *Being and Nothingness*, "We are all Catholic." In particular, this phrase highlights the two-way relationship which secular society maintains with the figure of the Roman Catholic church whose direct potential for influence over society and individuals it dedicated itself to undermining. More generally, the programme of public institutions (everything from schools to hospitals, courts, universities, etc.) was entirely based and has continued to operate long term with reference (though, obviously, not explicitly) to the Catholic model.⁵ It is impossible to appreciate the discussion of many questions in French public life which have strictly nothing to do with religion (from food quality to the ethical regulation of science, the management of hierarchical relationships in business, the future of rural society, societal expectations of the State, and demands for workers' rights) without being aware of the extent to which French culture is impregnated with Catholic values.

The fact is, the same degree of symbolic and cultural encoding is at work in all European countries, from Scandinavia to the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy or Ireland, though it takes completely different forms. In all the countries of Europe, the style of political life, the content of public debate on social and ethical issues, the definition of State or individual responsibility, the concept of citizenship or of family, attitudes to nature and the environment, but also the practical rules of civil conduct, attitudes to money or patterns of consumption (etc.) have taken shape in historical and religious contexts which still (up to a point) continue to shape them. Not because the religious institutions have retained any real power to set standards (we know they have lost that power everywhere), but because the symbolic structures which they shaped, even after official belief has been lost and religious observance has declined, still have a remarkable capacity to influence the local culture. It is worth noting that this differentiated influence operates within a shared world shaped by a long history in which the political and the religious spheres were s

3) *A disintegrating cultural matrix?*

The key question today is, obviously, what will be the future of this civilisational matrix shaped over a long historical period. Several sets of factors contribute to rocking a cultural foundation which is at one and the same time unified and diverse. In each instance, the problems encountered highlight and accentuate the tension between, on the one hand, the process of the homogenisation of the European religious scene under the influence of secularisation and, on the other, the possibly contradictory stimulation of the various religious cultures which exist in the same European area.

The first – and most visible – factor is Europe's *cultural and religious pluralisation*, primarily associated with phenomena immigration, and specifically the definitive settlement of immigrant populations in the host countries. The core of the phenomenon of pluralisation is,

⁴ cf. the analysis given by P. Bouretz, "La démocratie française au risque du monde", in M. Sadoun (ed), *La démocratie en France*. T1: *Idéologies* Paris, Gallimard, 2000, 27-137.

⁵ cf. F. Dubet, *Le déclin de l'institution*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.

clearly, the massive Islamic presence in several European countries, which is a common bond between the European countries facing the same problems of reciprocal acclimatisation of quite separate religious and cultural worlds. At the same time, it necessitates the wholesale reassessment of the relationships between religion and culture in the various societies concerned. However, it also reveals the disparities in societies' responses to demands for the recognition of Islam in their midst. While it is true, for example, that the size of the Moslem populations in the United Kingdom, France and Germany has made Islam a force to be reckoned with in these countries, it is also clear that the road to integration of these populations is significantly different due to both the political cultures of the host countries and the specific features of the different branches of Islamic faith involved (in these cases, those of Pakistani, North African or Turkish origin). The different approaches to issues such as the wearing of veils in school are clear demonstration of the fact that the presence of Islam has become a fact of life which both unites and divides different European countries.

The same dialectical tension between rapprochement and separation is at work in connection with the *cultural globalisation* phenomena affecting Europe along with the rest of the world. On the one hand, the spread of a homogenised media culture, the accelerated development of the movement of goods, persons and ideas, the homogenisation of models of consumption and the general subjection of trade – including the exchange of symbolic ideas – to the liberalised market regime are tending to erode the cultural – and, in particular, the religious – individualism of European societies. On the other hand, the very dynamic of cultural homogenisation is provoking reactions likely to stimulate the reactivation of these same cultural specificities and to cause national political and symbolic problems involving religion which one might have thought obsolete to resurface. While it is conceivable that the growing hegemony of North American culture and values may engender, as a reaction, the affirmation of a European culture with its own references and values, there is also the possibility that it will give rise to “reactionary identities” sustaining, even in Europe, heightened rivalries inseparably linked to religious persuasion and nationality. The fight to defend “cultural uniqueness” may find sustenance in the fertile soil of the religious worlds which exist side-by-side in Europe, but these very different religious worlds may make something quite different of that struggle.

