

# Religious convictions in political discourse: moral and theological grounds for a public theology in a plural world

Author: Miguel Yaksic

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/1862>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2010

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

**RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**  
**Moral and Theological Grounds for a Public Theology in a Plural World**

A Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the S.T.L. Degree  
from the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

By: Miguel Yaksic, SJ

Directed by: Dominic Doyle  
Second Reader: David Hollenbach, SJ

April 2010

**A.M.D.G**

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	04
<b>Chapter One: Religion in a Plural World</b>	10
1. Liberal Secularism	11
a. John Rawls' Version of Political Liberalism	12
2. The Irreducible Political Character of Christian Faith	17
a. Christian Faith	18
b. Dignitatis Humanae: Catholic Church Position on Religious Freedom	20
c. Political Theology: the Contribution of Metz and Moltmann	24
3. Religious Reasons and Political Arguments	28
4. Secularization and its Different Voices	35
<b>Chapter Two: A Revisionist Conception of Liberalism: Charles Taylor and Social Goods</b>	42
1. Charles Taylor's Moral Narrative	45
2. Charles Taylor's Critique to Formal Liberalism	49
3. Against Moral Reductionism	56
4. Constitutive Social Goods	58
5. Modern Goods, Christian Goods	64
6. Religious Arguments and Civil Society	72
<b>Chapter Three: Hope: The Political Dimension of Christian Faith</b>	78
1. Beyond Human Flourishing	81
2. Hope and Redemption	84
3. The Political Consequences of Eschatological Hope	86
a. An Apocalyptic Notion of Hope	87
b. Promise and Mission: Historical and Eschatological Dimension of Hope	92
<b>Conclusion</b>	96
<b>Bibliography</b>	100

## **Introduction**

Moral, aesthetic, and religious pluralism has become a source of disagreement and friction in the modern world. Within the context of modernity and precipitated by the American and French revolutions, liberal democracy has aimed to organize the social and political life of societies in which their inhabitants sustain different, distant, and sometimes contradictory conceptions of the good life. Liberal secular principles have been the framework used to protect fundamental values such as freedom, equality, and mutual respect. In order to preserve the stability of a plural society, liberalism insists that moral and religious convictions must remain a private matter. Democracy and tolerance, it was argued, would be best preserved if religious convictions were removed from the public/political conversation. Yet the debate about the appropriate relationship between religion and politics regularly resurfaces among political and moral philosophers, social theorists, and theologians.

This modern/liberal trend, which pushes comprehensive schemes and substantive views of life into the private realm, represents a major dilemma for Christian faith. Today, especially after the Second Vatican Council, most Christians would not hesitate to accept and cherish some of the most relevant liberal principles, such as church/state separation, liberty, equality, and tolerance. However, those who hold the Christian faith are also conscious that some of the convictions they maintain are destined to have greater political implications. While promoters of secular liberalism strongly discourage citizens from bringing their religious convictions into the public discourse, religious people believe that they should be heard on their own terms. Burning social, ethical, and political

affairs such as the moral status of the embryo, abortion, the end of life, and a fair distribution of the necessary means of life show how moral and religious convictions indeed play a role in the public conversation at the level of the civil society.

Can religious convictions modify and be modified by political discourse? How does religion enter into the political debate? How can religious reasons become part of political arguments? Given the fact that believers enter public life using their own reasons, informed by their symbolic, religious, and humanist convictions, the public discussion would be more democratic if citizens made their own convictions public.

Every time human beings approach dialogue they are already expressing a certain set of comprehensive convictions that inform their political conceptions. Citizens are willing to negotiate some of their beliefs in order to protect liberty and mutual respect, but what happens when this negotiation reaches the core identity of an individual? Are citizens willing to give up the piece of their identity that belongs to the very definition of who they are? If we really want to build up an enduring pluralism, we have to be capable of bringing the full description of who we are to public life. Pluralism has to build upon an open dialogue in which our horizons of meaning encounter and permeate each other, because it is in this encounter with others where our identities become permeable. Can tolerance and mutual respect be sustained by a merely formal political arrangement?

This thesis will defend the legitimacy, for believers, of shared loyalty: a deep allegiance to the ultimate convictions that define who we are and that are fundamental to our identities, and, at the same time a clear receptivity to differences and an explicit loyalty to pluralism. How can Christians remain faithful to their faith and keep a strong commitment to the respect of liberty and equality?

This thesis will also inquire into the public role of Christian faith: How may Christian theology offer some sense of a wider and fundamental hope for the world without endeavoring to become hegemonic? How can Christians bring about a distinctively Christian orientation to social and political debates, all the while remaining committed to liberty, equality, and mutual respect? How can the Catholic Church find her own voice within the achievements of modernity without giving up her own political/public nature? Whereas Christian faith must be aware that faith in Jesus Christ is not a private matter, it must also be aware that any public role of religion has to avoid any kind of control over public affairs.

I will argue in this thesis not only that religion –in particular Christianity– may legitimately play a role in the public sphere of a liberal democracy, but also that religious arguments may contribute to the construction of a common notion of shared ends and goods –all the while maintaining a commitment to freedom, equality, and mutual respect. The aim of this work is to explore the relationship between Christian faith and liberalism as the dominant, modern, public morality. While exploring the nature of this relationship I hope to be able to offer some moral and theological grounds for a public theology of a pluralist public life in a global world.

Even though history has proved the fittingness of church/state separation, I will claim that to divide religion and politics is much more complicated. The relationship between religion and politics is something more complex than the public/private division. There are some crucial aspects of human life that are frequently removed from public life by some approaches to political liberalism.

Christian faith is of its very nature public and political, but it must be able to present its convictions in a manner accessible to all human beings. Religion has to find its place in a society of free and equal citizens. The question will be not only how to build up a theology for a pluralist public life, but also how to offer a renewed version of liberalism that is not necessarily grounded on neutrality, secularism, and procedural-contractual formalism. How can we retrieve the historical, ethical, and social background of Western societies without jeopardizing liberty and equality? A democratic and plural culture, in order to be consistent with its own principles, should be able to accept religious freedom and pluralism as part of its very definition.

Three chapters comprise this thesis. The first one, *Religion in a Plural World*, explores the challenge that liberal secularism represents for Christian faith. There I aim to draw out the tension between the liberal trend towards the privatization of religion and what I call in this work the irreducible political nature of Christian faith. We will look at the philosophy of the late John Rawls, one of the most relevant exponents of liberalism, in order to grasp the consequences of this morality for the public role of religion. In their turn, the theologies of Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann will help us to define the political character of Christianity. The penultimate section examines the relationship between religious convictions and political reasons. And the last section offers an assessment of the notion of secularization in order to situate this thesis in a wider context.

Once I have described the nature of the dilemma between the privatization of religion and the political ethos of Christianity, I will explore the philosophy of Charles Taylor. In doing so I hope to offer a revised view of liberalism that eschew the privatization of religion and it welcomes the contribution of communities of faith (and



symbolic, aesthetic, and ethical schemes in general) in shaping the identity of modern democratic societies. I believe that Taylor's thought might offer a third way between communitarianism and formal liberalism, a way capable of recovering some of the most significant liberal commitments, yet also capable of recovering a richer, fuller, and more comprehensive approach to human agency. A more comprehensive view of ethical life might give more room for the contribution of religious communities to the public conversation.

Finally, after having attempted to prove that religion –and Christian faith in particular– may play a legitimate public/political role in modern societies, we will return to the issue of its irreducibly political nature. This time, however, we do so in order to demonstrate that Christian faith probably offers its best contribution to modern life in announcing an apocalyptic hope. We will see that the political nature of hope is to be found not in a particular concrete content, but in the imminent eschatological expectation that makes discipleship urgent. The contrast between the eschatological biblical-divine promises and the reality of the victims of history gives to the Church a crucial public role announcing hope.

When arguing for the political/public role of religious communities and Christian faith, an important distinction must be made. The concepts “public” and “political” will refer to the same reality, unless something different is said. They will be treated as synonyms for public sphere (plaza/domain/realm) and will refer to civil society and never to the level of the State or the government. As we will see in the last section of the second chapter, civil society will be defined as a web of associations that, being independent from the State and going beyond government, are influential in the elaboration of public

policies. This distinction fits within another important distinction in this thesis: whereas we have to defend the church/state separation principle, we will see that religion and politics seem to be hard to divide.

## **I. Religion in a Plural World**

The defenders of the modern-constitutional values of freedom, equality, and mutual respect have developed a moral-political-philosophical position often called political liberalism. This group of thinkers has sought to retool these principles for a secular pluralistic society. Accordingly, these sets of principles, which reflect some of the most important achievements of modernity, would be best preserved if religion were removed from the public sphere. The secular-liberal principle of the separation between the church and the State entails for them that belief, religious practice, and the notion of the good and of the beautiful should be treated as private matters. If religion is confined to the private life, its principles can forge personal behavior without interfering in public affairs.

Broadly speaking, this is the moral framework in which Christianity and public religions in general ought to develop their own commitments. This would not be a problem if Christian faith intended to shape only the private consciousness of the individual person. But, as I will argue in this chapter, if we accept that Christianity endeavors to confer a certain theological and moral order not only to the individual consciousness but to the whole world, then the modern liberal moral paradigm becomes a problem for Christian faith.

The present chapter will explore the nature and the consequences of this tension. The first two sections are devoted to articulating the dilemma between the modern trend towards the privatization of religion and what I call the irreducibly political character of Christian faith. The third section examines the relationship between religious convictions

and political reasons in order to defend the proposition that believers should be allowed to make public use of their beliefs in the public realm. Finally, an assessment of the concept of secularization will offer a wider context for the question of the place and the role of communities of faith in the modern world.

## 1. Liberal Secularism

Liberalism has probably become the dominant modern public morality in the West. It emerged as a bulwark against cruelty after the 16<sup>th</sup> century religious wars, as Judith Shklar often stressed<sup>1</sup>. We find its most influential, systematic and contemporary version in John Rawls “Political Liberalism”.

This first section will consider the meaning and consequences of Rawls’ later philosophy. Rawls’ main concern is to provide a philosophy that allows for the stability of a democratic regime in a plural culture. This author synthesizes the modern-liberal-deontological morality in a single project that seeks to protect democracy and mutual respect on the basis of a formal conception of justice. A nuanced presentation of his philosophy will be crucial for understanding some of the most significant challenges that religious reasons have to face in contemporary western societies. A good portion of the rest of this work will respond to the underlying, but often-unchallenged, presuppositions of liberal thought.

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Shklar. *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). “Putting Cruelty First” in *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984)

a. John Rawls' Version of Political Liberalism

In 1993, 22 years after *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls published *Political Liberalism*. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls wanted to develop the social contract doctrine –particularly in the tradition of Locke, Rousseau and Kant– in order to provide an alternative foundation to social justice than the one adopted by utilitarianism. Here Rawls attempted to establish a procedure capable of defining universal rules that would permit a rational evaluation of the morality of public institutions and practices by rational, equal and free individuals. Retrieving the idea of a “state of nature”, Rawls proposes the notion of *original position*, a hypothetical situation where free and equal persons within a sphere of impartiality (*veil of ignorance*) choose fair principles of justice in order to found the basic structure of society and, thereby, constitute a well-ordered society.

One of the most controversial aspects of *A Theory of Justice* was its character as a moral comprehensive doctrine. The principles of justice developed by Rawls became a systematic substitution for other comprehensive doctrines. The conception of “justice as fairness” –that aimed to reconcile freedom and equality in one single theory– was seen by the critics as another comprehensive scheme incompatible with other reasonable doctrines. The tradition of the social contract was a continuation of moral philosophy that cannot distinguish appropriately its borders from the borders of political philosophy. *A Theory of Justice* was not clear when distinguishing those frontiers as either.

*Political Liberalism* was written in order to address these controversies. In the second book, Rawls aims to reinstall his theory of Justice as Fairness inside a political conception of justice. Rawls based this turn in a distinction between (moral, philosophical and religious) comprehensive doctrines and a political conception of justice. Rawls

reduces his theory of justice to the scope of political consensus. Therefore, the new theory can be applied only within democratic constitutional regimes. Here Rawls discovers a principle of cooperation among individuals who hold different comprehensive doctrines. In the context of free institutions and rights, the diversity of irreconcilable doctrines is a permanent fact: a fact what Rawls calls the *fact of pluralism*. In this context the stability of a democratic regime depends on consensus. As a result, the central question of *Political Liberalism* –and the question that encourages Rawls to move from a moral to a politically delimited conception of justice– is the following:

How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?<sup>2</sup>

Rawls will respond with the thesis of the *Overlapping Consensus*. In his new vision, politics will not be about truth, but about stability. Facing the problem about the *fact of pluralism* –i.e. “how citizens who remained deeply divided on religious, philosophical and moral doctrines, can still maintain a just and stable democratic society”<sup>3</sup>– *Political Liberalism* looks for a political conception of justice able to support an overlapping consensus of reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines.

A political conception of justice, as envisioned by Rawls, is freestanding, that is to say, not derived from any particular comprehensive doctrine. In a well-ordered society –and in a public political culture– reasonable citizens able to cooperate with one another will agree that a freestanding political conception is the unique foundation for the kind of

---

<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

cooperation all citizens can reasonably be expected to support. This conception is the basis for a society as a fair system of cooperation, formed by citizens who are free and equal. A liberal political conception of justice, therefore, will assign to all citizens individual rights and liberties, will give priority to these rights and liberties over the different conceptions of the good, and will assure the possibility for citizens to make effective use of the freedoms they hold.

In 1980 Rawls wrote an article named *Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory*<sup>4</sup>, which is considered a work of transition towards *Political Liberalism*. Kantian constructivism, as Rawls understood it, supposes that a theory of justice depends on a conception of a person as a free and equal moral agent. This secures the agent's autonomy while basing it on the authority of the moral law. Rawls is able to develop the three new ideas that will characterize his later philosophy (overlapping consensus, the priority of the rights over the good, and public reason) once he has abandoned Kantian constructivism and others forms of comprehensive liberalism. He realizes that the only way to face the diversity described above is to abdicate the search for truth and to advocate for institutions able to tolerate any reasonable comprehensive doctrine.

The conception of person, which underlies the political conception of justice, implies an understanding of liberty. Freedom relies, in turn, on a sense of justice, the power of reason, and the capacity for sustaining a conception about the good. In political constructivism, the person ought to subordinate her conception of the good to a political conception of justice. This priority of justice over the good means that only principles of justice may regulate a fair system of cooperation in a plural society whose characteristic

---

<sup>4</sup> John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory", in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999)

feature is the diversity of the ideas concerning the good, which derived in turn from different moral, philosophical and religious doctrines.

With the idea of overlapping consensus Rawls argues that persons who hold different comprehensive doctrines in a well-ordered society will endorse the liberal political conception of justice—but for diverse reasons. This is possible because the freestanding political conception of justice is compatible with a number of worldviews that citizens might hold.

When Rawls designed the idea of overlapping consensus he had in mind the problem of the stability of a well-ordered society of justice as fairness. Can reasonable<sup>5</sup> and rational citizens find it reasonable to endorse the conception of justice as fairness as a regulative principle in their own search of the good?

Rawls believes that persons in a well-ordered society will usually do two things: accept just laws as reasonable and give support to a liberal conception of justice as long as it seems compatible with their own comprehensive notion of the good. The philosopher argues that individuals tend to endorse the principle of reciprocity when it supports institutions of mutual benefit.

When introducing overlapping consensus, Rawls assumes that reasonable comprehensive doctrines would be compatible with liberal political values and liberal principles of justice as part of its definition of the good; so people who hold those doctrines will agree with the principle of justice as fairness in a well-ordered society. For

---

<sup>5</sup> Rawls explains what he understands for reasonable describing its two basic features: (1) “the willingness to propose fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them provided others do” and (2) “the willingness to recognize the burdens of judgment and to accept their consequences for the use of public reason in directing the legitimate exercise of political power in a constitutional regime”. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 54. The rational is related to the capacity of maintaining idiosyncratic ideas on the good and behaves according to these ideas.



the comprehensive reasons specific to their comprehensive doctrines, rational and reasonable citizens would support the stability of a democratic society for the right reasons. That is what Roman Catholics uphold when they affirm in the Second Vatican Council that:

The human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. (...) This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.<sup>6</sup>

Here Catholics are endorsing a liberal conception of justice for reasons peculiar to their own comprehensive understanding of what human dignity is. Hence, Rawls sees an overlapping consensus as the basis of a democratic stability. Overlapping consensus is stable when founded on the *right reasons*—namely, on the hope that reasonable citizens will endorse those liberal conceptions because of moral reasons of justice and comprehensive values grounded on their own particular views. Therefore, stability is not just a consequence, nor a mere result of a *modus vivendi*; rather it is the best choice for everyone because of the comprehensive values implicit in their own worldviews.

