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What can the social sciences teach us about the relationships among cultural identity, religious identity, and religious freedom?

1. *Premise*

Every person who comes into the world already finds waiting for him myriad religious options, established over time within different territorial and cultural contexts. This pre-existence of theirs is to a large extent also their strength, consisting as it does in a heritage that is transmitted from one generation to another almost without any break. With the passing of the centuries and the millennia we can find in them signs of weakening but also of strengthening due to particular contingencies but it is unlikely that a religion that has been sufficiently institutionalised can suddenly lose its consistence or its attractiveness. People and organisations, beliefs and rites, values and symbols, traditions and acquisitions are able to resist the more drastic changes and adapt to the less important ones. Thanks to this, in the course of history, in the various societies of the north as well as of the south, the east and the west, the salient features of religions are consolidated and remain, as a whole, a more or less important point of reference for millions of individuals or also for more restricted groups of people.

2. *The hereditary process*

The passing on of ideals, norms and values from one generation to another in the same society assumes the character of a hereditary process which does not take place with the death of predecessors but comes about much earlier in the course of years and decades, very slowly, minute by minute and step by step, without showy and/or improvident jumps. In metaphorical terms it could be said to be a gradual distillation that has taken place over a considerable period of time and the decantation of which is as gentle and almost imperceptible as dripping water which will eventually carve out even the hardest rock. This transition, moreover, has a typical connotation in that it is global, not fragmented and, at least tendentially, systemic in its organic unity and completeness. Parents pass on to their children what they in turn have been taught by those who are the grandparents of those children and the generators of contemporary educators and inculcators of culture.

Think of the example of the house-museums (Besana 2007) of the many families who have gathered together heirlooms and remembrances of their lineage and of their adherence to a religious faith (photos of ancestors, works of art, sacred artefacts); these are all messages that communicate the existence of a cultural capital that is precious and versatile and worthy of being preserved not only for future generations but, above all, for future inculcators of culture-educators-trainers.

At first, the impact of the cultural inheritance of adults is usually gentle, almost sinuous, but as young people advance in age so too does their spirit of criticism which calls into question the meaning of everything. Subsequently there can also be noted a detachment from the attitudinal and behavioural models learnt but, nonetheless, a trace of them persists that is perhaps similar to a Karst process,

unexpressed and yet not exhausted. The spilling over of inherited values may take place at a later stage in the least foreseeable or most problematic occasions which call into play the value of life and the meaning of existence.

3. *Religion and socialization*

The most effective action on the part of religions and churches has already come about both in the past and in the present by creating and favouring conditions that have led to the adhesion of millions of people to a religion. The number of those who practise their faith is, generally, much lower - a "vicarious" religion in Davie's (2000, 2007) terms - than the number of believers in or sympathizers of that religion. This, however, does not mean that the influence of a particular religion loses in vigour in correspondence to the numerical difference between its faithful and its more or less convinced supporters.

The best working solution for churches and religious groups is to intervene at the early stages and, generally, within the first fifteen years of their existence – in other words at the dawn of their formation when many of their choices will be made.

In different cases, there takes place during this phase the diffusion of a religion which is prevalent within a given context wide or restricted as it may be. Hence the diffused religion, which originates in the family of origin (biological family) and proceeds through the subsequent generations, puts down roots. From one generation to the other the religious creed is passed on almost uninterruptedly except for personal modifications on the part of one or other of the parents or educators.

4. *Diffused religion*

Modern diffused religion is not very different from that of the past. Indeed it is precisely its persistence that gives it its peculiar, almost structural, characteristic which Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967) would have understood as a hard core not easily touched by time but subject, nevertheless, to variations that may not be easily perceived. If anything has changed, it has done so at a secondary level that regards details rather than substance. Diffused religion is the result of a vast process of religious socialization that continues to pervade cultural reality and not only that. The pervasive character of religion persists because it arises from the religion itself and is heavily imbued with religious connotations.

The fact remains that, according to the increase in religious allegiance, we might almost think of a system of communicating vases whereby the increase in one religion would correspond with the decrease in another, as though the total quantity of the religiously oriented subjects should not change significantly in its totality but should simply be variously distributed within the specific connections of each of the religions.

5. *Diffused religion and religion of values*

In any case, it is not easy to distinguish between diffused religion and the religion of values: the former is included in the latter which, in turn, embraces a larger section of any population that is characterised by different levels of belief. In effect, diffused

religion as such concerns a category of people who do not regard religion as their raison d'être but who, nonetheless, fall back on the values of religion when they have to make important decisions that require more ethically relevant choices.

Conversely, the religion of values concerns a wider spectrum of attitudes and behaviour that may be more or less superficial in respect of the so-called official model of the religion of belonging and/or of reference. Hence, in the religion of values we can find orthodox forms of religion as well as forms that are more critical if not actually opposed to the credo and official rites of that religion.

Sociologists, and especially sociologists of knowledge, have no doubt about the cognitive content of values. The typically Weberian operation consists in giving sense to every single aspect of reality. Therefore values and meanings either seem to coincide or to be one over the other, in any case they have a very close connection. Identity is another *Leitmotiv* of the phenomenology of values. It is through values that people identify themselves in a movement, a religion, a political party or an ideological faith. At the same time, historical and sociological dynamics are such that individual characters are taken into consideration, together with a proportional development of freedom and autonomy.

6. *Values and ideologies*

Nowadays, there is an evident increasing respect for individual rights, which are separate to a certain extent from the social context and do not easily combine with the issue of solidarity. The idea of a social actor is therefore an attempt to place the individual within a relational network, thus underlining his/her human characteristics of socialization, sharing, dialogue, confrontation, values, from neither a non utilitarian nor functional point of view.