A feature of the phenomena of cultural pluralisation and cultural globalisation is that they contribute both to the erosion and, paradoxically, to the partial reconstitution of the various religious civilisations which exist in Europe. This is not the case of a third set of phenomena directly impacting the *cultural foundation* made up of these religious civilisations. Indeed, considering the cultural upheavals with which Europe (like all democratic Western societies) is faced nowadays, we might wonder if we are not currently engaged in changes whose effects could well be as decisive in scale, for religion, as the critical turning-point of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.⁶ That period was characterised by the elimination of the transcendent from the political sphere, though it did not preclude the transfer of a form of transcendent thinking without reference to a deity (and the eschatological considerations which went hand-in-hand with it) into the political arena. It is possible that the cultural change we are currently experiencing will shake up the symbolic framework of our societies from top to bottom, perhaps definitively displacing religion from society. Identifying (and hopefully interrelating) three major observations will perhaps help make some sense of this stage in our cultural development:

- The first involves the advent, for the first time in human history and specifically in this economically and politically privileged arena that is Western Europe, of a well-fed or *satiated society*. Not only have the generations reaching adulthood today never known the reality or even the real threat of war, but they now live their lives without ever having to worry about having enough to eat tomorrow. Food sufficiency is now a given which is not adversely affected by even large-scale animal epidemics (compared with the last swine fever epidemic in Europe which caused shortages as recently as the 1950s). The cases of hunger that still exist in Europe are to do with the problems that some underprivileged social groups have in

⁶ Regarding this change, cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme. La fin d'un monde*. Paris, Bayard, 2003.

accessing resources rather than the fact that resources are not available.⁷ This *revolution of food satiety* (apart from the new problems of food safety it has brought to the fore) can be perceived as a major symbolic operator, entailing a radical transformation in the collective and individual relationship with the world. This transformation also affects other areas posing some threat to the experience of being – more or less - safe, in particular childbirth (except in rare cases, which we see as intolerable, giving birth is no longer a life-threatening experience in Europe) and (up to a point, at least) health.⁸ Admittedly, the experience of insecurity has shifted to other areas (employment, urban violence, social segregation, the environment, etc.) and general access to this “self-evidence of safety” is still, in the real world, unfairly distributed, but that is precisely because the “self-evidence of safety” (supported, one might say, by the self-evidence of the sufficiency of food resources which is its symbolic centre) has become the norm to the extent that we become indignant about new experiences of insecurity or when we see that safety fail. The experience of satiety, which has become a feature which typifies our societies, has major symbolic implications. In particular, it is directly linked with the focusing of belief systems upon this world that is supported by surveys of Europeans’ values. As soon as it is set up as an objective that is accessible in the here and now as a normal condition of individual and collective life (which ought to be the case for everyone), it can be accepted – or at least suggested – that the experience of satiety (not to be confused, obviously, with the personal, subjective experience of satisfying a desire) displays a crucial affinity with the shift of individual and collective aspirations for accomplishment demonstrated by the surveys of values. Less and less associated with the arrival of the Kingdom, or even with the radical or gradual transformation of society, the ideal of accomplishment is increasingly centred on the individual, in a trend of not dismissing but “subjectivising” utopia, which is perceived as a radical alternative to the experience of the present. This shift has nothing to do with some “end of history”: it is simply caused (obviously only in part, but a nonetheless significant part) by an increasingly clear-cut dislocation between the “fear of shortage” and the aspiration to happiness, which is now labelled “self-realisation”, “fulfilling one’s potential”, personal access to “wisdom”, “balance”, “inner peace”. One might maintain that this “subjectivisation of utopia” is one of several aspects of the invasion of the expressive individualism which is characteristic of all modern democratic societies. It is, however, worth establishing the connection between the general trend of subjectivising utopia and what has been described here as the collective and individual experience of satiety. The latter, in its direct link with the matter of biological survival and, therefore, death, resolves one of the central symbolic themes in all religious traditions, as evidenced particularly in Jewish and Christian liturgy: the thousand-year association of the end to hunger with the fulfilment of god’s promise of a “land of milk and honey”.