The strength of the idea of overlapping consensus probably relies on the fact that it does not entail that justice be founded on an intrinsic conception of the good; rather justice may be sought by reasonable persons as an instrument for achieving those final ends peculiar to their own comprehensive views. Thus, justice as a moral value is compatible with justice as a procedural policy. Once people who hold reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines accept a liberal political conception, then

---

<sup>6</sup> “Dignitatis Humanae” in *Second Vatican Council* quoted in John Rawls. “The idea of public reason revisited”, in *Political Liberalism*. 476 fn. 75

they also accept that, in public political deliberation, they can uphold only those liberal principles of justice and those public reasons that can be reasonably justified before others<sup>7</sup>. In the political realm, the arguments should always be political or, at least, compatible with the liberal political and formal principles of justice.

Two more considerations: first, the idea of overlapping consensus applies only to liberal democracies and not to all; second, it operates among reasonable people who hold reasonable doctrines. If some people refuse to give reasonable reasons then this refusal does not compromise the stability of the right reasons, unless there are too many unreasonable people –that is those who are not able to cooperate with others on terms they can reasonably accept– or too many people unwilling to engage the liberal principles of justice.

We probably find in Rawls' philosophy the most influent and developed version of political liberalism. I have devoted some time to expounding it because I believe it allows us to better understand the scope and consequences of a procedural version of liberalism for the place and the role of comprehensive doctrines in public life. In some way, Rawls's version of liberalism synthesizes what is seen as the main public morality in the West nowadays.

## 2. The Irreducible Political Character of Christian Faith

If we want to understand the dilemma between religious claims and democratic liberal theory, we need first to understand the essentially universal and public character of

---

<sup>7</sup> Here we see the connection between overlapping consensus and the idea of public reason.

Christian faith. Some Christian convictions have highly important political implications, and citizens seek to express these implications when exchanging reasons that support their respective ethical and political views. Liberal secularism, on the other hand, finds this symphony of religious voices expressed in the public square quite disturbing, Christians defend their right to articulate these commitments in the political realm. While secular liberals call upon citizens to restrain their desire to bring religious reasons into the public conversation, believers frequently feel compelled, in conscience, to communicate their religious commitments publicly-- particularly in cases related to ultimate questions such as the origin and the end of life.

Three sub-sections form this section: First, the theology of faith and grace shows how Christian faith goes far beyond an individual-personal-private option. Secondly, a critical review of the official moral position of the Church on the matter of religious liberty will prove the necessity of a more theological commitment if we wish to grasp the depth of the political nature of Christian faith. Thirdly, some modern theologies will offer an explanation of the irreducible public character of Christianity.

#### a. Christian Faith

From the point of view of a believer, faith is neither a private matter nor an individual option, but constitutes instead an overall vision of life, including public life. It furnishes a narrative that shapes the identity and the life of those who hold it. Christian faith involves the life, praxis and the *Lifeworld* of an entire community. According to Christianity there is a basic dialogical dimension at the heart of every human experience. When one believes and hopes, one believes and hopes for all. There is a fundamental

universal impetus in Christianity that makes faith not primarily a gift for the individual, but for the other. That is why religion seeks to influence public life including significant issues of political and ethical issues. The affirmation “Jesus is the Lord”, for instance, does not have the grammar of a private speech act.

Christianity does not understand faith as an “invisible inaccessible spiritual enclave residing within the human soul”<sup>8</sup>. Even though faith is something deeply personal, it cannot be identified as something private. Religious convictions are there, ultimately, in order to orient one’s life toward a number of ethical goals, and these goals are often situated eschatologically.

Moreover, faith might be defined as the human response to the saving grace of God. In other words, faith is nothing other than a gracious gift from God. The theology of grace raises a critical question for the dilemma between the public claims of Christian faith and the political marginalization of religion at the hands of secular liberalism. For those who believe, there is something central to their identity that cannot be reduced to social or cultural dynamics, something that somehow transcends human, social, and historical conditionality.

Central to the Christian understanding of existence is the notion of grace. For Karl Rahner, human beings are the event of a free and absolute self-communication of God<sup>9</sup>. God makes himself the most intimate, constitutive element of human life. Grace is nothing other than God in his own being communicating to human beings. God as the giver becomes himself the gift. That is why believers see God’s grace even outside verbalized and institutionalized Christianity. For them, the God of Jesus Christ seeks the

---

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 155

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2000) chapter 4.

salvation of all human beings, offering to all his grace of liberation. Faith requires a Christian to believe in the universal salvific will of God.<sup>10</sup> The assertion that the grace of God (or God himself) was made irreversible by the history of the crucified and risen One constitutes a central part of the faith of every Christian believer.

Some theories refer to Christianity as a narrative, a tradition among others in society. A narrative seems to be the way we see ourselves in a given place and period of time; it is part of our social imaginary. But for Christians the inner human constitution comes from God: it is the result of the work of grace. Thus the dilemma gets more acute. Religion as a practice entails an appropriate response to the Source of one's existence; and Christianity in particular places God's irruption into history through Jesus Christ as the foundational redeeming gift for all humanity.

b. *Dignitatis Humanae*: Catholic Church Position on Religious Freedom.

After decades of enduring Enlightenment critique and observing the development of the project of liberal democracy, The Catholic Church decided for first time to face the issue of religious freedom during the Second Vatican Council. In this section I aim to look into the official position of the Church in this matter placing it in the midst of the discussion I am describing. We will see that in spite of the crucial advances made by *Dignitatis Humanae* in the sphere of religious convictions and public reasons, some

---

<sup>10</sup> The Letter to the Colossians (1,15-20) constitutes, probably, one of the passages of the Scriptures that best accounts for the universal character of Christianity: "all things were created through him and for him" (...) "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (...) "For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him..." The same happens if we look at Ephesians: "bringing together all the universe under one single head" (*Ephesians* 1, 10). Both texts imply that everything in the universe is under the influence of the Spirit of Christ: the unification of everything under the authority of Christ. The Church as "body of Christ" participates of Christ in this recapitulation.

unresolved issues remained— above all, as I will explain later, because this declaration relies excessively on the doctrine of natural law.

This document traveled a rocky path through the Council, particularly because it acknowledged the church/state separation doctrine and gave priority to conscience over obedience to ecclesiastical authority. These two principles introduced a great contrast in relation to the standard teachings of the Church up to that time.

According to John O'Malley,<sup>11</sup> Catholic theologians developed a strategy capable of framing the conflictive new relationship of strict separation between Church and State. This author synthesizes the standard teaching of the Church on this issue before the Council: The basic principle was that “only truth has the right to freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Since Catholic Church sees herself as the bearer of truth through history and since most of the European citizens were Catholics, then (1) the State had the obligation of fostering Catholicism; (2) other religions might be tolerated in order to avoid conflicts; and (3) if Catholics are the minority, then the State should guarantee them the necessary room to practice their religion, as a matter of natural law.

By mid 20<sup>th</sup> century this doctrine was no longer convincing in the midst of the growing pluralism that characterizes the developed world. This doctrine was far from the practices of Catholic politicians and urgently needed a reform. John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain devoted much of their theological efforts to offer a revised version of these teachings. Their position on the issue of religious freedom and Church/State division eventually prevailed in the Council, but not without going through bitter struggles.

---

<sup>11</sup> John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2008), 212

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

A brief Declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae* was grounded on two basic principles of natural law: (1) the right of human creatures to seek the will of God in their lives, and (2) the act of faith, which is, in its own nature, free and uncoerced. The document aimed to regulate the relationship between Church and the State. The State must respect freedom of conscience against any kind of external coercion. Religious freedom relies basically upon immunity from coercion in civil society. Before the State imposes its laws, human beings are already moved by God to search religious truth. That is why, according to this doctrine, everyone has the right and the duty to freely fulfill their vocation to worship God. The Declaration states that the State must recognize this right constitutionally.

Religious communities should not be prevented from teaching publicly and witnessing to their faith. The right of religious freedom is not to be exercised only in private, but in human society. The natural law doctrine plays a crucial role here. Freedom has its roots in divine revelation because the act of faith is in itself a free act. Human beings' response to God must be free. No one can be forced to embrace faith against her will; nor can anyone be compelled to quit the free exercise of her faith.

What it is significant here, in light of the aim of this thesis, is not only that the State has the duty to tolerate the free exercise of religion, but also that religion may legitimately aspire to participate somehow in the public sphere. Individuals have the right to order their lives according to their own convictions. We will see further on in this work how this right cannot be satisfied just in the private realm; rather it must be capable of having some public destiny.

The advances that *Dignitatis Humanae*, *Gaudium et Spes* and the entire Council made on the issue of the relationship between the public/universal claims of Christianity

and the secular State were of great importance in relation to the place and the role of the Church in modern societies.

Despite this crucial progress, two questions remain. First, how can the defense of religious freedom be harmonized with the faithfulness to the divine command: “Teach all nations” (Mt. 19:20)? In terms of modern political theory, the interesting issue here is not about negative liberty, but about positive liberty.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this thesis is not primarily to defend religious freedom exclusively in relation to the independence of the individual from interference by others (negative freedom), but to defend the right of the Church to go to the public realm and to “teach all nations” (positive freedom). *Dignitatis Humanae* lacks strength when advocating a notion of liberty as the free exercise of the political dimension of Christian faith. The main point is not only that the individual can freely believe and worship as she wants, but that the Church, based on her own theology, has the right to offer a wider language of commitment to a greater whole and a to broader meaning. A theological rather than a moral approach to the political dimension of Christianity seems to account better for what I call here the irreducibly political character of Christian faith. Ultimately, the impetus to go and teach all nations does not rely on natural law but on theology itself. As we will see in the next section, instead of elaborating the natural law doctrine as a moral framework to deal with modern society, Christian theology should look into itself in order to discover its political nature. The definitive Christian claim is that God, through her communication in Jesus Christ, confers eschatological meaning and order to the world. We will deepen this argument in the last

---

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). This distinction between positive and negative liberty was introduced in this seminal essay published in 1958.



chapter: Christian faith should place the issue of suffering in the public sphere in order to offer an eschatological notion of hope.

Second, is *Dignitatis Humanae*'s philosophical reliance on natural law credible in today's pluralistic climate? We will probably never be able to commit ourselves in a truly plural dialogue as long as we continue thinking in terms of a universal, apodictic, and unitary (or even uniform) concept of truth, waiting to be discovered. The way we choose to frame this query seems to be critical in our plural world. It would be a loss if, as has happened with Aristotelian philosophy, faith gets confined again to a particular philosophical system. The philosophy and anthropology that informs most of the documents delivered by the Roman Magisterium, especially regarding moral issues, could be subject to some discernment. Particularly in relation to the perennial reference to nature or the natural law as the norm for moral decision, above all, in matters of human sexuality. I wonder whether the Church really contributes to the vitality of democracy when using certain kind of philosophies, or whether she takes the risk of becoming a sort of sect, incapable of making herself listened by the world.

### c. Political Theology: the Contribution of Metz and Moltmann

A major portion of the purpose of this thesis aims to stress that Christian faith cannot remain silent when secular liberalism pushes it to the margins of communal life. A theology committed to its own ethos should keep alive the struggle for a public and significant voice within civil society. In this sense, there are a number of relevant theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, who, during the second half of the twentieth century, have stressed the political dimension of Christianity. I will introduce, as

examples, the insights of two that stand against the modern trend towards the privatization of religion. Both grasp the irreducibly political character of Christian faith. The political theology delivered by Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann will allow us to understand some of the most essential public and political consequences of Christianity. The liberationist and redemptive aspect of the story of the God of Abraham and the gospel of Jesus Christ may only be understood in collective and mutual terms. The story of the Bible and the consequences of Christian faith are far from being something private and individual. From a believing point of view, the only way to measure the character of the impasse between the public claims of Christianity and secular liberalism lies on an accurate appreciation of the universal impetus of Christian faith.

Johann Baptist Metz attempts to build a new framework for fundamental theology based on the political consequences of praxis. He develops a “political theology”<sup>14</sup> in order to emphasize that Christianity cannot hold itself as politically innocent. For Metz the trend towards the privatization of religion threatens the very definition of Christian theology. Theology, in order to remain significant for the world and faithful to the Gospels, must reflect on theodicy, particularly after the horrendous events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Grounding theology in history, Metz aims to deprivatize Christian faith, making the eschatological message of Jesus Christ the central focus for Christian theology. The starting point for a theology with public implications should be eschatology because every Christian has the responsibility to develop her relationship to the world as one of hope.

---

<sup>14</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007)

In Metz's word, religion must be "interruptive". Instead of understanding time as an unbounded, limitless evolutionistic progress, theology has to bring back the immanent biblical-apocalyptic expectation that makes discipleship urgent. It is in this context that memory becomes a fundamental theological-political category for Metz. Memory is a constitutive relationship with the past that might bring subversive contents. The memory of the suffering becomes solidarity with the dead and the vanquished. A process of remembering grasps the promises of the past and gives to the church a public role: the opportunity to become a bearer of "dangerous memories", especially the ones of Jesus. The memory of Jesus, as an *anamnestic* solidarity, shows the conflict between the divine promises and history. Theology for Metz is in itself political: its role relies on fostering a consciousness of the struggle for memories of the dead and the suffering. Christian faith ought to ask the question of suffering again and again in order to work out an eschatological notion of hope.

Metz's own words help us to sum up his vision. He claims that the political dimension of Christian faith "is a praxis in history and society that understands itself as a solidaristic hope in the God of Jesus as the God of the living and the dead, who calls all [human beings] to be subjects in God's presence"<sup>15</sup>. For Metz, finally, the idea of God is itself political: all human beings are subjects before God and this belief requires a fight against oppression.

Jürgen Moltmann also argues for the "economic, social, and political consequences of the gospel of the Son of Man who was crucified as a rebel".<sup>16</sup> Moltmann aims to raise a theology of the cross as a critique of society, a critique capable of going

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 317

beyond the dichotomy between church and state. The memory of the passion and resurrection of Christ has, for Moltmann, liberationist implications. It brings the church into solidarity with the sufferers of her time. The crucified God is the God of the poor, the humiliated, and the oppressed.

Even though Moltmann wrote his *Theology of Hope* before he wrote *The Crucified God*, he sees the theological foundation for Christian hope in the resurrection of the crucified Christ. In order to be relevant, hope must be founded on remembrance and memories of suffering and, in particular, on the story of the cross. It becomes important then that the cross bears meaning and hope not only for the church but also for society. To maintain that at the heart of Christian faith lies a forsaken, crucified Christ is to make a powerful political statement. God raised the crucified God, making him the hope for human history. A church faithful to that should break her alliances with the powerful and enter into solidarity with the poor. The cry of Christ's abandonment leads to a theology deeply committed to the liberation of the oppressed. Ever since Auschwitz the question of God became for Moltmann the question of the cry of the victims for justice<sup>17</sup>.

Moltmann embraces the idea of the passibility of God to ground the liberationist dimension of the cross of Christ. God forsakes himself because through the cross he becomes the Father and God of the godforsaken. God is in passion during the crucifixion, active with his own being in the dying with Christ. Suffering the death of his Son, God loves forsaken human beings<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> Liberation Theology also shows the deep commitment of theology with praxis that seeks historical salvation. Theologians Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino ground their idea of the "crucified people" in the liberationist aspect of Moltmann's crucified God.

<sup>18</sup> In my reading, however, I tend to see in the cross the indignation of God: according to the criteria of the Kingdom and Jesus' own existence after the cross, the cross is no longer permissible in history.

### 3. Religious Reasons and Political Arguments

So far I have presented the challenges that secular liberalism, in one of its most influential versions, presents for public religions in a plural world. I have also aimed to describe the political dimension of Christian faith in order to show the theological nature of that public character.

