

Conference on “Religious freedom in a pluralistic age: trends, challenges and practices”

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Religious Freedom in Portugal, from the First Globalization in the XV century until the XXI century: failures and successes

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1. Thank you very much for inviting me. It is a great honor to be a speaker together with so distinguished scholars and in such a relevant Conference.
2. To begin with, I wish to state that I could personally be Exhibit 1 of this communication: My father's family, the Júdece, came to Portugal from Genoa in the 18th Century and they were Jews. My mother's family, the Alarcão, came from Spain in the 16th Century and the family's name had been given by the Castilla king, in the medieval ages, to a so called Cevallos that conquered the castle of Alarcón from the Muslims. Through a branch of my family I have Mahomet as one of my ancestors; and through another branch the Bishop Jerónimo Osório, one of the

leading humanist and theologian of the Renaissance, brother of another of my ancestors.

3. If I wished to find through my roots how to look for inspiration in matters of freedom of religion it would be therefore very difficult not to be lost in contradictions: shall I react as a Jew, persecuted for the evils of Christ death as if guilty was a collective and eternal liability for the Jewish people? Or should I react as a fanatical Muslim or a medieval Knight, and to decide to fight for my religion, if necessary killing all that disagreed with my faith? Or should I look for humanism and tolerance, even without accepting other religions as having the same right to existence than mine? Or should I admit that God knows better than any of us who are those deserving marching in to be in that number, as Louis Amstrong sang so many times?
4. Exhibit 2 of this text is my country. Ideologically Portugal went to the sea in the 15th Century to spread Christianity, if necessary destroying the faithful Muslims. In the 16th Century King D. Manuel decided – under influence of his Spanish queen wife – to impose to the Jews the conversion to Christianity or to leave Portugal once and for all. The Inquisition murdered and tortured people in the 16th and 17th Century. In the 18th Century, the Prime Minister Marquis de Pombal did the same against Jesuits and expelled them from Portugal. We had slaves and traded them to Brazil, Caribbean and North America. In the 19th Century the Religious Orders lost patrimony and

monasteries and convents were forced to close, Priests and Bishops began to be controlled by the Government and social (educational and health) activities by nuns were suppressed. The anti-monarchist party that put an end to the monarchy in 1910 sent in jail priests and nuns and expelled monks and nuns from Portugal. Afterwards the Dictator Salazar managed to sign a Treaty with the Vatican (the *Concordata*) changed directions and rendered to the Catholic Church privileges that were not allowed to other religions.

5. But this is only part of our story, actually just one face of the coin. We arrived in Japan, the first European people to reach this country, in 1543, and Jesuit priests accepted without any problems to be just another religion with the pre-existent Buddhism and Xintuism. Even before that date, in Goa, Christianity survived side by side with Hinduism and Muslims. Jews expelled from Portugal found refuge also in Goa and Brazil. The Jesuit Priests protected natives in South America against the greed of white colonizers. We had done nothing compared to what Spanish conquerors did to Incas and Aztecs. For more than 3 centuries, nobody has been killed by the State in Portugal on religious grounds. Baptists, Evangelicals Mormons and other religions were allowed to spread their faith in Africa and were instrumental in the access to literacy and culture of many black people all over the 20th Century, and many of them later on became leaders of liberation movements. In Portugal all the religions are

allowed and they work together when necessary or convenient.

6. Exhibit 3 is Europe. Pogroms, persecutions, fanaticism, religious wars, almost destroyed many times the European continent. Protestants, Jews, Catholics escaped to the United States of America to try to leave in peace and in accordance with their religions.
7. And Exhibit 4 is the world at large. Still in the 21st Century thousands are killed, million starve or are transformed into refugees in other regions in the name of fanatical interpretations of religions.
8. This shows a pattern. Freedom of Religion has been a long struggle, centuries after centuries, with ups and downs, never guaranteed, always in danger and subject to the movements of public opinion, demagoguery of social groups, populism of political leaders and indoctrination of fanatics.
9. But if we decide to look to long term trends, in my country as in Europe the evolution has been in the good direction, certainly quite often with regressions, but always and after much suffering, the freedom of religion returns with more strength.
10. People, politicians and intellectuals learn through mistakes. In Portugal (and the same happens all over the world) it is possible to see the positive connection between

social, economic and political progress and the level of freedom of religion. When Portugal went to the devils of religious persecution, the economic, financial and social consequences have been disastrous. The expulsion of Jews, the impossibility of Reformed Religion or Protestantism as we call it, the expulsion of Catholic Monks and Nuns, all facts that occurred in different moments of our History, let alone the military efforts to spread Christianity with weapons and not by the words and deeds, all of this played an important role and had been instrumental to our decadence.