- The second observation involves the spread of democratic culture beyond the political sphere in which democracy, as a way of organising the exercise of sovereignty, took shape. In this respect, the turning point which came about in Europe in the years 1968-1970 was clearly crucial. The democratic experience, as achieved *par excellence* by the cooperation of self-determining citizens in public debate to guide the society in which they live, is expanding beyond the confines of public life to infiltrate the exercise of all relationships, overturning established roles and hierarchies. No institution – school, business, university or church – is exempt from this transformation of traditional ways of exercising authority, representations of obligation and more or less “naturally ordained” distributions of roles and tasks. This democratic revision of “natural” roles and forms of authority obviously has the greatest impact within the family. In Europe, the trend is that the “relational family”, an association of individuals on an increasingly contractual basis, is inevitably gaining ascendancy over the “traditional family”, in which roles are supposed to reflect the “natural” destiny of its members.

⁷ cf. B. Hervieu et J. Viard, *L'Archipel paysan*, Editions de l'Aube, 2000.

⁸ Despite the considerable shake-up caused by the AIDS epidemic, the eradication of a number of major diseases and progress in disease prevention have given substance in Europe to the problem of “entitlement to health”, which is borne out (confirmed by negative examples i.e. access problems) by the existence of social, economic and cultural inequalities in access to healthcare.

The question of homoparental families is the latest, and most controversial, stage in this grass-roots revolution in conjugal and family relationships, directly – and revealingly – reflected by the reforms in family law undertaken in a number of European countries. I wish to focus on just one aspect of these changes here: their connection with the undermining of the religious justification for authority (specifically, male or paternal authority) defined as god-given. This undermining of authority which has already begun in the political arena is finding further application with contemporary challenges to the assignment of men, women and children to predetermined roles in society or in the family justified by a “natural order” which refers back explicitly or implicitly to the “will of god”, which is by definition intangible and passes our understanding. The very different ways in which European societies and religious institutions have adjusted to the new forms of marriage and parenthood – between the openness which characterises societies in the Protestant sphere of influence (despite some counter-reactions) and the defensive fall-back position more typically adopted by societies in Catholic-influenced countries – help revive the divisions between civilisational values broadly shaped by religious history. Such disparities are being eliminated, however, with the onset of a cultural and social revolution which is ultimately destroying the very foundation of these civilisational constructs.

- In more global terms, it is suggested that the current rocking of the cultural foundation is closely connected with the changes in Europeans’ attitude to nature. Indeed, these changes have a direct influence on the dynamics of collective production of what Charles Taylor labels “strong evaluations”.⁹ Social cohesion is effectively determined by the choices which a particular group is led to make between options it agrees to regard as superior or inferior, better or worse, desirable or undesirable, etc. Such evaluations involve not only the vying frames of mind, interests and aspirations within the group but also the references, norms, memories, aspirations etc. which make sense within the group. One might hypothesise that, to a great extent, the connection which has arisen in the long term between this social dynamic of the production of strong evaluations within European societies and their specific religious civilisational matrix was based on a particular way of viewing the *natural order*. The problem of the natural order was itself rooted in a religious world view (clearly differentiated according to whether a Catholic or a Protestant society is involved) which survived the advance of secularisation in various forms (including in legal form). Now, because of prodigious advances in science and technology, the basic human experiences most directly involved in the production of “strong evaluations” – sustenance, reproduction, health care, communication, the distinction between the living and dead, etc. – have been overturned by the discovery of the human capacity to alter processes previously thought to be immutable: with medically-assisted procreation dissolving the connection between marriage and filiation, the development of genome science and the practical control of the living organism turning farming conditions and therapeutics upside down, and the expansion of the cognitive sciences with all its implications for the field of information and our relationship to time and space, etc. There is no need for a long list: what entire civilisations have for thousands of years considered to be imperatives inevitably imposed upon humans by the dictates of the natural world, shaped symbolically by different religious systems, are now increasingly perceived as a set of mechanisms that can be manipulated, broken down, reorganised and modified. Nature has ceased to be an order, in either sense of the word: nature is perceived less and less as a world governed by immutable, eternal principles and is less and less able to impose its rules on humans. All European societies are today faced with a radical revision of their attitude to nature as the order of things which used to structure their symbolic worldviews (i.e. the shared mechanisms of meaning which lay at their centre). The foundations of the religious civilisations incorporating this view of nature have been definitively shaken by the necessary reassessment. The topical debates on bioethics in all European countries and in Europe as a whole are a perfect illustration of this. We are calling upon the symbolic resources of the different religious traditions to deal with ethical problems raised by the scientific control of nature the like of which have never been encountered

⁹ C. Taylor, *Le malaise dans la modernité*, Paris, Cerf, 1999 (Bellarmin, 1992).

before. At the same time, we are discovering the extraordinary weakness of these resources in terms of delivering standards, as well as the contradictions they entail. This process brings to light the eminently political nature of the generation of standards in ultramodern societies, and this discovery is seriously undermining the cultural plausibility of the codes of meaning which religions claim they still offer.