In this section I will introduce some nuances to this discussion. I will claim that believers should be allowed to make significant use of their religious convictions in the public realm, for that is where the identity of individuals and collectives is shaped and where the most relevant issues are discussed. When claiming that the Church should not renounce its voice in the public conversation I am stating that we must find a third way between secular liberalism and the neo-traditionalism developed by authors such as Stanley Hauerwas or John Milbank. Both neo-traditionalism and secularism restrain religion from participating in the political conversation. Some of the insights offered by Jeffrey Stout in *Democracy and Tradition* will help us to develop this notion of a third way. We will also see that the trend towards the privatization of religion seems to be founded on some ideological presuppositions. Likewise, unlike the neo-traditionalist arguments, I will argue that the Church must not stand as a particular community of virtue, against the world, and away from society; but she must contribute to the richness of a plural democracy able to incorporate different voices, even religious ones. Making her voice heard, the Church contributes to the health of a liberal democracy.

Let us recapitulate now the main features that characterize contemporary political liberalism. These are (1) the strict separation of Church and State in order to promote religious and moral tolerance; (2) the neutrality of the State, which must remain impartial regarding the moral-comprehensive convictions of its own citizens: the state is not to discriminate against religious convictions; (3) the priority of rights over the good: what we owe to one another and what the State owes to its citizens is limited to rights. The question about how should we live the good life is removed from the agenda of the political realm. Thus, a consequence of liberalism is that religion can prosper only in individual but not in the political life per se. Religion becomes largely a private matter.

In order to protect liberty, equality, tolerance and mutual respect, liberalism ends up removing religion from the public sphere and relegating it to private life. But religion, and in particular Christianity (as I have already argued), has always held a public vocation. In fact, if we analyze the history of many Western countries we will see how Christian moral values have been present in the foundation of these societies. In the U.S., for example, Christian and biblical imaginary was at the heart of the deliberations on the Constitution.

Theories of liberal secularism begin with an unfounded and ideological assumption that sees secularization as the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices in the modern world. The modern myth that sees history as the evolution from superstition to reason, from belief to unbelief, from the sacred to science can be challenged. We often see how contemporary liberal societies become increasingly hostile to religion, and we might find some ideological assumptions when pragmatist liberals like Rorty understand religion as a “conversation-stopper”. Secular liberalism affirms

that values such as freedom, equality, and toleration are best preserved if religion is removed from public affairs. Religion must be confined to the private sphere.

Along the same lines, the theories that construe society as having independent spheres of meaning, as if they were absolutely impermeable, seem to be flawed and founded on ideological assumptions as well. We might find plenty of examples where the public and the private meet in the form of associational actions of different individuals or collectives. Lincoln founded his argument against slavery on biblical imagery; Martin Luther King did the same regarding segregation. In Chile those who complain when the Catholic Church publicly stands against abortion, nevertheless celebrate the role that the Church played during Pinochet dictatorship. The day after Pinochet overthrew Allende, the Church founded the “Comité pro Paz” which became afterwards the “Vicaría de la Solidaridad”. To the action of that association on behalf of the human rights we owe hundreds of lives. A Church-based public initiative founded on religious convictions that openly faced dictatorship.

Often, people who hold religious convictions tend to believe that some of those convictions have significant political consequences, while secular liberals assume that religious arguments must remain at home. Freedom of religion implies, first of all, liberty of conscience, that is to say, the right to make up one’s own mind regarding religion and moral questions. But freedom of religion also considers the right to act according to one’s own beliefs, as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others. Things get more controversial when religious acts and commitments serve for reasons when taking a stand on political issues. It seems to be clear that the expression of religious arguments is protected under the right of religious freedom and freedom of expression. Still the

question remains whether religious reasons play a role –and if they do, which one– when discerning political decisions. If religious people use religious reasons that meet the criteria of plausibility to back up some of their political positions, there should be no reason to restrain the public use of those premises.

When religious convictions become political arguments, believers must do their best in order to properly justify their arguments. Christianity must be aware of some of the basics of public reason: Church reasons given in public should be accessible to all reasonable human beings; they must meet basic criteria of public plausibility. This statement seems fair to me. But when we enter into the realm of the social contract theory, more questions arise. To match “being reasonable” with “supporting a freestanding conception of justice” ends up being something not as conceivable as liberals like Rawls wanted to be. Particularly because this understanding of “being reasonable” implies confining to the private sphere the moral and religious comprehensive doctrines that ultimately define who we are. In other words, arguments can be reasonable even if they do not meet the Rawlsian criteria of public reason. If reason in common only means reaching a freestanding conception of justice, a formal political consensus, then the role of religions in the public becomes quite restrictive. There have to be more ways to treat fellow citizens as equals than through formal or procedural agreements. The fact that democratic societies are called to work upon the basis of certain common principles might lead to the misunderstanding of excluding religious arguments from public life. This conclusion seems not to take into account the spirit of the rights of freedom of conscience, religious freedom and freedom of expression. If those rights cannot be exercised in the public conversation, what would be



their purpose? If we cannot make substantial use of our religious commitments at the center of the public plaza, where the most important issues are discussed, then what is the real meaning of religious liberty?

To that question, Rawls would respond with what is called “the proviso”, an amended view of his idea of public reason.<sup>19</sup> According to this revisited version of public reason, a citizen might introduce religious arguments for political issues if those arguments are supplemented by reasons based on the social contract. Even though this version is less restrictive than the former one, I still see that to fulfill the proviso is a difficult task.

As Nicholas Wolterstorff points out: religious people base their decisions about fundamental issues of justice on their religious convictions. It is part of their view of life that they ought to allow the word of God or the teachings of Jesus to form not only their moral and political convictions but also their entire life. For them religion is not about political statements, but is about the way they live. If society does not allow them to ground their discernments and decisions on their religious beliefs it would infringe the free exercise of their conscience<sup>20</sup>.

To state that offering religious reasons in public conversation is inappropriate would imply that there exists an order of reasons that belongs to a neutral, formal field, able to be grasped and understood by every human being. I do not see how secular liberal reasons, as part of the achievements of Western Modernity, can be more neutral than

---

<sup>19</sup> John Rawls “The idea of Public Reason Revisited” in *Political Liberalism*.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues”, in *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of religious convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

reasons that belong to different religious or philosophical traditions.<sup>21</sup> The idea that all the reasons given in public ought to be part of a freestanding, neutral concept of justice seems flawed. A truer approach to the notion of mutual respect should allow giving in public the reasons that best define who we are, even though they cannot be embraced by each one of our interlocutors.

This being said, I would not go as far as Stanley Hauerwas<sup>22</sup> and John Milbank<sup>23</sup> do in this respect. Even though I see some ideology hidden behind the attempt of neutrality of secular liberalism, I would not still follow either the path of the neo-traditionalists who ground their anti-liberal critique in a private notion of Christian charity, radical discipleship or Aristotelian virtue. Some aspects of secularization, like the church/state division, have proven to be helpful even to Christianity. To be faithful to one's convictions does not necessarily entail being uninvolved in the politics of our democracies and being involved only in the polity that is the church. The church should not be only a "contrast model" but a contributor to the construction of common goals and ends, based on justice and respect. An understanding of religious tradition as a community of virtue that must stand against the rest of the world seems largely incompatible with democratic citizenship. Throughout the next chapter I hope to develop,

---

<sup>21</sup> Ashis Nandy, a well-known Indian scholar, declares himself in *Time Warps* an anti-secularist and anti-liberal. He argues that most of the analytic tools that belong to the growing dominant global culture have become ideas that go beyond history and culture. He also argues how Western categories such as modern rationality, secularism, and a social-evolutionist notion of an unbounded progress are bringing more confusion than order to India. They prevent ordinary Indians from bringing into India's public life the everyday categories which they actually live. His main thesis states that instead of attempting to build religious tolerance on the basis of the good conscience of a small group of "de-ethnicised", westernized, and middle class politicians and intellectuals, Indian politics should attempt to explore the philosophy, symbolism, and theology of tolerance rooted in the faith of the Indian citizens. The foundation of tolerance might be found not in the imported categories of secularism but rather in communal-ethnic religious convictions in India.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles. *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008)

<sup>23</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

following Taylor, a revisionist version of liberalism able to recover a richer, and more comprehensive view of human agency, all the while remaining committed to liberty, equality, and mutual respect.

Drawing on Hegel, Jeffrey Stout<sup>24</sup> wishes to prove that norms and democracy are the outcome of a social progress where members of a community achieve mutual recognition. Instead of a social contract as the basis of social cooperation, Hegel places a dialectical reasonableness. Norms are not constituted at the contractual level, but in a process of mutual recognition. Norms are social creatures. We will explore in the next chapter how an understanding of the meaning of democratic practices based on Hegelian thought might be more hospitable to religion than the Kantian social-contract tradition.

Stout develops a pragmatism deeply embedded in both the Hegelian tradition and in Emersonian expressivism and Deweyan pragmatism. He places his work as a third way between traditionalism and the liberal contractarian program of restraint (of comprehensive schemes). Both traditionalism and secular liberalism, Stout sustains, hold that democratic culture “implicitly requires the policing or self-censorship of religious expression in the political arena”.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he argues that the ethical life of democracies calls for expressive freedom of the particular views of the members of the community precisely where they gather, i.e. in the public sphere.

That is why Stout disagrees with Richard Rorty, who is probably the most important of the pragmatists, when the latter refers to religion as a conversation-stopper. According to Rorty, religion can only flourish in private life; in fact, religious reasons are so private that they cannot even be brought into the public conversation. That argument

---

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

takes us to a very limited position: we can share in public only those premises that people already hold in common. It seems hard to see the rationale of this argument, especially when Rorty distances himself from Habermas and Rawls. But, as Stout points out, it reflects the mainstream of the Western-Enlightened political culture. When someone is publicly expressing some of the contents of the faith she holds, she is not necessarily imposing her beliefs over her interlocutor; she is just communicating who she is. However, the fact that she believes does not mean that she is able to offer a rationale of her belief. In order to keep the conversation going, religious people ought to be able to elaborate some justification of their beliefs. Besides there are many other non-religious commitments and convictions that, when publically expressed that also create discursive impasses when they are not capable of offering reasons.

#### 4. Secularization and its Different Voices

To conclude this chapter I will offer an evaluation of some of the diversity of voices that refer to the process of secularization. Here I intend to contextualize liberal secularism in a wider perspective: secularization has somehow framed the relationship between the Church and society throughout modernity. This section aims to serve as a bridge between this chapter and the next one. Charles Taylor will show how secularization is an ambiguous concept. Paul Valadier argues that secularization is not totally foreign to Catholicism; rather it finds some of its origin in Christian theology. William Connolly defends a public ethos more tolerant to religious faith and moral convictions than traditional secularism. Finally, for Jeffrey Stout, a public conversation

functions under the limits of secularism when its participants do not take for granted God (or another ultimate moral source) as a common ground. Secularism should not necessarily entail religious disenchantment.

The concept of secularization seems to be quite ambiguous. It designates several different experiences. The eight hundred pages long Charles Taylor *A Secular Age* decisively proves this.

Here Taylor explores the Christian roots of our era and the widening range of spiritual and religious alternatives available to believers and non-believers in our time. In order to do this he provides a narrative of the development of these multiples options starting from the sixteenth century. *A Secular Age* aims to describe the historical process which ends up sketching the map of the spiritual-religious world in North-Atlantic civilization. One question frames the entire quest of the book: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”<sup>26</sup> Taylor develops three meanings under the notion of secularization: (1) the church/state separation and the division of spheres: while the public space must remain neutral in order to respect equality, the private realm constitutes the place for particular substantive schemes; (2) the decay of religious belief and practice: fewer people go to church today; and (3) a change in the conditions of belief: how did we get from the enchanted, hierarchical worldview, governed by the divine, to a disenchanting worldview characterized by instrumental reason and exclusive humanism. Even though Taylor pays attention to these three interrelated approaches to secularization, he focus his attention on the third: Secularization emerges when a self-sufficient humanism –a humanism with no goal other

---

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2007), 25

than human flourishing on this side of history— becomes available not only for the élites, but also for the masses. We will return to this topic in the last chapter. We will see how in recovering the potentiality of hope, as human flourishing on this side of history but in continuity with the next, Christianity can make one of its main political contributions. Taylor rejects the unilinear secularization narrative as science replacing faith. Instead he suggests another model which depends on what alternatives are available. The pattern of secularization is one of destabilization and recomposition, a complex and nuanced process made in several stages. Everyone can see that there have been declines in practice and explicit belief in many countries, especially in the last four decades. It is clear that God is not present in the public realm as in past centuries, but how to understand and interpret these changes may not be that evident. Taylor probably wishes to demonstrate that perhaps there is no such decline in belief; that what has faded has been our images of the golden era of religion. But if we include the current wide range of spiritual and semi-spiritual beliefs, religion has not declined. If we see religion as the shape of our ultimate concerns, then religion seems to be alive in the “age of authenticity”.

In its origins, after the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, liberal secularism arises as probably the best hope for a peaceful and just world. Issues such as the meaning of life, faith, salvation and damnation, and the divine source or morality were pulled out of the public life and deposited into private life. This new trend towards the secularization of the public was seen as a crucial shift calculated to protect freedom, tolerance, rights, and the primacy of the State. Yet, secularization also came about to protect the free exercise of religion. This is probably the ultimate meaning of John Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*.

Paul Valadier<sup>27</sup> defends the seemingly paradoxical thesis that the Catholic Church has contributed to the development of secularization, even when opposed to it. In some way, democracy and secularization has been strengthened by its Catholic opposition, even though Secularization is contrary to the universal impetus of Christianity.

Modern secularization is quite linked with the principle of the autonomy of the moral subject which brings to the fore the notion of independence, freedom, and rights. And the gospels, even though, they defend the value of the human person also defend its profound bond with the community, and therefore with others. The whole notion of covenant comes up to strengthen this assumption. We cannot get into the idea of Christian salvation if we see it as a personal/individual salvation. On the contrary, the Christian notion of charity, as the link between love of God, love of others, and proper love of self, certainly runs against the Enlightened notion of the total autonomy of moral conscience, or the absolute independence of the individual. Obviously, the Catholic Church has not wished to advance a doctrine that ends up fostering secularization. Quite the opposite, she has she has acknowledged only reluctantly to some of the modern achievements such as the scientific discourse, the notion of human rights, and the sovereignty of the modern States.

But, where does the contribution of Catholicism to secularization lay according to Valadier? Firstly, it is the Christian doctrine that first opened the door to scientific discourse. Since the God of the Bible totally transcends the world, the world is open to human stewardship. Thus it is part of human beings' responsibility to manage the creation. Secondly, it was the Church who first introduced a new relationship between temporal and spiritual affairs, defending the primacy of the latter over the former.

---

<sup>27</sup> In a lecture delivered at Boston College in the fall of 2008.

Whereas the task of the Church consisted in providing spiritual means for eternal salvation, the duty of the princes relied on running the affairs of earthly life. Thirdly, and this is a point where Taylor would very much agree with Valadier, the modern trend towards dignity, freedom, and equality of every human being finds its roots in Christian heritage. The Catholic Church, faithful to the Gospel, has always defended the notion of the dignity of the human person. Yet Taylor insists throughout his work that, paradoxically, some of the most impressive extensions of gospel ethics, such as universal solidarity and the affirmation of the value of ordinary life, depended on the dissolution of Christendom. We will deepen in this point in the next chapter.

Religions in general and the Catholic Church in particular might help to protect, strengthen, and foster some of the values that democratic regimes regard as most significant. In fact, liberal democracies, as I have been arguing, are far from being politically or ethically neutral. The respect of human dignity and tolerance, the priority of liberty, equality and solidarity are all values frequently supported by religious institutions. Communities of faith tend to unveil the symbolic foundations of such values, which often have a religious provenance. The Catholic Church –through the documents of *Medellín* and *Puebla*, through Liberation Theology and through the ecclesiology of Christian Base Communities– has strongly fostered in Latin America the struggle for a just society for all, especially for the poor. Furthermore, communities of faith may play another significant role precisely because they are suspicious of some of the consequences of the modern ideology of progress. It seems today that progress, as such, is good for the life of human beings. We witness a number of threats to life made in the name of reason that can be challenged by living communities of faith, such as nuclear



bombs or certain developments in genetics and biology. Reason must be subject of being stimulated or even questioned by different symbolic and ethical frameworks.