11. When Jews were expelled from Portugal, they found refuge and became the fabric of Low Countries progress. The fact that the Good Book was not read in Portugal has been a justification for low levels of literacy and for lack of liberal and democratic culture that allowed for archaism to survive. When monks and nuns were expelled and forbidden to work out of monasteries, lower classes were abandoned to the greed of powerful lords, so destroying the social fabric, health and education regressed and protection to the poorest among the poor collapsed with tremendous consequences. The military activism based on religion, even if it could be considered acceptable - which obviously it is not the case - was excessive when compared to our capacities as a country and therefore drained resources that would be essential for the development and progress of Portugal.

12. But now we are in the 21st Century. How is the law and practice of freedom of religion in Portugal?
13. Portugal ranks very high in religiosity and Catholicism in Europe. With only 9% of non-religious persons we are 2nd to Poland with 7%. But we are part of the middle range (with Italy) and far away from Poland and Ireland if we look to regular attendance to the mass and daily pray (35% as compared with 49%). When asked how important it is God for his life, only 10% of the Portuguese say that it is not relevant, albeit with very young generations (those with less than 30 years) going to 15%.
14. We are a religious country, but we are not very active in matters of practice if compared with some others, but clearly ranking much higher than Austria, Spain, Belgium or France, to give some examples. We never had the religious wars that spread through Germany, Low Countries, United Kingdom and France. Perhaps that helped us to have a very moderate and open minded way of practicing our Catholicism.
15. After the 1974 Revolution, an agenda of Freedom of Religion has been developed, increasing the conditions and legal rules in favor of separation between Church and State. This was for sure an old request of left wing parties and atheists or other religions. But it has proposed also by important sectors of the Catholic Church, that increasingly thought during the authoritarian and non democratic

regimen (1928 to 1974) that the privileges came to the Catholic Church with subtle forms of control or at least lack of autonomy towards the political power.

16. This favorable ideological environment, together with the secularization of the society, created a strong trend in favor of freedom of religion and decreasing of the Catholic Church privileges. The return from Africa after the decolonization of many citizens professing other religions (Protestants of various denominations, Hindus and Muslims, etc) and the immigration from Brazil and Eastern Europe in the last century, also increased the diversity of religious, without developing xenophobia or religious fundamentalism.
17. A possible reason for this peaceful integration lies on the old tradition of contacts with other peoples, cultures and religions, which were a historic consequence of Portuguese expansion to Asia, South America and Africa since the 15th Century, and also of the strong emigration in the two last centuries. A few months ago I was reading *The Economist* expressing the view that Utah, albeit being politically one of the most conservative parts of USA, “takes an independent, and softer, line on immigration than, say, the Bible-Belt folk of the South”. The reason according with Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah, is that they are cosmopolitan, because the Mormon Church sends many of its young overseas to proselytise, where they meet other cultures.

18. And how is now Portugal seen from abroad? The US Department of State, in its “International Religious Freedom Report”, dated November 17, 2010, stated that “The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and practices contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There were no reports of societal abuses of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom”.
19. It is also accurately stated that “the government is secular. Other than the constitution, the two most important documents relating to religious freedom are the 2001 Religious Freedom Act and the 1940 Concordat with the Holy See” (as amended in 2004 to comply with Religious Freedom Act). In accordance with law and regulations there is a “legislative framework for religious groups established in the country for at least 30 years or those recognized internationally for at least 60 years”.
20. The 2001 Act “provides qualifying religious groups with benefits previously reserved only for the Catholic Church: full tax-exempt status, legal recognition of their marriages and other rites; the right of their chaplains to minister in prisons, hospitals and military facilities; and respect for their traditional holidays”.

21. Being so, we have strong reasons to be optimist. It is not incorrect to consider Portugal as a case study for freedom of religion in a country with a dominant religion (more than 80% of the Portuguese consider themselves Catholics).
22. However it will be too naïve not to admit the existence of risks. France, Italy and Germany, and now even the traditional tolerant north of Europe countries, are showing signs of societal resistance to freedom of religion and multiculturalism, that quite often are two faces of the same coin. And as it normally happens in democratic societies the political process goes after the populist trends with unknown consequences.
23. But perhaps Portugal learnt from the failure of all the experiences of restrictions of religious freedom, the violent application of rules of orthodoxy by the Church and the State and the efforts of social engineering against religion as a whole. We have been for so many years, alias centuries, confronted with diversity and pluralism of people, race and religion. Therefore, we cultural and socio-psychologically accept more than others that freedom and equality are with fraternity a by-product of the natural acceptance of the diversity of ways for praying God and for the acceptance as human beings like any others those that consider that God is only a creation of men afraid of the future.

24. For all these reasons I am here with great pleasure, eager to learn and communicate, returning afterwards to my country even more convinced that freedom of religion may be a success story if all the men and women of good will help each other in the spiritual war between light and darkness.

Thank you

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