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## Religious and liberal democracies

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## **Religions and liberal democracies**

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The human brain is a product of evolution. Over the last 3,900 million years the development and diversity of life on the planet has been spectacular. The first species of the genus *homo* appeared only 2.5 million years ago. And the appearance of this curious animal, which we rather arrogantly refer to as *homo sapiens*, occurred 150,000 years ago – only a moment in evolutionary terms. We do not know exactly when it happened, but with the genus *homo* came a cerebral revolution: the development of symbolic and abstract language. Since then we have never stopped asking basic questions: What and who are we?, What is the universe like?, How should we behave?, Who should take collective decisions?, and so on. And we have continually produced an incredible number of different answers.

Religions are one way of answering these questions and their responses have fascinated humans for tens of thousands of years. Human brains are much given to religious ideas. For as far back as we have evidence, and regardless of their technological development, the different cultures that have existed on the planet have all maintained religious ideas and practices. In fact, humans have displayed great creativity when propounding the existence of gods and spirits. This is a historical and transcultural phenomenon that is present at all latitudes. And contrary to what a number of “enlightened” conceptions of a liberal or Marxist nature have maintained, religions have not disappeared in the modern era, nor are they likely to in the future.

Nobody really knows the reason for all this, although several partial explanations have been put forward, some of which are of an evolutionary or economic nature. The origin of religions are controversial –there have been proposed diverse reasons: functional, psychological, political, moral, biological –sub product of the improvement of brain abilities to make causal inferences and predictions-, etc. For example, the evolution of life and language may have made most human beings believe in religious tenets in order to fit in with the group. It can also be suggested that religions are “economical” ideologies; that is, with a small number of ideas and stories, it is possible to answer a large number of different and profound cosmological and existential questions. Firstly, they provide answers for questions regarding the origin of the world and its relationship with humans. Origin myths and past or future paradises for humanity are created. The proliferation of deities and spirits is useful for building a mental map of the cosmos. Secondly, they provide answers to existential questions and human needs. We know that we are going to die, and questions about other possible worlds beyond physical death are frightening and disconcerting. And despite the fact that nowadays religions may appear to some to be somewhat precarious conceptions in scientific and rational terms with regard to what they say about the world, they still appear to provide emotional reassurance for many people. Religions offer “explanations” about the meaning to life, and calm anxieties in front of dangers, pain or death.

On the one hand, religions, in a broad sense of the word, at least to some extent refer to beliefs in a supernatural world –gods, spirits, etc (a set of believes which sound very strange to non-believers in this specific religion). However, as it happens with other common concepts (democracy, nation, ethnicity, state, etc), “religion” is an elusive concept. There are many definitions of religion and none of them is universally accepted.

On the other hand, religious practices and ideas have been linked with different ways of organizing political coexistence. In fact, religions have turned out to be politically useful, above all since the earliest sedentary and hierarchical societies became established after the “Neolithic revolution” – the most important revolution of them all. The appearance of bureaucratized religions proved to be a good resource for legitimizing the new political orders in increasingly complex and populous societies. And they continue to do so today, even in some liberal democracies.

Thus, religions are an important object of study for scientists, historians, philosophers or political scientists: Why do religions exist?, Why do they fascinate so many people?, How can we regulate coexistence between different religions?, And between the latter and agnostics and atheists?, What normative and institutional model can best reconcile liberal democracies and religious pluralism?, What are the most suitable multicultural models for this kind of pluralism?, How can one reconcile a secular political institutionalization with religious pluralism in the political and social spheres?, At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are we moving from a secular model to a “post-secular” one? The questions go on and on. This is a multidisciplinary issue which involves disciplines such as history, philosophy, political science, biology and the neurosciences. In the next section I will focus on a number of elements of an epistemological, cultural and political nature that have a bearing on the analysis of religions in contemporary democracies. In the second and third sections we will approach religions as (multi)cultural phenomena and their relationship with liberal democracies.