William E. Connolly<sup>28</sup> introduces some critiques of the ideology of secularism as well. He defends an ideal of public life modified to strengthen the perspective of minorities. Secularism should be refashioned in order to become more tolerant to religion, as well as more capable of embracing a variety of moral, communal, and different kind of faiths. We need to learn how to cultivate a public ethos of engagement in which a wider variety of perspectives finds some room. Liberal secularism in its strict separation of spheres ends up threatening the notion of a more vibrant and open pluralism. “Several variants of secularism kill two birds with one stone: as they try to seal public life from religious doctrines they also cast out a set of non-theistic orientations toward reverence, ethics, and public life that deserve to be heard”<sup>29</sup>. What Connolly is pointing out is that social life and democracy would benefit when a more generous ethos of engagement between multiple voices has a place in society, taking intersubjectivism more seriously. Even though there are numerous connections, for this author neither secularism nor liberalism is entirely reducible to the other. We find some theological liberalism as we might find non-liberal secularisms. John Rawls fits in the category of a secular liberal. His radical separation between the private and the public makes his philosophy deaf to the multiplicity of voices subsisting under the freestanding conception of justice.

Connolly sees secularism as a Euro-American *modus vivendi* that has tried to determine the scope and the limits of the public sphere. His problems with secularism are

---

<sup>28</sup> William E. Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

related to the secular tendency to ignore and devalue religious, metaphysical, gender, ethnic, and sexual differences. Having pushed Christianity into a private existence, secularism now consolidates flat conceptions of ethics, and public life.<sup>30</sup>

Liberal secularism draws a picture of public sphere that has become quite hegemonic in the West. For Jeffrey Stout, secularization does not necessarily entails disenchantment or loss of religious belief. An ethical discourse is secularized when people engaging in public discourse offer arguments that do not look for agreement in substantial matters such as the existence of God or the eternal life. This mean that in some circumstances it would sound very inappropriate to give theological or comprehensive reasons in front of religiously diverse audience. Thus, Stout continues, “An ethical discourse in religiously plural democracies is secularized [...] only in the sense that it does not take for granted a set of agreed-upon assumptions about the nature and existence of God”<sup>31</sup>. In other words, religious arguments no longer have any sort of default authority, even though those who defend them could be rationally entitled to those religious commitments.

Can liberalism be compatible with a socially constituted self, a community-based notion of shared ends, and a conception of the good adequate to a pluralist society? Can it thus be hospitable to the contributions of communities of faith? How do we form a community able to find a common ground, while still respecting the community’s irreducible heterogeneity? The next chapter will address these questions.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Stout. *Democracy and Tradition*, 99

## **II. A revisionist conception of liberalism: Charles Taylor and social goods.**

Having introduced a description of the political and universal claims of Christianity, on the one hand, and one of the most influential versions of political liberalism, on the other, I aimed to stress the contrast between a public morality that seeks to protect pluralism on the basis of a procedural agreement and Christian faith and its political nature as the drive to confer certain order to society on the basis of its own theology. I believe that an appropriate interpretation of the philosophy of Charles Taylor can offer an alternative: both respectful of individual liberty, equality, and mutual respect and, at the same time, more hospitable to the contribution of religious and comprehensive doctrines in general to the public conversation.

Whereas many secular liberals claim neutrality at the origin of the liberal values (freedom, equality, and tolerance), I tend to see them as at least partly, historically and socially conditioned and embedded. Borrowing Sandel's expression: the self is encumbered in a more dramatic way than secular liberals are capable of recognizing.

The Catholic Church has resisted an individualistic interpretation of the individual person, constantly insisting that the person exists only within a community –beginning with the very basic community of human language, without which humanization would be impossible. This dialogical feature of the human condition reminds us that self-fulfilment seems impossible without regard for the demands of our ties with others and for the demands which emanate from something more than human desire. The twin ideas that (1) human beings are always dialogically shaped and, in some way, always bound to their community and (2) that human fulfilment is to be found beyond purely human

categories are two Christian notions that deeply underlie Taylor's philosophy. Taylor's overall thought seems to me quite Catholic and can thus help in the search for moral grounds for a public theology in a plural world.

I believe that some of the moral insights offered by Taylor might help theology to re-imagine itself in a world that seems to be characterized by an experience of absence and void or, rather, that seems to be looking for ways to avoid this sense of absence so common to instrumental rationality. Instead of the post-liberal and countercultural theology of, for instance, Stanley Hauerwas, I tend to think that a Catholic theology faithful to its own tradition should engage contemporary challenges directly. That is why a revisionist version of liberalism able to recognize its ties with some particular goods – those that have a significant Christian background, as I will try to prove later on – is so important for bringing back the contribution of religions to society. Human agency gets narrower when modern societies marginalize from the public discourse analogical and symbolic approaches to Truth, Justice, and the Good. The whole Catholic ritual tradition that embraces some of the most significant aspects of life through metaphor, sacraments and analogies, might help to bring back to public life the fullness of human experience so often narrowed by instrumental and disengaged rationalities. A theology in dialogue with contemporary morality can lead the public discussion beyond concepts such as economic development and technical progress, thus allowing a new awareness of the narratives that bring a sense of belonging to our communities. We need new forms of theological and political imagination based on what ultimately drives our sense of solidarity, justice, and benevolence. We need new forms of religious tolerance not necessarily inscribed in neutral/procedural secularism but consciously anchored in the ties that bind people

together in society. We will see how liberty, equality, and solidarity are somehow substantive goods and values that constitute a significant part of the identity of the (late) modern subject.

While keeping a strong commitment to liberty, equality, and mutual respect I hope to offer a fuller and richer understanding of human life, one that better accounts for human identity by including categories such as symbolic memory, a hermeneutic of the past, a communal and cultural belonging, and religious faith. A version of human agency grounded on such concepts resonates in some sense with other descriptions of the self, which from different perspectives, coincide in their critique of formal liberalism: namely, the encumbered self (Sandel)<sup>32</sup>, the pilgrim self (Thiemann)<sup>33</sup> and the porous self (Taylor)<sup>34</sup>.

This chapter will consider some of the most significant aspects of Taylor's philosophy developed throughout his entire corpus. I will claim, basically, that some aspects of his critique of modernity might help us to reframe the question for the place and the role of religious convictions in a secular liberal world. I aim to prove that Taylor's ethics offers some moral grounds that make modernity much more hospitable to religion and comprehensive schemes in general.

Six sections comprise this chapter. An overall view of Taylor's narrative will allow us to understand that, instead of offering a philosophical system, Taylor tells the story of the development of the modern identity at the moral and spiritual level. Sections

---

<sup>32</sup> Michael Sandel. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). A self tied, attached to her community, to her history, to a certain notion of the beautiful and of the good.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life*. A self in progress, shaped by the encounter of different communities and able to keep her freedom.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. A self open to transcendence, open to human flourishing beyond immanent progress.

two and three critique some of the individualistic and instrumental aspects of modern thought, and offer instead a vision of a broader ethics. Sections four and five play a crucial role in this thesis as they explore the irreducible social character of modern goods showing their Christian lineage. Finally, section six will attempt to demonstrate that the place where public religions must develop their insights is the scope of civil society.

### 1. Charles Taylor's Moral Narrative

According to Taylor, liberal secularism, as perhaps the dominant public moral in the West, seems to be part of a larger cultural transformation. A brief approach to the narrative style of Taylor's two major works (*Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*) offers a preliminary idea of his overall thought and helps us to contextualize the ethical arguments that I will introduce further on in this chapter. In spite of his gigantic work, Taylor does not offer a philosophical system. Rather his style seems to be more like a nuanced narrative. In this first section I aim to situate the coming discussions in the midst of a wider story that shows how the characteristics of modern morality are, actually, features of the development of the modern identity.

In *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, maybe more than in any other article or essay, Taylor reveals his Hegelian pedigree by reading history as the overcoming of contradictions. Both books are constantly unfolding the internal contradictions that drive history within historical processes. Taylor's style and method is not the modern history of philosophical, sociological, or theological theories. Rather this philosopher tells the story

of what he calls “social imaginaries”<sup>35</sup>, namely, the way ordinary people see, imagine, and understand themselves in a given period of time within the societies they inhabit and sustain. Social Imaginaries are different from social theories since they are something “much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode”<sup>36</sup>. It is interesting to note that whereas a social theory is shared just by small minority of intellectuals a social imaginary is something shared by larger groups of people.

Taylor sees the major changes of modernity taking place at the moral and spiritual level rather than at the epistemological one. History is, therefore, a lived experience, an account of our worldviews. Thus, this philosopher looks to discover the moral conditions that made some ways of life possible. This attempt is particularly strong in *A Secular Age* where, showing the complexity of human processes, Taylor will try to avoid those unilinear and unchallenged explanations of history that end up homogenizing human agency. He is interested in discover “how our sense of things, our cosmic imaginary, in other words, our whole background understanding and feel of the world has been transformed”<sup>37</sup>. Hence secularization, instead of a philosophical or sociological theory, comes across as a gradual fading of faith at the level of imagination. That is why arts, poetry, literature, and personal experiences of several figures are so important in his narrative. A moral and spiritual view of modernity retrieves the constellation of different understandings of nature, person, society, the Good, and God. In this sense atheism gives the impression of being a process of transformation in moral sensibility instead of an

---

<sup>35</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, chapter 4 and Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) chapter 2.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 22

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 325

epistemological crisis. That is why the question Taylor addresses in *A Secular Age* is, ultimately, how ordinary people came to imagine human flourishing without God.

The first half of *A Secular Age* looks into the process which led the West from a unified Christian world during the Middle Ages towards the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a self-sufficient humanism became available to masses of people. The author traces the emergence of a “buffered self”, a self-enclosed subject, shut to transcendence, the opposite of the previous “porous self”. The entire book presents a complex and nuanced exploration of the development of the moral, cultural, and social conditions for the possibility of belief and throughout the last chapters the author offers his version of the spiritual density of the present time. The final part of the book sketches the map of contemporary spiritual alternatives under the name of “Conditions of Belief”.

The modern moral order is described by Taylor as fundamentally an ethic of freedom and mutual benefit, both as coessential concepts. This morality of mutual benefit takes place between autonomous individuals, free agents who look for increasing life and the means of life through rights that are to be assured to all persons equally. The self becomes dominated by instrumental rationality and secular time. It is the natural order driven by science and disengaged reason where we live and develop our imaginaries and beliefs. Taylor, deconstructing the unchallenged, naturalized ethics behind modern epistemology, finds there an ethics of independence, self-responsibility, progress, and control. And this is probably one of the major claims underneath Taylor’s entire corpus. This philosophy targets the mainstream narrative that shapes what he calls “the immanent



frame”<sup>38</sup>. Taylor subjects this narrative to dialectical analysis throughout *A Secular Age* and, indeed, throughout his whole corpus.

However, the interesting point is that secular humanism is not the whole story of western modernity. The sacred is somewhere present in the culture of authenticity and expressive individualism. We live between “cross pressures,”<sup>39</sup> a movement of mutual fragilization between materialism and (orthodox forms of) religion that generate new forms of spiritual life that end up destabilizing the old ways of belief. The outcome of these cross pressures is a much more fragmented and fragile religious landscape than ever before, a landscape that displays diverse alternatives for fullness. New forms of belief that attempt to rescue the body and rehabilitate human desire emerge against the hegemony of calculating reason and against the “higher” demands of Christian ascetism.

We will see in this second chapter how Taylor disagrees with the modern thesis that states that religion will disappear or will become just a private matter. Taylor’s thought generally opposes the biased, conventional, antireligious narrative quite popular in the developed world. The conditions of belief have not faded but have radically changed. Instead of suppression Taylor sees rather a redefinition of the categories of belief in western democratic societies. Ultimately, his critique of secular liberalism is part of a wider critique of some aspects of the modern identity.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., chapter 15

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., chapter 16

## 2. Charles Taylor's Critique to Formal Liberalism

The argument I now introduce finds its modern roots in certain differences between Hegel's ethics and Kant's morality. This contrast portrays an essential moral distinction and plays a critical role in relation to the argument of this thesis. It somehow redraws the borderline between the private and the public and introduces a different concept of both ethical life and the public realm. I will claim here that there is much more continuity between ontological propositions and normative arguments than secular liberals are willing to admit. Since our political arguments are not only a matter of reaching consensus but also a matter of personal identity, religious reasons cannot be marginalized and relegated to a somehow fictitious private realm. What we claim in the public realm is a consequence of what we are. And what we are is not something developed only in private, but also developed in the encounter with others.

Whereas Kant rooted society in a contract celebrated among autonomous rational agents, Hegel argued that social contract theory lacks an appropriate account of history and social practices as a fundamental element of society. The origin of social norms is not to be found, according to Hegel, in the practical rationality of individuals committing themselves to a formal social contract. Rather, social norms emerge from social practices, from a shared ethical life where, in mutual recognition of other's consciousness, subjectivity and rationality are shaped by the interaction of the individuals that participate in society.

Jeffrey Stout retrieves this Hegelian tradition that understands ethical norms as socially instituted because he grounds his pragmatist account of democracy as tradition in

this Hegelian conception of the formation of ethical norms.<sup>40</sup> What I find helpful in this view is that it allows ethical life to be part of politics. In fact, democratic norms are ethically and socially formed. Thus, instead of the already-shaped-in-private identity of an independent, autonomous rational being, who goes to the public sphere just to build a rational, procedural, universally grounded agreement, we see an identity –a self-consciousness– that is ultimately shaped in the social encounter. In this sense, Hegel’s notion of *sittlichkeit* (ethical-social life; civil society) seems to me much more hospitable to comprehensive schemes, and therefore to religions, than Kant’s *moralität* (deontology).

One of the most celebrated passages of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* lies in what he calls “the struggle for recognition.”<sup>41</sup> Here he explores the necessary conditions for any form of consciousness as mutual recognition. Self-consciousness implies awareness of the fact that one’s identity is always dialogically shaped. A subject becomes individual when it is recognized by the other. Individuals that form a community see each other as equals and different from themselves, in a reciprocal relationship. Mutual recognition (*Anerkennung*) provides the matrix within which individual self-consciousness can exist as such.

In his famous “master/slave” dialectic, Hegel intended to typify certain features of “the struggle for recognition.” The conflict between the master and the slave represents the historical themes of dominance and obedience, dependence and independence. Adequate recognition requires a mirroring of the self through the other so as to overcome asymmetry.

---

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 271

<sup>41</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Chapter 4

This notion has been retrieved by a number of contemporary authors in the field of political thought<sup>42</sup> and it, I believe, undergirds Taylor's philosophy in a significant way. In my reading, I see something critical vis-à-vis the place and the role of religion (and comprehensive ethical and aesthetic schemes in general) in this theory of *Annerkennung*. Religion and comprehensive schemes cannot be removed from the public sphere because they are not something developed in the private life of an already-shaped identity, but they are something that appears and exists in social and mutual recognition through ethical life.

Taking into account this tradition, I see why Taylor does not feel comfortable with Rawls' political liberalism and particularly with the idea of overlapping consensus. Taylor is committed to the liberal values of liberty, equality, and the theory of basic rights. However, he believes that these values can flourish only in a particular kind of society, where some pre-conditions allow for the fulfillment of those liberal interests. He thinks that a person becomes really human by interaction with others, arguing that a subject makes choices within a particular society which has to be promoted. Hence, there is no chance for individual rights outside a human community based on some constitutive and collective (i.e., non-decomposable) goods.

Rawls identifies the fact of pluralism with identities and comprehensive schemes that are already constituted and shaped in a space previous to the political domain. Thus, individuals or collectives with their particular identities would go to the public field in order to dispute about the truth of their propositions and in order to build up political

---

<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Axel Honneth *The Struggle for Recognition: the moral grammar of social conflict*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Mass: Polity Press, 1995); Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: reimagining political space in a globalizing world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?* (New York: Verso: 2003)

consensus. Following Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit*, Taylor tends to disagree with this assertion. He defends instead a concept of politics as the place where people go in order to demand recognition of the *Lebenswelt* they champion. This alternative understanding of politics as embedded in a diverse tradition sees politics, not as the scope where citizens present their truth claims, but as the place where the identity of the members of the society is shaped by mutual recognition.<sup>43</sup>

In an article named "Cross-purposes: the Liberal-Communitarian Debate"<sup>44</sup>, Taylor suggests that this debate results from some misunderstandings: namely, a confusion between ontological issues and advocacy (normative) issues. Ontological issues "concern the terms you accept as ultimate in the order of explanation"<sup>45</sup>. Normative issues "concern the moral stand or policy one adopts"<sup>46</sup>. The relationship between both concepts is complex: even though they belong to a different order of reasons, they are not independent. An ontological position often grounds the view one advocates. An ontological position may support several normative propositions and a normative proposition may not be compatible with every ontological position. I find these distinctions not only methodologically clear, but also philosophically helpful. They raise some questions for Rawls' political liberalism.