Migration dynamics, which have a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic shape, emphasize the urgency of common values and adequate ethical principles which are able to solve conflicts, misunderstandings and struggles. The hypothesis of universal values widely accepted by different ethnic groups seems to be far too utopian. The idea that social subjects who belong to different religious faiths have visions of life squarely divided into good and evil with no possibility of dialogue, mediation, or discussion to find shared positions without conflict cannot even be thought of. Sometimes there are rules, adequate behaviours and coherent attitudes, usually widely accepted, which not even through the transcendental dimension of a religion really become accepted.

7. *Universal and local values*

The issue of universal values is not secondary. The necessity of spreading abroad the values of some organizations and nations depends directly on this issue. An example can be made for freedom or democracy: we shall ask ourselves if it is ethically desirable to export such values through the means of war which is already an implicit denial of freedom and democracy itself.

Universal values, spread worldwide and commonly shared by all cultures, can only be seen as hypothetical views. The hypothesis can be destined to a failure as soon as an empirical survey shows an opposite thesis.

A possible solution might be found by speaking about quasi-universal values. This means that the suggested classification cannot pretend to be exhaustive and to be susceptible of generalization. It would be better to avoid radical and self-referring positions. Values do not depend only on the capacity of a dominant group to impose them to other individual and social groups.

Today a better mobility of people throughout the world is visibly increasing the occasions of sharing values as well as occasions of clashes (Huntington 1996) between different cultures and religions. That is why there is a sort of competition of political and governmental structures for defining constitutions, laws and rules in order to protect basic local principles from other cultural values imported from immigrant people. In the meantime, better solutions for facing the clash of values are under consideration.

Among the major values are: gender equality, freedom of speech, freedom of education, the refusal of war as a solution for conflicts, peaceful living together of people with different cultural origins, abolition of the death penalty, non racial discrimination, school integration, ideological and religious pluralism and last, but not least, freedom of consciousness.

Regarding this, there are already a number of official declarations and signed documents (Blau, Moncada 2005: 44-49). The definition of the parts also shows a clear will to declare to be faithful and practicing of religion, as well as being part of a nation.

In the past not respecting the rules was a sin against God, nowadays it is called crime and is committed against individuals and societies. A change of mentality in the Catholic Church, which is a main part of universal religions, has renewed its vocabulary by defining crimes major social sins such as fiscal frauds, negligence at work, drug selling, gambling, mystification of public truth by modifying communication contents, and other "anti-social" behaviours.

Global values and local values can be in conflict, especially when the same individual has to play a number of different rules. In this case interests and habits are struggling, therefore there is a conflict of value oriented choices against goal oriented choices, as well as interests of the community against personal and/or family needs. Other factors may play a role, such as interpersonal relations, class relations (which is not an easy dimension to wipe out, well beyond Marxist theories), awareness of one's role within society.

The Kantian idea of a universal ethic, from which common values for harmony in the world and among men derive, has lost many fans and is no longer in fashion. Contemporary sociologists cannot ignore that there is something more (or less, according to different points of view) than "a starry sky above us" and more than the "moral conscience which is inside us".

It is difficult do not accept the idea that values are the roots of human and religious rights. Actually, according to *Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (1995: 886),

"human rights are those liberties, immunities, and benefits which, by accepted contemporary *values* [emphasis by R. C.], all human beings should be able to claim 'as of right' of the society in which they live".

If taken as such, values may also become normative rules, some sort of validation criteria. They guide individual choices; therefore they interact with interests and pre-existent habits (in fact, values are not immune from those interests and habits that are capable of consolidating them, instead of choosing among a wide variety of options or of interests and habits).

8. *Religions and values*

All the so called universal religions contain values that present a certain vision of the world, a certain meaning of life and a specific idea of human destiny, from those referring to books (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to Oriental ones (Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto).

A value centred attempt of syncretism may allow a slight convergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, despite many past and present historical events show some difficulties of these religions to reach shared solutions. However, official and organized attempts have been made.

Oriental and Chinese religions have the remarkable experience of *Ju-Fu-Tao* that melts together Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in one religion. *Ju-Fu-Tao* is widely practised especially by Chinese people.

Somewhere else, in Japan, social actors go further, not only having their cults and values that belong to other Asiatic religions (especially Shinto and Buddhism): they also include some elements of Christianity, thus determining a mixture of values and practices which are often alternated, according to the personal living of subjects, their families and communities. It is not by chance that in the first decade of the past century there was an attempt of melting Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity.

Hans Küng (2007), who has completed the publication of his trilogy on the three "book" religions, besides having underlined the numerous common elements among them, he also confirms that "there are common bases: do not kill, do not torture, do not violate; do not steal, do not corrupt, do not betray; do not lie, do not give false testimony; do not commit abuse. These principles belong to many religions. Usually, Catholics totally agree. In some cases the problem arises, when respect for life is identified with the condemnation of contraceptives, when there is a consideration of abortion which is too rigid, if there is a discriminatory attitude towards homosexuality or if the problems linked to euthanasia are not understood".

Especially when a crisis of values occurs, recurring to religious values seems to be a successful and unavoidable remedy. However, sociological research results clearly suggest that no value, either religious or secular, can totally satisfy all needs of social life.

9. *Conclusion*

Problems of equality and exclusion are a constant issue at the present time. They are a must in the international socio-political agenda. By now, the lack of participation of

some groups to higher education levels represents a strong call for attention and sensitivity for governments and international organizations.

Sociological research can only give empirical data about the presence of average widespread values in each culture or socio-geographical and political context. A worldwide survey, using an appropriate and significant methodology, based on a comparative interpretation could provide a general information about the existence of meta-values, that is to say, values empirically found in various society that, when compared on a larger scale, may be indicated as universal.

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