### **1) Epistemology: Prometheus, Gilgamesh and Lear.**

The ancient Greeks condensed the diverse characteristics of human beings into a variety of myths, among which that of Prometheus and Zeus (included in Plato's *Protagoras* dialogue) stands out. The gods assigned the brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus the task of handing out skills to the animals and to man so that they would be able to live their lives successfully. Epimetheus asked to be allowed to make the distribution. To some he gave strength, to others speed or wings to flee with, and so on, in such a way that no species ran the risk of being wiped out. When he had handed out all the skills, the human race had still not received its allocation and the day on which the gods' assignment expired had arrived. Prometheus, in a hurried attempt to find a way for humans to protect themselves, stole fire and professional wisdom from Hephaestus and Athena (for which he was later punished). Man now possessed these skills, but still lacked "political science", which was controlled by Zeus. Humans perfected their technologies, but whenever they met together, they attacked each other. Fearing that the human race would become extinct, Zeus sent Hermes –Plato says- to "bring man morality and justice, so that there would be order in the cities".

In view of the development of humanity it would seem clear, with regard to the amount of each skill handed out, that Prometheus was considerably more generous than Zeus. We are better at technology than at politics and justice. This myth clearly illustrates the fact that we humans are prone to do things in a hurry and to improvise. This is an approach that has been shown to be successful by studies into the evolution of life on the planet. Evolution is not based on a plan, rather it is the selection of a series of chance improvisations that have turned out to be effective.

We know that ideologies of all kinds distort reality. But together with these ideological distortions there are others of which we are less aware: those associated with how we

think, how we use language when we attempt to analyse and intervene in the world. Let us consider three of them:

- a) The tendency to use extremely abstract categories in order to include as many empirical cases as possible. To an extent, this is inevitable. The very act of naming something creates an abstraction. “Talking is an exaggeration”, the playwright Thomas Bernhard used to say. But at times we tend towards what could be called the *fallacy of abstraction*: the belief that the more abstract the language we use to describe, explain or transform a given phenomenon, the better we understand or control it. And often what happens is exactly the opposite: the more abstract the language, the poorer and more remote it is from the empirical cases that it attempts to discuss. Hegel knew quite a lot about this. However, some Marxists, for example, were prone to this kind of distortion when, using a small number of categories – “class struggle”, “economic base”, etc. – they tried to “explain” everything from the Sumerian empire to the technological revolution.
- b) The tendency to dichotomously dissect reality. Given the prevalence of this tendency, it would seem that our brain is prone to conceptual contrasts such as inside-outside, near-far, reason-emotions, matter-spirit, genetics-culture, east-west, ying-yang, Eros-Thanatos, etc. This is the spontaneous immersion in a “digital” epistemological perspective sometimes referred to as the “discontinuous mind” (Dawkins), which has proven advantageous in the development of evolution. It is very likely that binary contrasts have been useful for ensuring survival in a hostile world, but they are too primitive for understanding phenomena of a political or social nature, for example, in which different variables are interwoven. Despite the advantages we have derived from

having this kind of brain, we know that it is a structurally lazy organ that always tries to make as little effort as possible. However, we know that reality is often full of interrelationships, of intermediate areas, of complexities which force us either to introduce nuances or directly think in other ways. For example, the desirability of analysing culture *within* genetics, rather than contrasting the two concepts. But this is always more costly in epistemological terms. We need to employ far more words to overcome the tendency towards contrast between terms that are in fact often not logically exclusive and can be combined in different ways and with different intensities.

- c) The tendency of Western thought not to manage plurality correctly. Nowadays we recognize that political and moral pluralism is not only an unavoidable fact, but also an essential value of contemporary ethics and politics. We know that in any given situation there is no single way to act correctly in moral terms or that there is no single suitable political decision at any given moment. But in the history of Western philosophy, from Athens to Jerusalem, we have tended to think differently, in “monist” rather than in “pluralist” terms. We have thought in terms of one kind of “man”, of a single kind of “moral duty”, in a single ideal political system (every ideology has its own version). Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin have already pointed out that a lack of pluralism has characterized Western thought since Plato. But despite the fact that we recognize the pluralism of values and of comparable lifestyles, we often continue to believe that there is only one correct answer and that all others are wrong.