Whereas Taylor argues that an ontological proposition defines a gamut of normative or advocacy positions, Rawls asserts that an independent political conception of justice can overlap with a number of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. While Taylor holds that a normative position is based on an ontological proposition (every

---

<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism*.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate" in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995)

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*,181.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*,182.

normative debate implies, ultimately, an ontological debate), Rawls affirms that political conceptions are independent from ontological views and are able to be overlap with every comprehensive doctrine as long as they are reasonable.

The problem with the idea of overlapping consensus rests on the gap that Rawls introduces between comprehensive and political doctrines. This distinction might take the work of the later Rawls to a kind of philosophical blindness before the particular nature of human identity. The substitution of reasonability for truth avoids the problem of identity and recognition. It works only for a formal conception of politics and justice, but not for a more substantive approach to those notions. Whereas Rawls ends up introducing a radical distinction between the self and her political purposes, the identity of a human being seems to me indivisible from the ends she pursues because those ends are an essential part of the definition of the identity of that particular individual. This is why the Rawlsian division between a freestanding political conception of justice and moral doctrines seems implausible. Moreover, I believe that ontological propositions are compatible with normative liberal conceptions. It would be perfectly possible for a liberal community to engage in particular values. In fact, instead of remaining neutral, procedural and deontological liberalism seems to be a particular comprehensive doctrine willing to give more weight to some principles and ethical-political values than others. Liberalism seems to be far from being purely formal and neutral; rather it is the outcome of a particular cultural development. It is a form of morality.

In my reading, the fundamental question concerns the content and sense of the public sphere and challenges the frontier between the public and the private. Even though we can (and must) separate the government from religious institutions as a basic

democratic principle, it is much more complicated to divide religion and politics. Following the idea that the concept of the public must go beyond government, I tend to think that the public sphere is not only the place where citizens go to verify the rationality of their political conception of justice; not only the place where we design public policies; but also the place where individuals and collectives encounter themselves in a permanent definition and redefinition of their identities, frequently shaped by the recognition that comes from others. The public domain is the place where different horizons of meaning meet and where different conceptions of the good and the beautiful (either morally or religiously grounded) mutually permeate and redefine.

Taylor goes deeper in his critique to liberalism as a morality grounded on the social contract theory. Under the name of “atomism”<sup>47</sup> he places not only the 17<sup>th</sup> century doctrines of social contract but also all the theories that somehow give priority to the individual and her rights over society or that see society in a purely instrumental means to fulfill the needs of the individual. The doctrine of the primacy of rights has been profoundly influential in modern political imaginaries.

According to Taylor there is something very fundamental missing in the understanding of society as the sum of atoms. Some views of human agency give critical significance to the freedom to choose one’s own mode of life. But for this author the doctrine of the primacy of the rights cannot be independent from some considerations about what is to be a human being or what is to be part of a human community. Human beings “cannot develop the fullness of their moral autonomy –that is the capacity to form

---

<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, “Atomism” in *Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985)

independent moral convictions– outside a political culture sustained by institutions of political participation and guarantees of personal independence”<sup>48</sup>.

The whole idea of being an autonomous agent is part of a particular identity, a way of understanding ourselves, with which human beings are not born. It is an identity that human beings have to acquire. And the only way to do it seems to be through common practices in common life. Therefore, the Enlightened, free, and autonomous individual can keep her moral status only in a certain kind of society where those values are considered worth fostering.

Taylor develops his social thesis beginning with the very basic community coming from human language, without which humanization would be impossible. There is no private language. Even before the individual there is something already shared. The same thesis that I have sketched earlier (individual identity is partly defined by the encounter with others, and not only privately) applies here. The idea of the social contract is in some way a flawed notion, since the self cannot exist in isolation. Human language is therefore something irreducible. Ultimately, these issues about political participation run deep. They concern not only the way human beings live together, but they touch on the nature of human life. Taylor places himself in a third way between individual freedom and common good. He defends freedom, but as something socially constituted.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,198.



### 3. Against Moral Reductionism

In this next section, I wish to demonstrate how significant the distinction is between formal morality and ethics (ethical life) for the place and role of religions in a pluralistic society. In the essay “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy”,<sup>49</sup> Taylor criticizes the tendency, in the field of analytic philosophy, toward narrowness in certain issues related to moral philosophy. Instead of asking what is good to be or what is good to love, the focus of analytic philosophy is on obligatory action, on what we ought to do. But what happens in those situations where not just actions are involved but ways of life or ways of being?

The question about how to restore the wider focus of moral philosophy seems to be critical when we think in terms of the public role of religions. A challenging task remains in discerning how to enhance the scope of morality, including some notions of the good life, without threatening our commitments to liberty, equality, and mutual respect as some of the most important achievements of modernity. The search for a “revisionist” version of liberalism, compatible with a “socially constituted self,” “a community-based notion of virtue,” and “a conception of the good adequate to a pluralistic society” (developed by Ronald Thiemann in *Religion in Public Life*) might help us to frame the idea of a wider version of ethics suitable to liberal values.

Taylor detects a certain narrowness when liberal secularism removes the question of *what is good* from the public discussion. Iris Murdoch, Taylor maintains, takes the

---

<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996)

consideration of a good “which would go beyond life,”<sup>50</sup> as a good whose “goodness cannot be entirely explained in terms of its contributing to a fuller, better, richer, more satisfying human life. It is a good that, sometimes, we might more appropriately respond to in suffering and death rather than in fullness and life.”<sup>51</sup> Taylor, on the other hand, aims to foster a liberation from narrow morality to broader ethics by introducing an even wider question: “What commands our fullest love?”

“We are trapped in the corral of morality”, according to Taylor, and we need to go beyond the unconditional. Part of the problem comes from the modern epistemological turn. Ever since Descartes, we have put our trust in a method or a procedure of operation which conforms to a “disengaged reason,” able to turn on its own proceedings and examine them for accuracy. Taylor sees in the rigor and clarity of instrumental reason part of the enormous success of Rawls’ philosophy: it proved that rigorous, formal and unconditioned modes of reasoning can be used in moral and politics. Therefore, justice (and the right) gains primacy over issues of fulfillment and good life partly because calculability simplifies the work of morality.

Modernity has made epistemology central and questions about good life are declared insoluble (and therefore private) while questions of justice and fairness can be treated by adopting a rational method of discernment. Thus liberal secularism asserts that political society must give everyone the space to develop her own goals rather than espousing one view or another of the good life. This principle has shown itself to be successful in respecting individual rights and its defense is widely accepted, even for Taylor. Still, he believes that not all moral deliberations can be developed by a calculus

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

of obligated action. That would amount to another illusion— of what he calls “single-term moralities.” Do we not need ethical deliberation about what is good in order to know how to make a choice in certain circumstances? Taylor addresses this question with the idea of “constitutive goods.”<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. Constitutive Social Goods

So far I have been attempting to prove that an understanding of ethics such as the one developed by Taylor might offer some moral grounds able to support the contribution of religions to public life. In this regard, the notion of social goods constitutes a crucial milestone. Bringing back to political life a dialogical dimension of human agency – instead of the individualistic view introduced by social contract theories– communities of faith can aspire again to contribute in the formation of some common values and ends. In this sense Christianity can provide an invaluable contribution to human life. When a notion of limitless scientific progress, incapable of considering values such as human good, comes across as an unchallenged reality, the Catholic Church faces the opportunity to re-establish a wider and deeper discussion about the future of humankind. An understanding of the good as having not only value for the individual, but as something irreducibly common matches with some of the most important aspects of Christian anthropology.

Among the many differences between Taylor and Rawls we find some interesting coincidences: both are committed to the defense of liberty, equality, tolerance, and

---

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter 4; and “Irreducibly Social Goods” in *Philosophical Arguments*.

solidarity; and both propose their philosophy, in part, as a critique of utilitarianism. The divergence resides in Taylor's view of the foundation of modern moral philosophy. At the origin of modern moral philosophy, he identifies a new area that he names, as we have seen, "atomism."<sup>53</sup> Through this concept, Taylor wants to demonstrate that, at the basis of utilitarianism, welfarism, and the theories of social contract, there are goods that are ultimately "decomposable." According to utilitarianism, all the goods are individual or have value for the individual and according to the theories of social contract, the society is born in order to protect freedom and private property, both as individual goods. It is against this deep assumption, in which goods are understood as individual assets, that Taylor develops his theory of public, social, and non-decomposable goods.

If we trace this notion of constitutive goods through Taylor's corpus we will find that though having different names, each one of them refers to the very same reality: "convergent," "constitutive," "irreducible," and "social" goods. Goods that are not only collectively secured but also those we cannot get in any other way-- goods that are socially provided and that no individual could afford by herself. A conversation, for instance, is not the coordination of actions of different individuals but a common action in a strong, irreducible sense. Constitutive goods exist because they have been articulated in some way. Human rights, for instance, exist because of the following factors: 1) they have been promulgated; 2) thinkers have theorized about them; 3) struggles have been engaged in their favor; 4) people have created different means to assure their implementation and so on. Language and articulation are necessary conditions for the possibility of the existence of goods.

---

<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, "Atomism" in *Philosophy Papers 2*.

Constitutive goods are, for Taylor, moral sources because they invite individuals to configure their lives according to their content. These are goods that make some reference to a determinate order of things that articulates the search for a good life. Constitutive goods “are things that we love” and not only theories.

Even though they might be associated with a metaphysical outlook, they belong to modern humanistic ethics as well. In ancient and medieval times, constitutive goods were an important component of theistic and metaphysical ethics. That does not mean they are an insignificant element of modern ethics. In fact, in humanistic ethics the locus for this kind of goods moved onto human beings themselves.

The notion of constitutive goods goes beyond the approach of moral as a theory of obligatory action. According to Taylor, deontological morality is itself grounded on certain life goods such as freedom, universal justice, equality of some sort, and respect of diversity. The same kind of good is to be found underlying Kant’s defense of the dignity of human life and even underlying the categorical imperative. Its second version provides a good sample: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end.”<sup>54</sup>

Dignity, the value of rationality, freedom, and respect for human life reinforce the ethical awareness of modernity. They define why human beings deserve our respect when they are the objects of our actions. In this sense, modern deontological morality seems to be ultimately at the service of some irreducible social goods. Taylor goes even further when he claims that we define the content of those goods by clarifying what is worth

---

<sup>54</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publish Co, 1993), 30

fostering of the human potential. Therefore, behind the narrow morality of obligatory action or the freestanding conception of justice there are some ontological features of human life that are being embraced.

*Moralität* misses, then, some of the basic articulations that help human beings to define what they want to be and discern how to move toward it. “The fullness of ethical life involves not just doing, but also being; and not just these two but also loving what is constitutively good.”<sup>55</sup> In this sense, constitutive goods would be part of a background not always recognized in modernity.

Some of the procedures we use and the norms that rule our lives may only be understood in the context of acquired habits and paradigms that partially define who we are. Ethical life becomes a place of articulation for our identity, of what we love, and of what we want to be. *Sittlichkeit* thus constitutes an ethical narrative.

The identification of citizens with democracy as a common enterprise is essentially the recognition of a common good. Since we exercise freedom in common actions, it seems that we value it as a common good. A liberal democracy may only be successful if capable of relying on a sense of loyalty and identification with pluralism and participation. A democracy that sees in the participatory self-rule an essential component of it recognizes that rule as a basic notion of good life.

How do freedom, benevolence, equality, justice, and mutual respect become moral imperatives throughout modernity? The question for the moral sources of modernity remains. What are the constitutive goods that underlie those values? Is it the attempt of modern morality to reconstruct ethics without any reference to the Good

---

<sup>55</sup> Charles Taylor “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, 15

something possible? Because we articulate the goods through narrative and language we can understand them as moral sources. Taylor argues that the articulation of the goods that define who we are is critical in order to offer moral and political reasons:

“The belief in God, say, offers a reason [...] as an articulation of what is crucial to the shape of the moral world in one’s best account. It offers a reason rather as I do when I lay out my most basic concerns in order to make sense of my life to you. And we can see right off from this why the perception of a hypergood, while offering a reason, at the same time helps define my identity”<sup>56</sup>.

Taylor speaks about the role that “qualitative discriminations” play in ethical life. They offer some sense regarding what is worth fostering of human agency. Our moral discernments go beyond disengaged and instrumental reason because they are always placed within certain frameworks that give some context to them. These are the horizons of meaning within which we develop our life and that provide significant orientation for the definitions of our identities. In the West an important portion of frameworks belong to the set of values that have their origin in the Gospel’s concern for life.

Utilitarianism and deontology do not leave too much room for qualitative distinctions. Why a person is worthy of respect seems not to be a question able to be addressed procedurally. Whereas for Kant a moral agent loses her moral autonomy when she incorporates qualitative distinctions, Taylor sees more goods involved in a moral decision.

Obviously, a moral theory of goods has to face several challenges. In fact, the problem with the goods is that they tend to be particular and tend to be articulated in a

---

<sup>56</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. 76

particular way by particular communities or cultures. Goods are always embedded in the concrete way of life of a concrete community. That is why morality tends to develop a universal ethic capable of offering principles that determine what kind of actions belong to the universal definition of the human subject. The stress on a procedural view of ethics is clearly bound up with its allegiance to the modern notion of individual freedom. We all show some allegiance to some goods over others. How to promote reconciliation and articulation of different kind of goods in a same community?

Modernity for Taylor is still committed to the protection of some “hypergoods” that are an essential part of the definition of the identity of the modern subject. Modernity is more a narrative than the result of instrumental reason; a narrative that linked the self with the protection of the goods that define the modern identity. These hypergoods are ultimately the three main moral sources of modernity for Taylor: the theistic ground; naturalism of disengaged reason, and romantic expressivism.<sup>57</sup>

The conception of irreducibly social goods is bound up not only with some important aspects of modern politics, but also provides a significant ground for the role that religions might play in the polity. Considering some goods as irreducible and held in common might help modern societies to recover some significant symbolic, ritual, sacramental attributes of our lives that have been treated as private aspects. These are collective goods that shape the way we understand and value human agency. The modern and utilitarian idea that all goods are for the individual prevents us from understanding significant features of modern ethical life.

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 495.



## 5. Modern Goods, Christian Goods

I will argue in this section that modern values such as liberty, equality, and mutual respect are not at all foreign to Christian faith. On the contrary, I will claim, following Taylor, that those principles are, ultimately, founded on the Gospel ethics. Some of the most important modern achievements seem to be a secularization of Christian moral standards.

An important concept in the philosophy of Taylor resides in what he calls the “affirmation of ordinary life.”<sup>58</sup> It is central to his reading of what constitutes the modern identity and can be defined as a *transvaluation* of values, as a subversion of the aristocratic ethic of honor so central to pre-modern times.

Ordinary life designates “those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labor, the making of the things needed for life, and our life of sexual beings, including marriage and the family.”<sup>59</sup> It is opposed to the pre-modern ethics that exalted contemplation and participation instead of manual labor as higher human activities. It is also opposed to the ethic of honor and glory based on the values of war. The good life is no longer to be found in higher activities –contemplation, religious asceticism or the citizen rule– but it is to be found at the very heart of daily life. Human beings are seen as producers who find his dignity not in honor but in labor. This trend was born against higher goods that served as a cover to justify the privileged status of a

---

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* part III; *A Secular Age*, 144, 370-373, 695-697; *A Catholic Modernity?* ed. James L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22; *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 45, 104.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 211

higher, aristocratic, and noble ruler, religious, or military class. The bourgeois ethic of ordinary life opposed itself to the ethic of honor and fame.