4) From the elimination of religion from culture to new ways of exploiting "Europe's religious heritage"

It may seem paradoxical, even provocative, to emphasise the ongoing process of the elimination of religion from European culture, as I have just done, given the prospect of a process which will instead amplify the wealth and the unifying power of Europe's "religious heritage". I do not seek to disparage the symbolic and ethical potential of this heritage. Indeed I have endeavoured to emphasise the importance of the religious civilisational matrix – both unified and diverse – in which European societies are rooted. Nonetheless, I think it worth examining – in the precise light of the cultural development which I have just described – the significance of referring to the European religious bedrock in terms of heritage.

- My first remark concerns the reference to memory which forms part of this reference to religious heritage. As we know, the question of memory is raised obsessively specifically in societies in which there is a risk of loss of memory because of the rapid rate of change. Traditional societies, which rely on memory, do not feel the need to talk about collective memory all the time. It is a given which makes its organisational power felt in all aspects of social life and is not an "issue". On the other hand, modern societies, which have change as their motor and their imperative, are much more anxious about keeping the flickering "flame of memory" alive. The predilection for commemoration is a modern and even an ultramodern one. Concern for heritage, and religious heritage, is in keeping with that attitude. Religion can be considered "heritage" only because it is kept distinct from and operates separately from the places where the rules of collective life are primarily decided. The classification of religion as heritage is supported inexorably by the erosion of the organisational power of religion in social life.

- An act of commemoration, classifying religion as heritage is, at the same time, for Europe a way of negotiating its attitude to its own history. This is my second comment. Of what does Europe's religious history consist first and foremost? For the most part, of wars, often bloody wars, setting groups and entire nations against each other. Indeed, the question of how to ensure religious peace is the main issue which gave rise to the founding of the State in Europe. The reference to religious history as heritage currently at issue is a way of assuaging the dark memory of the religious wars in Europe in favour of the convergent contribution of different religions to the creation of the (intellectual and artistic) values and works which now form a bond between Europeans. Treating Europe's religious treasure as heritage is also a way of cleansing religion of its connections with the political conflicts and phenomena of social domination and violence with which it was associated, to retain and conserve only the "pure" civilising power it is supposed to have exerted throughout history. We should not resent or decry this application of selective memory. Quite the opposite, it contributes crucially to the production of norms and values which we use to govern our collective lives. Referring to Europe's religious (or spiritual) heritage is not, in that sense, an act of conservation in a museum but rather an activity of symbolic production which contributes to the emergence of a shared worldview. There is nothing anecdotal about the debate on the nature of the reference to religious heritage in the texts governing the European Union, from this point of view. For, while it propounds irreconcilable local views, it also illuminates the collective cultural choices currently being made.

- The third comment is that, precisely because of its nature as an active producer of shared norms, reference to Europe's religious heritage also entails a twofold risk.

The first risk is that such a reference may itself become the focus of strategies undertaken by the main churches to regain the public prominence they are tending to lose. The search for the prospect of shared meaning, sustained in part by reference to the

religious heritage which Europeans theoretically share may seem, in the eyes of the religious institutions, to be an opportunity to put themselves forward as the special keepers and hence the most legitimate administrators of that heritage. In a study of Pope John Paul II's speeches during his visit to the European institutions in 1992, Jean-Paul Willaime asked the question in explicit terms, as follows: "If, by civil religion, we mean the system of beliefs and rites by means of which a social area ritualises its collective existence and maintains collective reverence for the values which lie at the foundation of its order, one might wonder whether the Pope's visit to the European institutions is not part of a process of developing a civil religion for Europe, a process in which the Catholic Church would put itself forward as the favoured guardian of the European soul."¹⁰ This is an important question which is worth considering if we wish the reference to a shared religious inheritance to be able to operate not as a way of placing rivalry between religious persuasions and ideological conflict back on the agenda, but as an integrating reference, which may be shared by all Europeans, whether they are believers or non-believers, whether or not they adhere to a particular religious persuasion.