Most current theoretical conceptions continue to display these *abstract, dichotomous* and *monist* tendencies. And flawed theories are not the best way to improve practice. One key to thinking and behaving better in human societies is in critically controlling

this triad of distortions which live within our languages and our attitudes. This is easier said than done, it requires effort, but it is necessary in order to refine both our analytical abilities and our moral attitudes and political institutions.

Literature sometimes reflects these difficulties. The classic *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* are two of the works that best illustrate the consequences of a lack of practical wisdom on the part of the ruler and the difficult road that must be taken to achieve it. Religion now is no more than a distant reference point. The books' main characters are powerful at the beginning – they are both kings – but are disconcerted by the consequences of their own actions; actions that are expressed through a kind of language that hides rather than reveals reality. They find it difficult to escape from the confusion produced by the contrast between perspectives that they believed to be sound and the practical unfolding of a series of events that have a direct effect on themselves and their societies. In order to do so, they will need to go on a journey, both physical and interior, towards lands that until now were unknown to them and which, in the end, will make them wiser, more tolerant and unhappier. But this will make it possible to “civilize” the government of the city once again and will be of benefit to its subjects.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the oldest literary work that we know of. The main character is an allusion to the historical king of Uruk in ancient Mesopotamia (approximately 2750 BC). The five oldest extant texts date from around 2100 BC. They are written in Sumerian, the educated language of the period, which is unrelated to any language currently known. The version of the epic currently considered to be standard is based on a later version written in Akkadian.

The “modern” fascination that the main character still exerts is due to the timelessness of the issues it addresses: the city, abuse of power, love, vulnerability overcome, and the

need to attain lost wisdom by undertaking a difficult and tragic journey that distances him from his past arrogance and sense of security. Gilgamesh is at first an undisputed, although despotic, ruler. To remedy the situation, the gods send Enkidu, a hero who first lives outside the city in a “wild” state, but who becomes “civilized” through the eroticism of a priestess sent by the king himself. He then moves into the city and establishes a close friendship with Gilgamesh after fighting with him. Gilgamesh’s desire to acquire immortal fame (in a similar way to Achilles in the *Iliad*) forces the two friends into combat with the monster Humbaba, who was not in fact a threat to the city. The two friends almost lose their lives, but are helped by the gods and, in the end, Gilgamesh reluctantly follows Enkidu’s advice and kills Humbaba. Enkidu later pays for this affront by falling ill and dying. Gilgamesh’s grief brings him face to face with his own vulnerability, his fear of having to face death. The necessary wisdom to do so cannot be transmitted through words; one must learn it by oneself. Our hero leaves the city and sets off on a journey in search of an impossible immortality. Having overcome all manner of trials and after meeting Utnapishtim, the only man to have attained immortality (the story of the great Flood that inspired the later biblical myth), Gilgamesh accepts human frailty and this makes it possible for him to govern the city of Uruk, to which he finally returns, in a tolerant, balanced and just way. Ingredients: awareness of one’s own limitations, scepticism regarding moral certainties, and the inevitable unpredictability of our actions. In short, the poem speaks of this profound forgotten wisdom which is ignored by those in power.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear* offers one of the greatest versions of the tragedy that envelops all humanity. It is a work that makes no concessions to the appealing moral or religious words of self-deception. The king, when he abandons his throne, begins a journey that allows him to see, through pain and personal degradation, that we are alone in an

emotional and cosmological void, in a wilderness of doubts, desires and contradictory thoughts. And beyond this there is nothing: “As flies for wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport”. It is difficult to accept that Cordelia dies and the rats do not. The attainment of wisdom is a tragic journey that one can only make on one’s own (as Gilgamesh does). It even requires Lear’s madness and Gloucester’s blindness for them to grasp a truth that they did not see before. “’Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind”. At the end, they know that they know very little, but what they do know is more profound than everything that they thought they knew before. Politics should be built on the idea that mankind belongs to nature and that it is small in epistemological and moral terms. Only through the critical wisdom that leads to a weak and tragic nakedness is it possible to act justly. We are a fragile reality. Our only protection from ourselves is a political society that avoids the arrogant arbitrariness of our behaviour. Through Shakespeare we can hear echoes of Montaigne’s sceptical naturalism and the almost born modern thought of Hobbes and his reflection on the mutual distrust between humans in the absence of effective political institutions.