The transition from an ethics that held a strong sense of hierarchy to another ethics that praise labor, production, and family life, displaces the locus of the good life from higher activities placing it within life itself. Everyone can now participate at the center of the good life. The ethic of glory is confronted with an alternative view: the bourgeois ethics so central to the development of modern liberal society, the value of equality and the defense of universal rights.

Hence the radical unconditionality of human rights became one of the main driving forces of modern liberal culture. Taylor sees a theological origin in the affirmation of ordinary life and its defense of equality, liberty and the respect of human rights. It was necessary to break with Christendom in order to achieve the idea of equality and the ethics of human rights. Within Christendom we could never have attained this radical unconditionality of the value of human life. Although the impossibility of that unconditionality does not lie on Christian faith but in the project of Christendom: the attempt to marry faith with a form of culture and a mode of society. Today, we know there never can be a total fusion of faith and society because human society in history inevitably involves coercion and coercion, as Weber argued, is to be monopolized by the State and, of course, is not part of the role of religions. Since no other single doctrine has taken the place of Christendom, the public realm has remained the locus of rival fundamental worldviews.

The affirmation of ordinary life has a Judeo-Christian origin and was brought back to the center of the culture first by the work of the Reformation. The Reformation

did not distinguish between more or less committed Christians. Lutheran principles of *sola fides*, *sola scriptura*, and *sola gratia* might be seen as a powerful engine of democratization of faith. They placed the salvation of a hopeless humankind on the pure action of a merciful gracious God.<sup>60</sup> The sacraments, the hierarchy of the Church, the role of the priest and his celibacy, and monastic life are seen by Luther as mediations between God and the people that ought to be rejected. Laypeople should no longer depend on the prayers of the consecrated. The new theological insight of *sola fides* not only reflected a theological principle but also a new sense of the relevancy of the personal commitment. By rejecting any form of consecrated life (higher vocations as Taylor calls them in *A Secular Age*) as a privileged place of the sacred, Protestantism somehow denied the distinction between the sacred and the profane. What is important in light of the extension of the gospel values is that the fullness of the Christian experience is now to be found within the activities of ordinary life: marriage, family and work. Modernity was born as an anti-hierarchical movement that ended up widening the notion of agape. This notion of the affirmation of ordinary life is, ultimately, grounded on the Bible: God herself supports life.

Paradoxically, some of the most impressive extensions of gospel ethics, such as universal solidarity and the affirmation of the value of ordinary life, depended on a breakaway from Christendom. That breakaway allowed a significant portion of our religious background to become part of the content of our modern horizons of meaning.

---

<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately the limited scope of this work does not allow me to go deeper in this thesis. Taylor develops this thesis both in the third part of *Sources of the Self* and across *A Secular Age*, particularly in chapter 3. He attributes to the movements of reform the affirmation of the value of ordinary life and also part of the “disenchantment” of western societies. A promising research project would be to trace the place and the role of the sacred, the symbolic, the aesthetic and the ritual in modern liberal societies. The conditions of belief seem not to be faded but changed. It remains as a challenge for religions, but especially for Roman Catholicism, to be capable of discovering the locus of the sacred and spiritual quests in late modernity.

The “Good Samaritan Parable” constitutes a fine example of how a religious good has become part of our common sense of solidarity in the West. We might even find in the Rawlsian “difference principle” some echo of that story. That is why modernity is not entirely alien to Christianity, because it shows a Christian inheritance in its convictions regarding universal rights. The modern approach to human potential seems to be ultimately grounded on a Judeo-Christian foundation. The modern commitment to improve living and working conditions, overcoming poverty, and increasing progress and human welfare might be seen as a rationalization of Christian agape. The philosophy of the Enlightenment defines itself over and against a traditional and religious past; it wished to reject some aspects of history that it found harmful for humanity. But to what extent does modern thought still live from the moral and spiritual insights that has supposedly rejected?

Many of the moral sources of the West have been expressed through stories that have had powerful consequences. The story of the Exodus has inspired many other stories of liberation in history, such as the civil rights movement in the U.S. This example shows how the articulation of goods has been always historical.

This whole relationship between secular reason and Christianity throughout modernity is carefully reviewed by Taylor. I agree when he understands the movement to secular modern reason as a paradigm shift. Modernity is somehow grounded on a moral shift from a theological view of life to secular reason that has tried to prove some superiority of the latter tradition of moral thought over the former. It is reason overcoming faith and science overcoming the symbolic and the sacred. Taylor calls this

process with the name of “suppression arguments.”<sup>61</sup> As Kant pointed out, becoming enlightened is like growing up: “sapere aude.” Enlightenment is seen as a new moral standing that brings light to beliefs, traditions and different frameworks of representation that have darkened the mind of the autonomous agent. A shift from substantive to instrumental reason makes modernity hostile to mystery and religion and the notion of good life disappears under a disengaged objectification. Modernity leaves behind the “porous self” and adopts instead the “buffered self”<sup>62</sup>.

However, part of the misunderstandings between the Catholic Church and secular liberalism are not only the result of a new hostile paradigm but also the result of some inner Catholic practices and views. Michael Buckley<sup>63</sup>, aiming to track the emergence of atheism in modernity, argues that Catholicism in order to defend God’s existence abandoned the notion of the personal God for a natural-theistic idea of God. In some sense scientific theology has historically neglected a more categorical and experiential approach to God. To leave aside the revelatory dimension of the God of Jesus Christ in order to defend his existence would end in an internal contradiction that leads to unbelief. That is what happened, Buckley continues, when Descartes assigned to the rational method of his philosophy the task of demonstrating God’s existence. An internal contradiction arises when we see religion as something that ought to be demonstrated. It helps to create what Taylor calls “impersonal order” where the personal relationship with the God of the Bible fades.

---

<sup>61</sup> Charles Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason” in *Philosophical Arguments* and “A Philosopher’s Postscript: Engaging the Citadel of Secular Reason” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Reinhard Hüter (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27, 37-42, 134-142.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God: the Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)

Society becomes an order of mutual benefit where human agency is governed by reason. Religion develops into a morality and Christianity turns out to be a form of humanism. Here God is neither the personal God of an intersubjective relation, nor the God of Abraham, but rather a sort of administrator of an impersonal natural order. In the moral world of mutual benefit ruled by an impersonal God known by the means of reason, exclusive humanism flourishes and benevolence ends up being the entire human vocation. Taylor calls this historical process the “eclipse of grace”: by reason, autonomy, and discipline human beings are able to govern their lives and the world. It is in this context that modern defenders of God’s existence espoused an apologetic stand that transformed faith into a Deist perspective and God into an impersonal ruler of the universe, thereby abandoning the religious experience of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Power, reason and invulnerability, a sense of achievement, education, discipline, and civility are the features that characterize the new modern identity.

Taylor will argue in *A Secular Age* that it is precisely this perception of accomplishment that brings, at the same time, flatness, emptiness and a lack of felt meaning to a growing category of people who, unable to accept orthodox Christianity, seek for some alternative spiritual sources. This is one of the dissatisfactions that Taylor treats under the name of “the malaises of modernity”.<sup>64</sup>

These misunderstandings between the Catholic Church and modernity are also related to the way we understand the word *katholou* (Catholic).<sup>65</sup> The Scriptures promise a kind of reconciliation based on “oneness”, in the sense that human beings cannot attain wholeness individually, because complementarity –and not uniformity or radical

---

<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, chapter 8

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*

identity– is essential. Every time the Catholic Church fosters uniformity instead of complementarity loses faithfulness to Catholicism, because it privileges unity but at the price of suppressing some of the diversity created by God. An approach to the universal claims of Christianity as “unity-across-difference” instead of “unity-through-sameness”<sup>66</sup> might prove to be helpful for the relationship between religious reasons and political arguments in the public conversation.

This approach becomes significant when we hold that some of the most important modern goods are, ultimately gospel goods. We find through modernity some authentic developments of the gospel, such as universal rights and the value of equality. Yet we also find a negation of God that ends up marginalizing the gospels. We witness an interesting dilemma here: even though we cannot dismiss the Christian roots of the West, secular reason, liberalism, and exclusive humanism in some sense make Christian faith a foreigner in its own culture. Across his corpus Taylor defends the thesis that the affirmation of universal rights are part of the biblical story that has fostered the respect for life. To say that universal rights are radically unconditional –namely, that they do not depend on gender, culture, religion, and so on– corresponds with the Christian notion of *Imago Dei*: human beings have been created in the image and likeness of God and everyone has the same value before God. Yet this became possible only after the medieval hierarchical society collapsed. How can we distinguish the universal claims of Christianity from the attempt to marry the faith with a particular culture, a mode of society, and a form of government?

Rather than an epistemological or even metaphysical turn, Taylor sees modernity and its relation to the sacred and the supernatural as a move towards a different “horizon

---

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

of assumptions” or “climate of thought”; a new moral force rather than a doctrine. A certain climate makes western cultures inhospitable to religion and to the transcendent. Obstacles to belief come along with new social imaginaries, that is to say, new ways of understanding ourselves in a given period of time. The incompatibility seems to be at the moral and spiritual level. That is why a richer and fuller approach to ethical life that sees morality not as an instrument or procedure, but as a way of being, is so critical when we think about the role of communities of faith in democratic societies.

The immanent and the transcendent are two different and often competing views of human life. For believers the human person bears an irreducible inclination to something beyond biological life. The disengaged and instrumental mode of life –that has been at the core of many of the most influential moral theories– ends up being quite inhospitable to belief and to the contribution of communities of faith. The instrumental, atomistic society –as the sum of bearers of individual rights– leaves its citizens without a sense of common purpose and meaning in life. It is the idea of disenchantment that Taylor borrows from Weber and that is so central to *Sources of the Self* and to *A Secular Age*. How can we reconcile respect for liberty without fostering an atomistic focus on individual goals –all the while keeping alive the sense of a community found on common ends? Here it lays the crux of the dilemma for the role of religion –as well as any more symbolic, aesthetic, and ethical views of life– in modern democratic societies. The search is for ways to recover a language of commitment to a greater whole and to a greater meaning, something beyond individual fulfillment. Social fragmentation leaves the public domain empty of a meaning capable of creating allegiance and a common commitment among individuals. Here religion might play a significant role.



## 6. Religious Arguments and Civil Society

Introducing an adequate distinction between the government (and the State) and the meaning of the public sphere is crucial to the discussion of the relationship between the Catholic Church and liberal democracy. I will argue in this final section that the place where religious arguments should be developed is the civil society. This assertion synthesizes something that I have been arguing throughout the thesis. That (1) secularization with regard to the strict separation between Church and State has turned out to be something positive for both institutions; and (2) that the relationship between religion and politics is something not only hard to divide and distinguish, but also something that represents a healthy and helpful relationship for society and human life. The civil society, as the public sphere, constitutes a crucial locus for the development of the moral and spiritual identity of both the individual agent and the community.

A fundamental distinction between State and society is made by Charles Taylor in an article named “Invoking Civil Society”<sup>67</sup>. Even though he does not enter this discussion specifically in light of the role of religion in modern democracies, some of his insights will be recollected here. Taylor explores the meaning of civil society as a multifaceted and complex reality, and as a web of associations that, being independent from the State, are influential in the elaboration of public policies.

Almost fifty years prior to this article John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain explored the distinction between State and society in order to show that religious claims can be compatible with the principles of a liberal democracy not at the

---

<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor. “Invoking Civil Society” in *Philosophical Arguments*.

level of the government but at the level of the civil society<sup>68</sup>. They understood civil society as a rich number of different communities that play a public role even though they are not the State: trade unions, faith communities, universities, newspapers and magazines, books and journals, professional associations, and electronic media.

Societies may be divided in four different spheres of meanings. These are (1) political society: the State and the government, the elaboration and execution of the law, public policies, and the monopoly of violence; (2) civil society: associations in general, the place where people develop networks and social capital, power to persuade and the place for shared values and common goals; (3) economic society: business, money, and entrepreneurship; (4) the private life of the family.

Civil society is the locus where we place agency as our ability to invoke reasons and arguments to support the moral views that define our identity. The civil society is not the State or the government, but is still a political and public domain. It is political in the sense that society is the place where individuals and collectives encounter each other, demanding recognition of their identities and championing particular values and worldviews. It is the place where different horizons of meaning permeate each other. It is the home of what Ronald Thiemann calls the “pilgrim self”<sup>69</sup> –a person in progress, forged by the encounter of different communities and traditions and yet able to keep her liberty.

In civil society, the people’s convictions overlap within the multiplicity of solidarities in which they participate. This is the place in which the identity of the subject becomes multiple: shaped by her belonging to different cultural worlds: State, nation,

---

<sup>68</sup> David Hollenbach, *The Global Face of Public Faith* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press), 153

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life*, 113

family, class, religion, gender, culture, society, and the like. Here is where communities of faith play their particular role invoking their convictions and reasons in the midst of what looks like an irreducible heterogeneity.

The notion of civil society demonstrates that the compartmentalization of the ethical and the political –a strict division between the private and the public– is hard to sustain: all forms of politics require a self that is the result of the encounter of different identities at the public level. This distinction also brings to the fore another division that I have been trying to problematize throughout this work: it is one thing to separate the Church from the State, but another quite different thing is to divide religion and politics.

The domain of the public –understood more broadly than government– designates what is of common concern, what matters to the entire society. The sense of nation emerges not only from the government but also from newspapers, universities, books, and even from bars. Part of what civil society is comes from public opinion, which, according to Taylor, is not only the sum of individual opinions but the product of longstanding elaboration. What makes it public in its strongest sense is that it has been recognized by everyone as something held in common, but elaborated outside the State. Society is not identical with its political organization. This feature of liberalism might be helpful for the role of religions in public life. The civil society is, ultimately, the locus for radical political and religious hopes.

The public sphere is a crucial characteristic of modern society. It is the domain where people not only freely form their opinions and convictions, both individually and collectively, but also where those opinions seek to influence somehow the future of the society. The public realm forms a common space that leads to the creation of public

opinion. Discussion takes place in the public arena, through different kinds of media, and tends toward a common resolution or at least toward a mutual understanding between the participants. This shared discussion involves the whole society. “A general understanding of what things count as is constitutive of the reality we call the public sphere.”<sup>70</sup> The public sphere is an open place for a discussion that potentially involves everyone so the society can come to a common mind about significant matters. To reach a common understanding does not mean to reach moral or political consensus, but it means to engage in a critical debate about affairs that involve some common aspects of common life. Participating in civil society helps people to see themselves as belonging to a community that shares some collective purposes. An adequate understanding of the purpose of the civil society might bring new forms of political imagination open to bridge the gap between contemporary liberal democracy and collective, religious, and communal categories that can be employed in the public discourse. At the level of the public sphere people should have the right to use the categories that best define their identity and express their sense of belonging.

Obviously, the outcome of the public discussion does not have any legal or compulsory value, but the government rules sovereign and reasoning people. So before a law comes out from the parliament it somehow retrieves what has already been emerging out of the debate among citizens. The public discussion in the public sphere is not an exercise of power but it ends up influencing those in power. In some sense, civil society might be seen as a remedy for the political fragmentation that emerges from a society understood as an aggregation of individuals who deny any political and communal vocation. Democratic deliberation is something like the public sphere, or the public

---

<sup>70</sup> Charles Taylor. “Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere” in *Philosophical Arguments*, 262

sphere is at least involved in the democratic process of decision-making. Participating in the public square bound citizens together in light of common projects and allegiances. Once people are able to identify themselves with a set of goods and ends, political fragmentation is reversed.

It is crucial for the Church to be aware that society can also function as a whole outside the political (State/government) realm, that society is not constituted by the government, but limits it. Understanding this extra-political meaning (in the sense of not being part of political power) of society is central for the contribution of the church to the polity, because this is the locus where communities of faith can exercise their religious and moral vocation publicly and where Christianity may display its theological-political ethos.

It becomes a challenge for religions that hold a public/political nature to be sure that the State leaves enough room for the development of the civil society. A flourishing civil society is central to democracy because it allows different communities to be part of the common deliberation. The Catholic Church must defend, protect, and foster an open and healthy debate on issues that are central to her concerns. The place to do that is the civil society. The more space for civil society the more options for a persuasive role of faith in defending certain values. The attempt to merge faith (or any other kind of ultimate vision) with a form of government has taken religions to an extreme marginalization. That is the case of the Catholic Church behind the iron curtain and that is what happens if we do not unveil secular liberalism as a kind of ideology. The more independent the Church is from political authority, the freer she is to express her own

commitments. The existence of the public sphere shows that these debates, the differences, and the conflicts are perfectly legitimate in a plural world.