The second risk, probably more alarming, is that this reference to Europe's religious heritage, while one hopes that it may have an integrating effect within the Community, may be seen outside it as a way of setting boundaries. The heritage covered by the reference is a Jewish and, above all, Christian heritage, in its two variants, Protestant and Catholic. As such, it denotes a clearly demarcated area, bordered to the east by the domain of Orthodox Christianity and to the south by that of Islam. The discussions surrounding Turkey's entry into the European Union clearly show – quite apart from the major issue of human rights – the cultural, legal and symbolic issues raised by opening the European house to admit an Islamic country, however declaredly secular that country may be. Nor is the fact that there are no Orthodox countries among the signatories to the Treaty of Athens without significance.

The public debate to which the definition of the cultural, political, ethical and symbolic heritage denoted by "Europe's religious heritage" belongs itself represents an active aspect of the ongoing construction of social cohesion in Europe. It is first of all a place where the very frontiers of the shared European area are defined. It is, next, the privileged place for negotiating – based on the work of producing a shared memory – the reconciliation between establishing a common spirit and acknowledging the unique features that nourish this common spirit. Lastly, it is one of the potential test-beds for the production of "strong evaluations" in respect of the completely new cultural situations currently facing Europe.

In this last area, Europe shares the questions which are raised in all ultramodern societies. It also shares the risk that the extent of the social implications of this turning point, and indeed psychological implications for the individual, may give rise, as it already has in the United States, to a severe backlash on the part of institutions and religious authorities. Such bodies may make every effort to defend their social and economic influence, and even to regain their lost political influence, by relying on the reactionary forces generated by the widespread insecurity (the loss of all absolute references) caused by this change. We have sufficiently clear evidence to believe that this is not a mere hypothesis. The possibility that extremely bitter cultural (and hence social and political) conflicts may come into being in this context is not just a theory. The possibility of the emergence in Europe of a "culture war", like the one in the United States whose violence is described by the sociologist James D. Hunter (in a somewhat one-sided but relevant manner), cannot be dismissed out of hand.¹¹ At the very least, this situation encourages the *republicanisation* of religious identities (which secularisation was supposed to have pushed back into the private domain). While this feature is part of the general trend of all modern democratic societies to promote the

¹⁰ J.P. Willaime (ed.), *Strasbourg, Jean-Paul II et l'Europe*, Paris, cerf, 1991; and J.P. Willaime, "les religions et l'unification européenne", in G. Davie et D. Hervieu-Léger (eds), *Identités religieuses en Europe*, Paris, La Découverte, 1996.

¹¹ James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America*, New York, Basic Books, 1991.

individual right (of a person or group) to assert publicly the uniqueness of his identity,¹² it takes on special significance in the religious domain, heightening the tension between the propensity to tolerant individualisation of belief and the ambition to assert in the public forum the right to difference in token of the “truth” which the community claims to possess.¹³

In this context, reference to Europe’s religious heritage becomes meaningful. If Europe’s religious foundation is weakened, this does not mean that the Judeo-Christian bedrock into which the foundation is sunk is being definitively dismissed. For that would mean forgetting that both the concept and experience of autonomy and the concept and experience of human dominion over nature – which are both implicated in weakening the religious foundation – are themselves derived (at least in part) from that same Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, the very experience of the weakening of the foundations of religion becomes the starting point for the reconsideration of European religious heritage with reference to two specific aspects: firstly, the possibility of redefining autonomy on the basis of Judeo-Christian concepts of otherness and mutual relations, rather than as merely the liberal affirmation of an individual’s autonomy in his private life; and secondly, the issue of dominion over nature, which could be considered, in the light of the Judeo-Christian concepts of the Creation, as something other than raw material and source of revenue. In my opinion, the question of the “European soul” is best addressed by considering these two aspects, not by referring nostalgically to a religious past that is both glorious and painful but which has, in any case, definitively ceased to exist.

¹² On this “democracy of identities”, cf. M. Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie*, op. cit.; and D. Schnapper, *La démocratie providentielle*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002.

¹³ On the specific tension in the contemporary religious arena between soft or mutual forms of validation of belief and hard forms of community validation of belief, cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti*, op. cit.