There are some things that we never stop learning. The history of mankind is like a kind of permanent rebirth of ignorance. In general, it can be said that human societies learn little history, and that they learn little *from* history. And these key epistemological facts have *political* repercussions. Democracies are also systems based on constant forgetfulness; with regard to the question of religion, for example.

## **2) Religions and liberal democracies. A renewal of secularism?**

### ***2.1) Religions as cultural phenomena***

Religions are cultural phenomena and can be studied as such. Many historical religions have disappeared and those that are hegemonic today began life as marginal sects. There have been and there still are thousands of gods and many religions in the world.

In practical terms, despite the advantages that religions appear to have for their believers, they have also been and continue to be one of the main sources of wars and suffering for humanity. Throughout history religions have shown themselves to be prone to acts of terror, dogmatism and contempt for pluralism and human dignity. Religions usually state that they know some kind of fundamental “truth” about the world, and sometimes attempt to impose this on others, but without freedom of religion and thought there is no liberal democracy.

In the majority of contemporary non-democratic societies, religions continue to be an obstacle to freedom, equality and pluralism. They have often shown a perverse side. Bertrand Russell (*In Praise of Idleness*) said the same with regard to Christianity: “The Jews first invented the notion that only one religion could be true, but they had no wish to convert all the world to it, and therefore only prosecuted other Jews. The Christians, retaining the Judaic belief in a special revelation, added to it the Roman desire for worldwide dominion and the Greek taste for metaphysical subtleties. The combination produced the most fiercely persecuting religion that the world has yet known”. And Ernst Bloch (*Atheismus in Christentum*) also says it with irony: “the best thing about religion is that it makes for heretics”.

Today we know that “sacred books” are usually a poor source of historical information, as they are full of origin myths, invented reconstructions, literary stories taken from other cultures, etc. However, there are two surprising aspects of the social reception of religions by the *homo sapiens*: 1) the limited critical spirit in which the stories of one’s

own religious culture are received – many people believe them to be “historical”, and 2) the relatively scant interest that their study awakes from historiographical, archaeological, philological, etc. perspectives among the population, or even among “enlightened” people. It would seem that any critical approach to religious texts must discriminate between historical events and invented stories. Thus, for example, the Bible recounts the story of a group of characters and events that cover a period from the middle Bronze Age - second millennium BC – until the end of the first millennium BC. Most texts, however, are rather recent (most of them date from the period of the Babylonian captivity and the subsequent return to Palestine (6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC). But we would probably find that most westerners believe that Moses, for example, really existed in the same way and with the same certainty as they believe that Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great were real historical figures.

Biblical historiography agrees on a number of things, although others are still the subject of scientific debate as archaeological and philological tests, among others, have been inconclusive. There is broad agreement among specialists that some characters and events in the Bible are “invented history”. For example, the existence of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and the judges (Gideon, Samson, etc.); the 12 tribes of the Israelites, the story of Moses (one part is a popular tale similar to that of the Assyrians and Persians, and another a story of political leadership subsequent to the period of Babylonian captivity); the exodus from Egypt; the “conquest” of the “promised” land - extermination of imaginary peoples until there is no word about others that really existed in the area; Jericho was abandoned in biblical times and would continue to be so for some time afterwards, etc. A good deal of the biblical story has the structure of a “holy war” (loyalty to a single god would lead to victory over one’s enemies and prosperity; misfortune is a punishment for lack of loyalty to this god). In short, the

development of a critical culture with regard to the world's religions would help us to understand them better and disassociate them from their mythological side.