Even though the Church runs the risk of becoming irrelevant in some liberal societies where pluralism and mutual respect are seen to push any ontological and moral claim to the private sphere, liberal societies can be also the best place for public religions.

### **III. Hope: the political dimension of Christian Faith**

Throughout the second chapter I have attempted to prove that religion, and in particular Christianity, plays a legitimate public/political role in society: specifically, it both strengthens political identity and shapes some notion of shared goods and goals within a liberal democracy. We have seen how a richer understanding of ethics can bring back to the polity a fuller understanding of human agency. We have also seen how some of the most significant aspects and values of western modern societies have ultimately been formed by its Christian background. I aimed to show that Christianity could be compatible with liberty and tolerance, because freedom and mutual respect are values ultimately grounded on the Gospel.

A religious solution to the problem of religious diversity in a democratic society requires a very high form of religious commitment. The Catholic Church can seek to proclaim her loftiest insights while yet preserving a humble recognition of the fact that all concrete expressions of religious faith have been subject to some historical contingency.

The idea that some day human life will improve and justice will arrive has constituted a driving force throughout history. This yearning has been particularly strong in modernity. Two ideologies sum up this modern utopic trend. First, great confidence was placed in the notion of a progress grounded in the power of human reason and in the liberty of the bourgeoisie. This first utopia expected that the scientific revolution would bring growth and improvement to the world by replacing the old religious and metaphysical cosmogony. The power of reason would then bring humanity to a higher stage in the scale of development. A second approach also attempted to improve the

human condition, but understood progress as the liberation of the industrial proletariat through a revolution powered by the class struggle. Modern ideals have pushed humanity to yearn for a better future and to put all the trust in purely human potential. We know today that, even though human life has improved in several aspects, neither the notion of an unbounded scientific progress nor the attempt to emancipate the proletariat brought total happiness to the world. On the contrary, both ideologies have brought some progress but also a fair amount of disgrace.

There is a sort of inescapable vocation of religion, and particularly Christianity, to announce that history is directed to its consummation; that the whole of creation will be reconciled at the end time; that the search of justice will be fulfilled ultimately by God; that the human being has an indelible, transcendent vocation; that our efforts toward justice and the common good will be the very goods that God will use to re-create the world at the end of days.

For these reasons, Christians probably offer their best contribution to modern life in announcing hope. Moreover, an eschatological understanding of human agency may also offset some of the potential tensions implicit in ultimate/comprehensive visions of life.

In this final chapter I will advocate the need of an eschatological framing of human agency. I do so precisely to avoid the conflictive dimension of religious convictions. I will claim that the irreducibly political character of Christian faith finds its best expression in the theological virtue of hope. I will also claim that, as history has shown, immanent progress will never be capable of redeeming human beings. I aim to show not only that the search for hope is an anthropological constant, but also that the



Church must play an “interruptive<sup>71</sup>” role: eschatological hope affects our capacity for political and ethical determination in social and personal conditions of suffering and injustice. As Johann Baptist Metz points out, the political role of Christianity lies in the eschatological meaning of hope: it is the question of salvation for those who suffer, for the victims of history. We will see that the political character of hope is to be found not in a particular historical notion that fills hope with some concrete content, but in an apocalyptic eschatology.

As a transition from the last chapter, we will devote the first section to exploring those aspects of Taylor’s thought where he expresses the need to recover an eschatological perspective on human life. Taylor sees the projection of life beyond history as an anthropological constant that has been suffocated by some aspects of the modern vision of life. A brief presentation of this “malaise” of modernity will stress the need for the missionary task of the Church in announcing eschatological hope. In the second section I will introduce a distinction between human progress and divine redemption and briefly describe Christian hope as the opportunity to publicly speak about God. The third section is central to this final chapter. There we will look at the political/public consequences of an apocalyptic hope. Drawing especially in the theology of Metz and Moltmann I will emphasize that eschatological hope requires us to bring back the idea of an immanent expectation: here hope unveils its political nature. Because time is bounded, we can still remain hopeful and the Church can negotiate the tension between the divine promises and the iniquities of the world.

---

<sup>71</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 156. The concept of “interruption” implies a certain Christian praxis nourished by both the praxis of the historical Jesus and the hope in the second coming of Christ: it will interrupt the suffering of the victims of history. Hope in the future should foster a praxis of solidarity able to interrupt pain and injustice.

## 1. Beyond human flourishing

Charles Taylor concludes *Sources of the Self* by putting his own cards on the table. A secular perspective of life removes “any religious dimension or radical hope in history”<sup>72</sup> and ends up “stifling the response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived”<sup>73</sup>. The whole project of *Sources of the Self* has been, in Taylor’s words, a work of liberation. He has tried to show those blind spots on modern history that tend, in our culture, to “stifle the spirit”. That is why Taylor’s work is an effort to retrieve all those human goods that have been buried under modern instrumental rationality. Taylor takes the risk of defending the significance of these goods, even though they have been accused of bringing mutilation and destruction to history. He places his hope in history, and, fundamentally, in the story of the God of Abraham who has left his “promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided”.<sup>74</sup>

Toward the last four chapters of *A Secular Age* the same philosophy/theology of hope comes to the fore again. Here Taylor aims to show how uncomfortable human beings feel under the instrumental/immanent paradigm. This uneasiness is part of the malaises of modernity that create an explosion of new forms of belief that makes the late modern spiritual and moral landscape quite fragmented and fragile. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic-expressivist turn becomes a mass phenomenon during the 1960’s in the sexual revolution. Against the hegemony of calculating reason and against the higher demands

---

<sup>72</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 521.

of Christian ascetism we find the aspiration to rescue the body and rehabilitate human desire. “Excarnation”<sup>75</sup> becomes an important concept in these chapters, in which Taylor offers his own view of the current spiritual culture. He claims that even though a movement towards different forms of “excarnation” has been part of the paths that Christianity has chosen throughout history, Christian faith essentially involves the hope of an ultimate reconciliation of humans and God in the resurrected body. There is here an interesting connection between a contemporary spiritual retrieving of the body and the centrality of incarnation in Christian theology. The aspiration to wholeness entails the restoration of a healthy relation to the body. Ordinary life and sexuality must be incorporated in the human quest for plenitude.

Recovering the importance of eschatological hope does not imply forgetting and marginalizing the value of ordinary life. As I argued in the second chapter, modernity and Christianity agree in the appreciation of ordinary life: work, love, family, experiences, and relationships. Taylor does not hesitate in drawing on Christian theology to defend the compatibility between the value of ordinary life and eschatological hope.

Throughout the last two chapters of *A Secular Age*, “Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity” and “Conversions” Taylor aims to prove how the quest for hope is as alive as ever. The different (late) modern conceptions of time, the importance of art, the place of death, and the search for meaning become ways to go beyond the “immanent frame”.<sup>76</sup> far from being comfortably settled in unbelief, the secular age seems schizophrenic.

Taylor examines “conversions” in order to show that “understanding our time in Christian terms is partly to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have

---

<sup>75</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 741

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 15

discovered a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, to God”<sup>77</sup>. Here Taylor looks at some of those who broke the “immanent frame”, both believers and unbelievers who went through some kind of conversion, who went through a kind of epiphanic experience. Again the lived experience, the social imaginaries, turns out to be critical in this kind of narrative. The book gets into the itineraries of faith of a long list of poets and writers. What is common in the experience of all of them is that they all believe in the value of democracy, liberty, equality, and human rights. None of them is alienated from the modern age; rather they exercise their critique from within modernity. These are figures that have placed the sacred and the spiritual in organic relation to their individual and social lives.

The search for authenticity might be the ground for a revival of hope as human flourishing beyond history. A dialectical approach to authenticity shows the positive side of individual quests as the waiting rooms for the rediscovery and revitalization of Christian faith. A Catholic Church aware of these movements can play a significant role emphasizing the radical significance that communal belonging has for human life. Human aspiration for religion persists amid all these forms of secularization and in the desire for a personal relationship to God at the spiritual level.

Some of the more spiritual and theological conclusions reached by Taylor about the rehabilitation of the body, a personal God, the difficulties of the contemporary subject with authority and belonging, etc. are not novel for someone already involved in contemporary theology. In some sense, the biblical, patristic, liturgical, and cultural *aggiornamento* of the Church during Vatican II demonstrate that these concerns have been present in the Church for decades. At any rate, what is important for the purposes of

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 755

this thesis is that the contemporary expressivist spirituality, which shows a novel thirst for meaning and fullness, offers a new fertile terrain for the proclamation of the gospel. It shows that the need for hope remains necessary even today.

## 2. Hope and Redemption

In this section I will briefly introduce the necessity of being aware of the difference between the historical possibilities of human progress and the eschatological promise delivered by God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though I will defend further the continuity between historical liberation and eschatological fulfillment, I will argue here that only an eschatological concept of hope can satisfy the human longing for justice and transcendence. Moreover, hope constitutes an opportunity to publicly speak of God.

A clear distinction between human progress and divine redemption is crucial in the encyclical letter on Christian Hope: *Spe Salvi*.<sup>78</sup> Benedict identifies political hope with (1) the modern attempt to bring happiness and welfare to society, driven by the power of reason and the freedom of the autonomous individual; (2) with the bourgeois revolution; (3) and with the Marxist revolution that wished to bring about a definitive change in history. The outcome of human progress has turned out to be quite ambiguous: it has produced, simultaneously, the cure of mortal diseases and the atomic bomb. In responding to the question about what kind of progress makes life more human, the Church might play a significant role. The moral and spiritual wellbeing of human beings

---

<sup>78</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi: Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope* (Washington, D.C, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007)

will never be completely guaranteed by material progress. Human beings will never be redeemed by improvements external to them. The letter is clear in arguing that it is neither science nor reason that, ultimately, redeems human beings: they are redeemed by love.<sup>79</sup> Hope is essentially faith in an absolute and unconditional love capable of redeeming human beings.

*Spe Salvi* emphasizes the communitarian aspect of Christian hope. Hope in isolation will never be real hope because there is no salvation in isolation. Hope is always something collective, communal, and social. Redemption is the re-establishment of unity. Benedict XVI stresses the social character of hope as a community-oriented virtue.

Christian hope helps us to discern the answer to the question: when is the world better? What will make the world definitely good? The Church ought to offer her own response to these questions in the public conversation. The Church has to remind society that human progress will never be capable of redeeming human beings. The hope we hold is not only for us but essentially for others. Only when someone hopes for others does she hope for herself too. That is why prayer, advocacy, charity, and solidarity are so important.

Hope might also stand against some features of the so-called return of religion. Because of the communitarian, political, and redemptive character of hope, this virtue rejects a new-age spirituality that leads to a vague, diffuse, and individualistic religiosity, one that seeks the divine not in God but within human beings. The Christian notion of hope, by contrast, is rooted in the concrete story of the God of Abraham and of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God enters human history. Jesus takes up the prophetic message of God and the coming of the kingdom of God as a kingdom of justice, peace, and

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 29

freedom. In Jesus, God goes to the cross and there, through his death, institutes a new beginning and a hope for a new life.

On the cross, God does not eliminate suffering but redeems it. The theology of the cross comes across as a word of hope for the world, in the living God who gives life. Hope does not only entail personal fulfillment and happiness, but also welfare for the whole world in justice and peace.

To talk about the irreducible political nature of Christian faith implies claiming in the public the relevance of speaking about God. By doing this, theology does not derive a concrete political program from God's message, but it seeks to place religion in relation to politics as a form to promote freedom, justice, and solidarity. All of these are values deeply embedded on the gospels.

Christian theology will retain its public relevance if it is capable of keeping its own identity: namely, if it keeps speaking of God in a distinctive and, at the same time, in an engaging manner. The Church can thus open new perspectives of hope for the contemporary humanity.

### 3. The Political Consequences of Eschatological Hope

In the first chapter I introduced some aspects of the theologies of Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann in order to stress the public/political nature of Christian faith. In this final section we will return to both theologians to argue that the public role of theology relies, chiefly, on an apocalyptic concept of hope. We will see in this section that eschatological hope has both a political/public nature and political/historical

consequences. I will place this reflection in dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger's *Eschatology* and a few aspects of Jon Sobrino's theology.

a. An Apocalyptic Notion of Hope

Metz's theology turns from the Incarnation, as the proper framework in which to understand the Christian attitude towards the world<sup>80</sup> to eschatology. In *Faith in History and Society* theology became for Metz very much what is counseled by the First Letter of Peter, namely to give a justification for the hope that it is in us (3:15). Eschatology becomes the starting point for theology because it reinforces the shift to praxis and to the political. The revisionist Marxist Philosopher Ernst Bloch, in his immense *Principle of Hope*,<sup>81</sup> was quite influential in restoring this turn to hope and the future as the vital horizon for Christian faith. For Bloch, history is shaped by the coming into being of what has not yet existed. Human agency is oriented to bring into existence what is so far only future. This power of utopia pushes history forward.

Metz aimed to build up a theology able to remain significant for the world. In this regard, theology was obliged to reflect upon suffering and injustice in order to bring hope for the victims of history. Theology had to be defined and contextualized by its socio-political situation. Hence, the point of departure for a theology committed to human life should be the eschatological message of Jesus Christ.

It is the notion of hope that makes theology political. Hope, understood as the fulfillment of human longings, stands against the modern trend to a radical privatization

---

<sup>80</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) and *Faith in History and Society*.

<sup>81</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1986)



of faith. Metz produces his political theology as a way to renegotiate the Catholic Church's attitude towards modernity. As we will see, Metz stresses an apocalyptic concept of hope, because it resists the modern understanding of time and history. Apocalyptic texts bring interruption into proximity.

A theology like this, which aims for political impact, grounds its insights on the Bible. The stories of the Old Testament are stories of human beings becoming subjects before God, becoming subjects of a new history driven by God's promises. Ever since the story of Abraham, faith has been oriented by eschatological promises. The contrast between these promises and historical reality constitutes a Christian criterion to discern and evaluate social and political life. Christians can inquire to what extent society is leading human beings to the fulfillment of those promises. Here lies, for political theology, the social-critical task of faith, particularly in relation to the life of the poor and the victims of history. When bringing hope to society, the Church contradicts the experience of the present by the hope in the future: namely, the hope in the resurrection of all those who are living under the sign of the cross.

It is in the eschatological horizon of hope that society emerges as a history directed to its consummation. In this sense, it seems to be crucial to be able to articulate a theology related to history and society. The free action of human beings plays a significant role, since it is oriented toward shaping the world. Hope, in its turn, gives a horizon of meaning to human freedom.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Vatican II and, particularly, *Gaudium et Spes* resonates with these ideas. It highlights the collective dimension of Christian eschatology. God has chosen human beings as members of a community, as a nation and not only as individuals. From its very beginning, salvation history had a communitarian character (GS 32). Moreover, *Gaudium et Spes* clearly sees the link between improving life conditions through service to human beings and an eschatological future. In serving the world, human beings devote themselves to the future (GS 38). This relationship between earthly service and eschatological future is driven by the hope that faith brings into the world. *Gaudium et Spes* does not confuse temporal progress

Eschatology introduces a crucial contribution of the discussion for the place and the role of religion and Christianity in public life— especially when the public sphere remains the locus where ultimate visions compete. The emphasis on eschatology as the starting point for theology means that God and not some other historical principle, is the unique subject that governs history. The Christian notion of hope prevents Christianity from becoming potentially conflictual because the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ will occur at the end of times. An eschatological fulfillment of human hope will prevent a class, a people, scientific progress, religious institutions, or even intra-historical utopias from becoming the exhaustive –and therefore both partial and totalitarian– goal of history. Metz calls this prevention the “eschatological proviso.”<sup>83</sup> There is a gap between the eschatological message of Jesus and political reality. Even though the eschatological promises have a political/public nature (liberty, peace, justice, reconciliation, and a new earth) and animate Christians to bring them to society, the content of these promises cannot be identified with a historical goal, a kind of society, or a particular political tendency. In Metz word, the eschatological proviso “makes every historically real status of society appear to be provisional.”<sup>84</sup>

The eschatological expectation is political not in the sense that it assumes a particular political content, but in the sense that it functions as a historical/liberating driving force. Hope, leading history towards its reconciliation, drives human solidarity within the world and towards the future. The biblical promises question human life and

---

with the content of the kingdom of God, but acknowledges that the better ordering of society is itself a significant aspect of the kingdom (GS 39). Even though there is something radically new emerging through the reconciliation of all things in Christ, Vatican II stresses the continuity: “...the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate or concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some foreshadowing of the new age” (GS 39).