It has been empirically proven that people from the highest cultural levels of developed countries account for significantly fewer believers in specific religions when compared with the overall average of the population. However, as mentioned above, and in contrast to the “enlightened” opinion that religions would die out as science spread and countries developed, religions appear to be here to stay. Moreover, we also know that relations between hegemonic religions and individual liberties have historically been somewhat troubled. A quick look at the world today shows that in many places the dominant religions still constitute an ideology that has not been “politically civilized” with regard to respect for pluralism. A report of the US State Department (2010) submitted to Congress in compliance with the international law of religious freedom – which includes the right to defend agnostic and atheistic positions – analyses the state of religious freedom in 198 states. It includes up to five types of violation of this freedom: practices against the collective expression of religious beliefs; the freedom of expression of religious, agnostic or atheistic ideas; the right to change religion; the possession and distribution of religious texts (including books considered “sacred” by their respective believers); and religious education. The countries in which the situation is most serious are (in alphabetical order): Afghanistan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and Vietnam.

## ***2.2) Liberal democracies and cultural freedom. The debate on multiculturalism***

In the United Nations' Human Development Report on cultural freedom (2004), this is considered to be an essential value for the *democratic quality* of a society. It is a type of freedom that forms part of human rights and is decisive for individual development and people's self-esteem. The report suggests five courses of action: 1) multiculturalism: ensure the participation of marginalized cultural groups (electoral reforms, federalism with asymmetric features); 2) policies that ensure religious freedom (including festivals, customs relating to diet and dress, etc.); 3) policies of legal pluralism (a more controversial issue that would, in any case, involve respect for the limits mentioned above); 4) linguistic policies (some democratic states are still monolingual with regard to their institutions and symbols despite their internal multilingualism); and 5) socio-economic policies (minimum wages, education, health).

In general terms, there are two possible approaches to the issue of multiculturalism: 1) to treat it as a practical issue, whose objective is to avoid conflicts in the least traumatic and costly way possible (pragmatic attitude); and 2) to view it as a question of "justice" which requires correct solutions (moral attitude). Both attitudes tend to get mixed up in practical politics. The second attitude, moreover, has produced two contrasting visions: a) to consider that the "private sphere" (e.g. religion) should be kept separate from the "public sphere" (French republican model), and b) to accept any kind of privacy in the public sphere as long as human rights and democratic institutions are not questioned (Canadian multicultural model). The other cases would occupy intermediate positions between these two.

The recognition of multiculturalism appeared at the end of the 1960s, mainly in Canada and Australia. In Europe it was adopted by the Swedish government at the end of the 1970s. Holland adopted it in its "minority policy". The United Kingdom, a self-styled "multicultural country", has put more emphasis on the fight against discrimination than

on the recognition of minority cultures. In Ontario (Canada) – in whose main city, Toronto, over 150 languages are spoken by a population (around 50%) from over 160 countries – the use of the “sharia” law has even been debated (and rejected) as a possible “means of mediation” in family conflicts (marriages, custody of children, inheritances). And also France, with its republican and lay tradition which rejects ostentatious religious and cultural symbols in the public sphere (e.g. the case of the use of certain items of clothing at school) has opened its doors to multiculturalism in a number of local policies.

One of the conclusions of the debate of recent years on multiculturalism is that cultural freedom is not ensured through the mere application of the civil, participatory and social rights enshrined in democratic constitutions. Until recently, to be in favour of multiculturalism used to be just another “progressive” position, something that did not require too much explanation (like being anti-war, an ecologist or pro-democracy). Nowadays, however, parties, trade unions, the media and opinion polls reflect more cautious positions. This change is in itself a symptom of the perception of the complexity of the issue. Simple positions do not usually fit very well with the growing pluralism of modern-day democracies.

Moreover, the academic world appears to have accepted that cultural problems cannot be reduced to “socioeconomic or social causes”. It is true that the two spheres are interrelated, but they are different phenomena that refer to diverse values, objectives, institutions, practices and policies. It is also clear that many cultural identities have been marginalized in the past, and that states always impose their own national, cultural and linguistic features.

While the ethnic and religious composition of societies was highly homogeneous (even when there were internal differences of a national and linguistic nature) it was usually taken for granted that if immigrants arrived, they should “integrate”, in the sense of “assimilate”, into the cultural patterns of their adopted society. Over time, as the size of immigrant groups increased – something which has always been the case in the United States because of its role as an immigrant country – “integration” came to be understood with regard to the public sphere only, while in the private sphere a multiplicity of customs could be maintained provided that they did not represent a distortion of democratic values and institutions.

However, western societies, above all European ones, are nowadays facing something rather different with regard to transnational migrations: a re-politicization of the private sphere. The demand is to be present in the public sphere in a more permanent way, beginning with ways of dressing, food, school curricula and public holidays. It is no longer a case of “integrating” immigrants, but of achieving their “political accommodation” based on their specific cultural characteristics. Thus, it is possible to identify three historical phases in the way that democracies have tended to treat this issue: assimilation, integration and accommodation. The possibilities and consequences of moving from the second to the third phase are still unclear, above all when, in recent years, negative perceptions of multiculturalism have emerged: as a threat to democratic values or national identities; as a source of instability and insecurity; or as a kind of unsolvable conflict.

Behind these perceptions are, obviously, the attacks of 9/11 in New York (2001), 11 March in Madrid (2004) and 7 July in London (2005), as well as phenomena like the violent riots in Paris or the lack of prospects following the hopes awoken on an international scale by the “Arab Spring” (2012). And behind these perceptions is the

rise of political parties that associate immigration with threats to “our way of life”. Today “integration” is no longer a *magic word* the very mention of which will ensure a solution to the issue – in the same way that the word “interculturalism” is losing its earlier magical quality. These are terms that have become polysemous – there are different ways to define them and to relate them to different moral and political values. Their practical consequences in the sphere of institutions and public policies have become much more complex and much more replete with contradictions than when they first appeared. Religions belong to this multicultural world. A general question is what kind of institutional model seems more adequate to the current multicultural conditions of liberal democracies.

### ***2.3) A renewal of secularism?***

Religions have been understood in different ways within democracies, from seeing them as a derivative of individual freedom to associating them with coercion against that freedom. Regardless of whether one believes that the religious dimension represents a valuable aspect of human life, or whether one thinks that it reflects an intellectual and moral immaturity on the part of believers, the fact is that religions are an important part of many people’s lives. Nowadays, the pluralism of religious, agnostic and atheistic beliefs is one of the cornerstones of contemporary liberal democracies. Both religious beliefs and their denial are intellectual positions that deserve respect, but both positions must in turn respect the collective political values that we consider fundamental nowadays in liberal democracies: rights, freedoms, and respect for democratic rules, institutions and decision-making processes. This is easy to say, but it is a political institutionalization that has taken thousands of years to establish firmly.

In political terms, the religious wars that devastated Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were one of the decisive factors that led to the subsequent establishment of liberal regimes which would make the separation of state and churches (at least to some extent) one of their organizational principles. Political liberalism resulted in the establishment of “civil” limits on Christian ecclesiastical authorities. This “great separation” between the political and religious spheres was quickly seen by Hobbes and the early liberals as essential to avoid the tendency towards “political redemption” of monotheistic religions, as well as being a necessary condition for human emancipation and critical thought. From the liberal revolutions onwards something fundamental changed: the idea gained ground that believing or not believing in gods belonged to the private sphere, and not to the legitimation of political order. The separation of the spheres of religion and politics is one of the most crucial emancipative achievements of the modern age. However, the contextual conditions of current liberal democracies have become more culturally plural and complex than what was usually accepted a few decades ago.

Which specific models of religious pluralism are most in keeping with the values and practices of multicultural liberal democracies? There are several possible answers. On the one hand, there are those models that opt for clear separation between the public sphere and religious expressions. They think that the latter should be present in the private sphere, but not in the public sphere, which belongs to everyone. It is not permitted for a judge, a teacher, a policeman, or even students to display religious symbols. On the other hand, there are the models that allow the expression of beliefs as long as democratic rules are respected (albeit with exceptions).

Broadly speaking, I believe that an updated liberal-democratic secular model should be based on four basic principles: “separation” (of religious and state powers), the state’s neutrality (governance), religious freedom, and respect/protection of religious and non-

religious minorities. These four principles are interwoven. In current democracies, citizens who are believers in different religions live in close proximity to other citizens who are agnostics or atheists. However, instead of the binary public-private contrast, I think that it is better to distinguish between three spheres of action in the political life of a country: the public sphere, the social sphere and the private sphere. The reason for establishing this distinction is twofold. On the one hand, the public (state) and social spheres do not coincide and, on the other hand, religions have an inherent collective component (they are not only a “private” subject practiced at home or in churches).

Although the borders between these three spheres are porous, in the following pages I will defend the idea that no religion should be present in the public (state) sphere in a 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal democracy. Its place is in the private and social spheres. It is fundamental to continue to insist on the secular model (laicism) especially in contexts of “deep diversity”. It has been empirically proven that the decisions of parliaments, governments or courts of law of almost all democracies still display historical habits and conceptual prejudices with regard to the historically dominant religion in each context. In most cases, this contradicts the constitutional precepts of laicism, neutrality and pluralism; conditions practical religious freedom and the protection of religious minorities, agnostics and atheists; and continues to confer an important political role on hegemonic churches. Liberal democracies, out of respect for their own normative principles, ought to be far more secular, even at constitutional level, than they currently are, although this should not make them hostile to specific religions.

Besides these three spheres of action, I think it is advisable also to distinguish between two general approaches: the expression of beliefs in the private and social spheres and the institutional regulation of the public sphere. The four secular principles pointed out earlier demand a different kind of modulation once these three spheres of action and

these two approaches have been taken into account. For example, in the public (state) sphere, neutrality is defined more by what one wishes to *actively* avoid than by the remnants of cultural inertia that a given society still displays. In institutions such as parliaments, governments, courts of law, city councils, hospitals, prisons or schools, which are paid for by everyone, there should be a scrupulous “neutral” respect for (religious and non-religious) pluralism, avoiding symbols or the inclusion of specific religions or atheistic doctrines in education curricula. “Neutrality”, as a principle of governance, does not only imply avoiding a hierarchy of religious or atheistic perspectives, but also proactively avoiding them in institutions and public policies.

In fact, to establish the boundaries of neutrality is not a “neutral” subject. However, this is not a majority *democratic* question, nor a question of “customs” or historical culture, but a *liberal* question of the respect and protection of minorities and pluralism. In other words, I think that, generally speaking, what has sometimes been called “open secularism” should mainly be applied in the private and social spheres, whereas “strict secularism” should be applied in the *public* sphere (although some specific matters can be approached as a question of degree and may display specific gradients of limitations depending on the branch of government or the context -wearing religious symbols for some state employees (teachers) or wearing “radical” examples of them, like the burka or niqab, in the social sphere). So, unavoidably, some kind of religious practices can legitimately be discriminated against in the public sphere of liberal democracies and this could even be the case for a small number of radical cases in the social sphere. In other words, even if we maintain a “weak” conception of the moral foundations of liberal democracies, “neutrality” is not synonymous with passive normative indifference or emptiness. Like other “universal” values, the “moral equality” of individuals is not an

absolute value. In practice, it can clash with other “universal” values, such as equality of men and women, security, respect for human dignity, etc.

Broadly speaking, any philosophical attempt to establish the chances of a possible normative “overlapping consensus” between different religious and secular conceptions (Rawls-Habermas) is, in my view, no more than an academic exercise to ornament a theoretical impossibility that will never be able to completely replace pragmatic agreements of a *modus vivendi* type in the framework of pluralism and dissent in present-day democratic societies. Basically, the difference between liberal conceptions that favour “deliberative” consensuses -or those based on “dialogue” or on some kind of “public reason”- and liberal conceptions that are given to agonistic approaches, is how these two perspectives understand “politics”.

If we take religious diversity seriously (Taylor), including the agnostic and atheistic perspectives, consensual reconstructions of a Kantian nature will always be in danger of collapsing due to the realistic strength projected by the shadows of the perspectives put forward by natural sciences and by Hobbes, Hegel and Berlin. Consensus on concepts and values is different from consensus on reconstructions of what is reasonable in the public sphere. Consensus on values does not ensure consensus on conceptions of the public sphere. And both are different from consensus on interests and identities. Rationalistic and non-historical Western “humanism” –especially when it lacks scientific knowledge- falls easily in the traps of a bad or narrow anthropology. The most promising kind of philosophies works in the same side than sciences, in the side of the will of knowledge and the best way of living (again, against ignorance, arbitrariness and superstition).

In fact, possible consensuses based on practical democratic deliberations are more suitable for establishing what is denied than what is affirmed. It is always easier to agree on the evil to be avoided than on the good to be attained. “Cooperation” or “consensuses”, however much they are called “overlapping”, not only have normative limits, but also epistemological ones. Pluralism of *values, objectives, identities* and *interests* will always be radical between humans in an “open society”. I believe that, regarding this question, the possibilities of practical reason are intellectually more modest than what traditional and some “deliberative” current political theories still claim. The result of deep dissent leads to consensuses of a more pragmatic nature.

In short, religious and cultural differences are here to stay (and grow) in modern-day democracies. A harmonious world, without antagonisms, Isaiah Berlin would say two centuries later, is not only impossible but simply inconceivable. Conflicts are inherent in human collectivities. Liberal governments should recognize that all political values will eventually clash, and that all conflicts require negotiation. And the classical Greeks maintained that there were only two ways to overcome the deficiencies of coexistence: *polis* and *paideia*. In other words, *institutional reforms* (which include socio-economic reforms and co-participation in policies of cultural accommodation), and *education* (to promote shared cultural norms of behaviour based on respect for cultural dissent).

The growing cultural pluralism of contemporary societies coexists with the epistemological tendencies mentioned earlier, to construct *abstract, dichotomous* and *monist* conceptions. In our “Western” theories, the risks associated with the *fallacy of abstraction*, the *discontinuous mind* and *conceptual monism* always appear.

Kant astutely established, although ironically in a more Hegelian than Kantian sense, that the roots of progress stem from humans’ natural inclination to want to be social

without fully being able to do so. In other words, they stem from their *unsocial sociability*. Our pluralism of values, objectives, interests and identities is always changing, but always constitutes the horizon of our humanity. Humans sometimes desire consensus, but their nature desires other things. Thus, it is advisable to approach human progress from the perspective of the conflicting tendencies of our nature (not against them).

Human brains are well prepared for survival and reproduction. They are very good at emotional responses such as empathy, anger, revenge, shame or gratitude. However, the self-styled “sapiens” are primates that are very prone to deceiving themselves. Evolution has made us gullible. It is always difficult to introduce critical attitudes, as is seeing that scepticism, as Montaigne, Kant and Hegel used to say, is a necessary intermediate step to attaining knowledge. More than “social animals” we are “unsocially sociable” animals (Shakespeare showed this feature in a myriad of small mirrors).

In the political sphere, the crucial thing is to have liberal-democratic institutions capable of resolving conflicts of values, objectives, interests and identities peacefully. The principles of separation, neutrality, religious freedom, and the respect for and protection of minorities are the ones that need updating in contemporary democracies through the practical adjustments of institutions, rights and duties in the public, social and private spheres. But I do not believe that it is necessary to talk about a “post-secular” model in contemporary democracies, but to readapt and take seriously the “secular” model that is fundamental for the liberal-democratic emancipation that modernity tried to establish through the “great separation” of the spheres of politics and religion. This occurred about three centuries ago, but we should continue to develop it.