<sup>83</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, 113

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

encourage us to make them a reality in the present society, especially for the poor. The biblical promises invite believers to stand critically before the world.

That is why Ratzinger's critique to political theology seems to be relevant.<sup>85</sup> From the perspective of an Augustinian theology, Joseph Ratzinger introduces some objections to political theology. He thinks that the realization of the kingdom of God will never be a political process. If we see Christianity as a strategy to bring hope, then the question is: "Which hope"? God's kingdom does not have a political content: it would become a "false messianic movement" that will lead to totalitarianism. Likewise the world will be transformed by God's grace and not by political actions. For Ratzinger political life belongs to the realm of moral theology and not to eschatology. The kingdom of God is a moral norm of political activity.<sup>86</sup> Theology has to keep away from politics in order to avoid Christian totalitarianism. Ratzinger seems to advocate no less than the liberal church/state separation principle: Christian faith cannot marry a particular political system.

Most likely, both Metz and Moltmann would agree with this statement. Christian faith cannot become a political system. Yet they see a political ethos in theology in the liberating consequences of the hope in the risen Lord. More precisely, the difference between Metz and Ratzinger is to be found in the fact that for Metz a proper approach to eschatology ought to be apocalyptic. Metz does not seem to defend a particular historical

---

<sup>85</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University Press, 1988), 57-60

<sup>86</sup> According to Metz, because theology is political systematic theology itself should deal with modernity, society, and politics. Metz sees in the social teaching of the Church an appendix: in order to leave theology untouched by the world the Church builds the social teaching to deal with political and social problems. The Church shields theology from social affairs. Metz introduces a harsh critique when saying that the Church uses the Social Teaching to relief the social and political pressures exerted by the world to systematic theology.

content for the notion of hope: rather he defends its apocalyptic character. Herein lies its political nature.

Hope is apocalyptic because it implies some imminent expectation.<sup>87</sup> Eschatology has an apocalyptic character when time becomes crucial. When the expectation is imminent then discipleship becomes something urgent. When the expectation is no longer imminent and when theology loses this sense of time, then the Christian God loses social and historical relevance. As Metz points out, it is this apocalyptic expectation that grounds Christian responsibility to the world. That is why the public role of religion is interruptive: it entails the public task of reminding the world that there is an *eschaton*.

The apocalyptic imminent expectation stands against an empty, evolutionistic, understanding of time. In an essay called “Theology versus Polymythicism: a Short Apology for Biblical Monotheism,”<sup>88</sup> Metz addresses the issue of modern time as myth: a myth that imagines time as an empty evolutionistic and limitless infinitude. History becomes anonymous when God is erased from the historical horizon.

Against this approach Metz brings to the forefront the Jewish-Christian monotheistic God. The modern understanding of time is closer to the polytheistic Greek world where time is seen as an evolutionistically limitless, empty, and continuous. This view makes God unthinkable and memories (of Jesus and of the vanquished) lose their strength. This evolutionistic vision of time leads to apathy in public life. On the contrary, the Christian discourse on the God of the Bible breaks this modern myth. Ever since the story of Abraham the biblical landscape turns out to be an eschatological landscape, driven by the fulfillment of the promises. God himself becomes the end of time and the

---

<sup>87</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*. See especially chapter 10

<sup>88</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998)

idea that God is coming constitutes, for Metz, the heart of the biblical perception of reality. To have hope means to keep alive the images of the Kingdom of God. Remaining faithful to these images will allow the images of the promise to remain faithful to us. Christian eschatology reminds us that time is bounded, so we can remain hopeful. Love, solidarity, and the memories of Jesus become apocalyptic categories of interruption.

b. Promise and Mission: Historical and Eschatological Dimension of Hope.

Apocalyptic eschatology looks to the future, although from the perspective of the memory of the suffering. The hope of the suffering lies in the fact that the *eschaton* will interrupt their history of pain and injustice. The Church here plays a critical public role: she has not only to bear but also to communicate the memories of the suffering. The Church has to stress the conflict between the divine promises and the inequities of the world. This role goes far beyond the one assigned by modern morality to religious convictions. Hope stands as indignation before the suffering memories of the past. On the criteria of the kingdom, indifference regarding time is no longer permissible. Theology ought to introduce the issue of suffering again and again, in order to exercise an eschatological notion of hope.

That notion of hope has its point of departure in the contrast between the memories of the suffering and the biblical promises. For Jürgen Moltmann<sup>89</sup> it is the apocalyptic expectation that drives the missionary task of the Church to transform the

---

<sup>89</sup> Moltmann theology coincides with Metz theology in the sense that both share eschatology as the departing point for theology. Theology is eschatology because Christianity is the religion of a promise, the religion of hope.

world<sup>90</sup>. And transforming the world seems to constitute more than a spiritual or private task: it is also a political mission. Moltmann was probably the first modern theologian to put together eschatological redemption and historical liberation as two aspects of a same reality: theology of the promise, theology of the future of Christ, and apostolic mission all bring hope and liberation. To be oriented to the *eschaton*, implies Moltmann, is to work for justice here and now. That is why hope is not only eschatological, but also historical. “It makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here, [but] in the light of the promised future that is to come.”<sup>91</sup> Moltmann aims to bridge the gap between eschatology and politics in the sense that he stresses the continuity between heavenly promises and worldly history. God’s promise has political implications: to satisfy the hunger for the divine right and justice in this world.

This gap is bridged through the relationship between promise and mission, a correlation that comes from the experience of the witnesses of the Resurrected. The Christian consciousness of history is one of mission: to bring hope to society. Hope is also historical because we wait for the presence of what is coming to us. This arriving future, which brings something totally new, but in continuity with the past, works by awakening hopes and establishing resistance to injustice.

Hope is political not in the sense of adopting a historical utopia, but in the sense of bringing to public life the Christian message. Hope helps us to understand creation as an ongoing process: consummation means nothing else than the transformation of this present world. The eschatological horizon of hope allows theology to frame its

---

<sup>90</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993). See especially chapters 1 and 2

<sup>91</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of hope*, 22

relationship to the civil society by shaping the beliefs and practices of all Christians. Here hope helps theology to stand against the trend that leads to the privatization of faith. Hope constitutes a horizon of fulfillment, plenitude, justice, and consummation, not just for the individual, but for the whole of society. It is because of its eschatological structure that theology is in itself political: because Christian hope becomes an opportunity to fulfill the deepest human longings for peace, justice, and reconciliation. Awareness of the history of Jesus being resurrected is, at the same time, awareness of mission. Christianity exercises its public role in pursuing the fulfillment of the divine promises. In hope two human longings meet: on the one hand the humanistic desire for justice and, on the other, the anthropological quest for transcendence.

Jon Sobrino, who draws on Metz's political theology, argues that it is the lordship of Christ that generates hope.<sup>92</sup> The resurrection of Jesus became again a central theme around the time of Vatican II. It brought back to the fore a Paschal approach to the liturgy that overcomes "sacrificialism" and recovers the value of corporality. When arguing that hope has a political/public character, we distance ourselves from the approach to the meaning of the cross as expiatory offering. More than a sacrifice of expiation for the sins of the world, a liberating understanding of the Paschal mysteries leads us to read history eschatologically: Jesus as the incarnation of a future that frees humankind from suffering and injustice. It is the content of the cross what makes the resurrection an event of liberating love.

Jesus' Resurrection opens resurrection to all human beings, and retrieves Isaiah's apocalyptic eschatology of a new heaven and a new earth. It reevaluates future and hope. For Christian faith, Sobrino adds, the resurrection not only refers to the future of history,

---

<sup>92</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns (New York, Orbis Books, 2001), 161

but also has present meaning. It has political consequences in the sense that the resurrection brings hope, above all, to the victims of history. Because God resurrected the crucified one, hope is hope primarily for the abandoned and the outcast. Jesus' resurrection brings hope, above all, for those crucified in history.

Christian hope can only be realistic and liberating if capable of apprehending the negative elements of history, especially the pain and suffering of the poor. Christian faith turns out to be relevant for society when it reveals its commitment to the history of the crucified one. The resurrection of Christ brings hope to the poor because the crucified Christ becomes the brother of the abandoned, the marginalized, and the oppressed. God raised a rejected man and that is why his resurrection comes across as hope for those without rights.<sup>93</sup> The story of the crucified and resurrected one gives to the victims the courage to hope in their own resurrection.<sup>94</sup> Hope keeps faith linked to life, history, society, and the world.

---

<sup>93</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*

<sup>94</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 42



## **Conclusion**

Christian Faith ought to ask time and again how to remain a living religion. Whereas for those who believe there are some aspects of faith that continue intact throughout history, the place and the role of religion in society must be renegotiated, taking into account the nature of Christian faith and the signs of the times. There seems to be a fair amount of confusion regarding the relationship between religion and politics. Catholic Christianity should be aware that the role of religion is today maybe more important than ever. In a world that wishes to control every dimension of human life, from its beginning to its end, the Church can remain as a living institution by helping society to discern what really humanizes and what dehumanizes life. Seeing society as an ethical community, Christians can lead it to reflect publicly upon their moral structures. Contrasting the divine promises with the reality of the poor and the suffering, the Church can raise questions about justice, the use of massive weapons, the access to means necessary for life, the issue of abortion, and so on.

Liberal secularism demands that we separate our identity as citizens from the moral and religious convictions that define who we are when engaging in public discourse about justice, rights, and the good life. To counter this view, I have defended the continuity between our core identity and the political propositions that we espouse. Christian faith can contribute to democratic societies when emphasizing an idea of politics grounded on a concept of human person as essentially interrelated with others. Any project that aims to build solidarity upon some individualistic common denominator (individual happiness, individual freedom) seems to be flawed. Instead, we can work out

a notion of solidarity that begins from within faith communities, moral traditions, and symbolic frameworks, thus exploring the way different traditions have managed to deal with that diversity and pluralism. This seems to be a possible way to construe a richer, deeper, and probably more lasting approach to the common good. Perhaps the best resource for a true inter-traditional dialogue would then come from our own sense of identity, from belonging to a particular community and tradition. Solidarity is not something external, but something deeply spiritual and moral. Nevertheless, these insights would be only helpful if they were patient of respect for freedom, equality, and tolerance.

Against individualistic modern theories that reduce the common good to an aggregated sum of individual choices, the Catholic Church can remind society that an ethical life may exist only as an intersubjective construction: individual choices only meet moral criteria when they become interpersonal. By going public, a Christian faith that has incorporated the Enlightenment critique to religion can contribute to the vigor of public life.

Throughout this thesis I have tried to address the question of how to articulate a Catholic theology for a public life in a plural society. In that regard this work has followed the track of a large community of theologians who, being aware of the limitations of a project that deals with convictions and political liberties, have remained both engaged and humble. A very provisional answer might rely on framing the relationship between religious convictions and democracy in terms that could go beyond secular liberalism and religious traditionalism. We need new forms of theological imagination, on the one hand, and new forms of political imagination on the other.

New forms of theological imagination would be based on evangelical principles, which would inform a theology capable of discerning the signs of the Times, as well as on the search for new philosophical and moral categories that would allow theology to enter into a fruitful and respectful dialogue with diversity. New forms of political imagination would be capable of disclosing the ideological aspects that have infiltrated certain dimensions of secularism: some of its claims of rationality and neutrality seem not to be as well founded as some secularist claim.

I have attempted to prove throughout this thesis that we can find, along Taylor's lines, new moral grounds for the publicity and plausibility of religious contributions. The search for the good life, as part of a fuller understanding of human agency, is not something that must be overcome. Rather, this search needs to be promoted in order to build up a generative pluralism able to incorporate the diversity of *lifeworlds* present in contemporary societies. Like religious fundamentalism, the modern idea of rationality, the scientific attempt to control life, and the notion of time as limitless progress might become a form of violence. They end up removing memory, religious symbolism and ritualism, ethical and aesthetical belonging from the public praxis of human beings.

A lucid reading of modernity would unveil some of the ethical-comprehensive commitments of modernity. It might reveal that freedom, equality, and mutual respect are not values that were born during the Enlightenment but values that have a profound Judeo-Christian background. The public role of Christianity can be compatible with respect of religious freedom of non-Christians because the respect for the human person is a Christian value. In exposing the non-neutrality of secular liberalism, we become

aware that Judeo Christianity has played an important role in shaping some of the features of Western societies.

A richer version of ethical life –as opposed to a limited notion of morality as obligatory action– compatible with freedom, equality, and mutual respect; the recognition of some constitutive social goods that are at the base of the very definition of the modern identity; and the egalitarian commitment to the “affirmation of ordinary life” might prompt us to expand the permissible contributions of religious communities to the construction of a common notion of shared ends and goods. Likewise, the Church, bringing about an apocalyptic hope, can stress the need for historical liberation from suffering and injustice in light of the definitive divine promises that ultimately drive human history and foster solidarity.

I believe there should be no contradiction in being a believer deeply committed to his faith and a democratic citizen aware of the diversity present in modern societies. On the contrary, some of the principles developed here can help us to defend the legitimacy of shared loyalty: a deep allegiance to the ultimate convictions that define who we are and an open receptivity to differences and pluralism.

## Bibliography

- Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi: Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope*. Washington, D.C, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007
- Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986
- Boyle, Nicholas. *Who are we now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heany*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998
- Buckley, Michael. *Denying and Disclosing God: the Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004
- Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994
- Connolly, William. *Why I am not a Secularist?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *A Community of Character*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981
- Hauerwas, Stanley & Coles, Roland. *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*. Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977
- Hollenbach, David. *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002
- \_\_\_\_\_ . *The Global Face of Public Faith*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003
- Honneth, Axel, *The Struggle for Recognition: the moral grammar of social conflict*, trans. Joel Anderson. Cambridge, Mass: Polity Press, 1995
- Insole, Christopher J. *The Politics of Human Frailty: a Theological Defense of Political Liberalism*. London: SCM Press, 2004
- Kant, Immanuel. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1993
- Martin, David. *Does Christianity Cause War?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997
- Metz, Johann Baptist. *Faith in History and Society*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007
- \_\_\_\_\_ . *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley. New York: Paulist Pres., 1998
- \_\_\_\_\_ . *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel. New York: Herder. 1969
- Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993
- \_\_\_\_\_ . *The Crucified God*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993
- Nandy, Ashis. *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Past in Indian Politics and Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002
- O'Malley, John. *What Happened at Vatican II*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2008

- Locke, John. *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1950
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych. New York: Crossroad, 2000
- Ratzinger, Joseph. *Eschatology*, trans. Michael Waldstein. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory". In *Collected Papers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 199
- Sandel, Michael, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Second Vatican Council. Boston, Mass: Saint Paul Editions, 1987
- Sobrino, Jon. *Christ the Liberator. A view from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns. New York: Orbis Books, 2001
- Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Belknap Press, 2007
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Catholic Modernity?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Multiculturalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophical Papers 2*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy". In Antonaccio, Maria and Schweiker, William editors. *Iris Murdoch and the search for human goodness*. Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A philosopher's Postscript: Engaging the Citadel of Secular Reason". In Griffiths, Paul and Reinhard Hüter editors. *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*. New York: T & T Clark, 2005
- Thiemann, Ronald. *Religion in Public Life*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas "The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues", in *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of religious convictions in Political Debate*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008



How is a plural democracy to handle such tensions? Is it possible to reconcile the demands of those who maintain that their first loyalty must be to their faith with the observance of such laws? Equally, it was clear to its members that "moral conviction or instinctive feeling is not a valid basis for overriding the individual's privacy and for bringing within the ambit of the criminal law private sexual behaviour of this kind" (p. 22). Discrimination in employment on grounds of sexual orientation is permitted "for the purpose of an organised religion [...] if it is necessary to comply with the doctrine of the organisation; or so as to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers".