

Marco Ventura

A civil religion for Europe. How to make sense of the past.

1. The civil religion of Christianity. Confessional states and established churches.
2. A civil religion for the Liberal age. Tolerance and freedom. The civil religion of anticlericalism.
3. Post World War II Europe as a secular construction. The civil religion of human rights in the free market.

The issue of civil religion in Europe is dominated by two fundamental questions. The first is about Christianity as the generally shared civil religion of Europe and the scandal of inter-Christian violence: if Christianity was the civil religion in Europe, how was it possible for Christians to fight and kill each other in the name of God for centuries? Unless a simply moral explanation is accepted – Christians slaughtered each other because they were bad Christians – a deep contradiction needs to be addressed: how could Christianity represent at the same time the principle of religious/civil unity beyond national borders and the reason why nations and peoples went to war with each other?

The second question concerns the process of secularisation: since the Reformation and, moreover, since the Enlightenment and the Liberal age, the civil religion of Europe came to be the secular free market of ideas, faiths, goods and capitals. Religion wasn't given up; Christianity continued to be a substantial part of European civil religion, but the secular setting dominated society, its policies and to some extent religion itself. Again we are confronted here with an inconsistency, which cannot be eluded: how was it possible for the new civil religion of Europe to endorse secularism and absorb the anti-clerical and anti-religious discourse without breaking with

religion? How could the civil religion of human rights and the single free market pull together the secular and the religious?

In order to formulate a tentative answer to the double dilemma, I will need to describe and define what appears to me as a threefold historical and theoretical development through which Europe came to progressively define her civil religion.

I will firstly analyse the period in which Christianity was the unchallenged civil religion of Europe and in particular the tie connecting the concurrently developing national states and national churches. I will then study the second phase represented by liberalism, when rights and liberties were recognised as the basis of coexistence in a free democratic society, to such extent that they merged with the Christian legacy to form the new civil religion of Europe. The third and last part of the process concerns the transformation of post World War II Europe into a complex entity based on a secular free market of ideas, faiths, goods and capitals.

1. The civil religion of Christianity. Confessional states and established churches

From the fourth to the nineteenth century after Christ, Europe underwent a fundamental transition from the original monolithic equation between Christianity, the (only) Church and the (only) Empire, to the plural landscape featuring a multiplicity of churches and states, which took shape after the Reformation. Of course the very notion of Europe as a single entity in the historical and geographical perspective is highly problematic; and of course this summary betrays the complexity of the histories of Christianity and of Europe. Nevertheless I believe that it is possible to assess this passage as a crucial step in the European establishment and evolution of a Christian civil religion.

At first Christianity presented itself as a coherent and cohesive unity. The first Councils defined the orthodoxy and celebrated the alliance with the Emperor. Already at the end of the fifth century, Pope Gelasius codified the unity of Christianity under the dualist power, which he thus explained in a nutshell to the Emperor

Anastasius: "Two there are, august Emperor, by which this world is ruled on title of original and sovereign right, the consecrated authority of the priests and the royal power." Despite the lesson of the Oriental schism (or precisely to counter its impact), the Medieval Church elaborated the *Respublica Christiana* in the name of unity and continuity of powers and goals. The equation dominated between Christianity, the Empire and the Church. No matter how richly articulated in local communities and customs, the one and only Church represented the uniqueness and necessary unity of Christianity. Multiplicity was already there, of course. Indeed, different "Christianities" and churches existed. But unity and homogeneity were the overwhelming ideal. The preservation of orthodoxy and the defence of a monolithic apparatus of ecclesiastical institutions were essential. Alternative theories and practices could not coexist: they had to fight each other in the quest for unity. The existence of more than one Church was theologically unthinkable and practically intolerable. Blood could be shed in order to force the reality into the ideal.

After the Reformation, resistance to Christian plurality reached its climax. Wars of religion represented a huge price to pay in order for Europe to feed the ideal of the equation of one Christianity to one Church.

Gradually an increasing sense emerged that the plurality of churches and doctrines engendering conflicts was inevitable and demanded some acceptance. Difficult as it was to endorse it, Christians learnt to coexist with more than one church; they stopped feeling that every Christian not belonging to the same orthodoxy was an enemy to convert, forcibly if necessary. Unity as the ideal did not change. But the practical degree to which tolerance could be showed increased. Moral and ecclesiastical sanctions were not given up; violent sanctions were. The sword came to be resented as an inappropriate means to cope with the actual plurality of Christianity.

Christianity ended up accepting, at least in practice, the multiplicity and competition of churches. The process leading to the shift from the irresistible command of Christian unity to the acceptance of plurality was intimately linked with modernity. Reasons and circumstances, connections and implications are still to be entirely

worked out. What is important to make clear at this stage is that for a long part of its history, Christianity did not tolerate Christian diversity, that Christian civil religion did not prevent Christians from killing each other in the name of Christianity.

Christian diversity and plurality was there already. Persecutions and conflicts attempted to annihilate it in order to re-establish idealised unity. Then a transformation occurred. A plurality of churches emerged, which reshaped the European religious landscape. Practical and even theoretical tolerance came along with it.

Was tolerance of diversity the product of the increasing plurality of churches? Was the proliferation of churches the result of the theological move towards tolerance? Or more simply, is Western secularisation the overarching explanation for everything? What matters is that a second phase started when different churches replaced the one Church and when, little by little, tolerance and acceptance replaced intolerance and repression.

In European history the two phases corresponded to two similar phases in the development of the civil sphere. At the time when Christianity meant one Church, the Empire embodied the idea of a unique (divinely determined) power. When Christianity started to signify “more churches,” the Empire also exploded giving rise to European national states. “More than one church” equalled “more than one Empire.” Though in many different ways, states developed in Europe from the split of the Empire at the same time as churches developed, departing from the only Church which had existed for the first millennium. Historians are unable to definitely clarify what the cause was and what the effect. Several hypotheses can be reasonably argued. All we can be sure about is that the two processes took place at the same time in the same context. Connections must have existed, although we do not know precisely which, how or why.

Civil religion in Europe followed the two phases. In the first phase Christian civil religion meant ideal unity not only within the Church but also between the Church and the Empire. The Christian dualism theorised by Pope Gelasius was meant to express the fundamental unity of the two powers unified by the supreme civil religion of Christianity.

In the second phase, Christian civil religion adjusted to the transformation.

Through conflicts and tensions, states and churches took shape together in the modern world. Each church couldn't even conceive of itself without the complementary national venture. The same was true for the states. Sovereignty was understood in the perspective of the unity between the spiritual and the temporal, which now meant between the national state and the relevant national church. Orthodox and Protestant national churches were the best example because of the lack of an all-encompassing supranational church. But the Catholic Church also underwent the same process, since it struggled for centuries in pulling together the universal dimension represented by the Holy See and the activism of local churches (in Poland, in Ireland, etc.) in the making of national unity.

Since the birth of national states, civil religion was a matter of mutual protection between the locally dominant church and the relevant state. The state was a confessional state; the church was an established church. Civil religion was made of both dimensions. Like the two sides of the coin, the confessional state and the established church embodied the Christian civil religion in Europe.

2. A civil religion for the Liberal age. Tolerance and freedom. The civil religion of anticlericalism.

The transition in Europe from mono-Church to multi-church Christianity brought with it the transition from religious intolerance to tolerance and ultimately to religious liberty and to the full panoply of freedoms and rights of the Liberal age. The Christian civil religion slowly neutralised religion as the cause for bloodshed and mutated into a new civil religion where the old aspects (confessional states plus national churches) merged with the new (religious tolerance and liberty). Nineteenth-century Europe was still a Europe at war, but European wars ceased to be religious wars.

In the process, Protestant Christianity and Protestant churches played a very special role. They fought the other churches with no less intolerance; they repressed dissidence and heresy with the same

ruthlessness and cruelty as the other churches. Nevertheless their theology, more than the Catholic one, made cultural and political modification possible. Free examination, the autonomy of the individual in the reading and interpretation of the Scripture, were to be the very basis for individual freedoms and rights. This does not mean that tolerance was achieved in Protestantism without conflicts. But the seed of religious freedom, at least in the sense of individual freedom, was predominantly a Protestant one and achievements in the field were mainly and more precociously in Protestant countries and churches.

The Catholic Church had a strong tradition in defence of the rights and liberty of the Church (*Libertas Ecclesiae*), meaning of course the true one. But religious tolerance and freedom in the Liberal age went far beyond, based as it was on the individual rights and the free competition of churches.

Of course the theological roots of the change matched other conditions and factors. The transformation did not concern the whole of Christianity (or the whole of Protestantism) at the same time in the same way. New Protestant sects and churches arose, which challenged the unity of church and state in Protestant countries or regions (such as Switzerland, a crucial laboratory). This pushed Protestant states to experience new patterns. In some areas and countries, states slowly started to be less confessional and churches kept on, little by little, abandoning the ambition of cutting other churches out of the market.

The Christian civil religion of Europe came to include tolerance and religious liberty. Again, religious change corresponded to economic and political transformation, which accompanied the spread of liberalism in a large part of Europe. Did Christianity grow to include freedom because of the more general cultural, economic and political mutation? Or did liberal Europe reflect the new Protestant theology? Both are true, probably.

According to the locally dominant Christian landscape and the more general context, in some European areas and countries, political and legal modernity was accessed without passing through an intense and specific religious conflict. Religion was not the key factor of modernisation. In northern Europe, for instance, churches and states faced the new context together. Each changed on its own, but also a

common process of transformation took place where the state pushed the church to mutate and vice-versa. This enabled the traditional link between dominant churches and the relevant states to survive. Political freedoms and rights were enacted with the collaboration of both.

The situation was different in other parts of Europe. In predominantly Catholic countries, the anti-modern position of the Catholic Church made the transition to political and legal modernity impossible without fighting. Political conflict stemmed from the Catholic determination to refuse modern liberties. In 1864 the Syllabus of Errors condemned by Pius IX included, at number 15, the proposition according to which “Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.” An inconsistency still existed (not only in the Catholic teaching) between the intolerant legacy of the past and the modern compromise between Christianity and civil freedoms.

The conflict took place mainly in France – first during the Revolution with the tentative creation of an alternative secular religion (the Cult of Reason) and then for the whole nineteenth century until the law of separation of 1905 – and in Italy with the Risorgimento, the takeover of the Pontifical states and the achievement of Italian unity.

In the two countries, and in others to a different extent, fighting the Catholic Church was seen as an indispensable step in order to build a modern community recognising and practising those freedoms that the Pope condemned as incompatible with human nature.

While a new European civil religion was taking shape in which Christianity merged with liberal freedoms, Catholic countries could not prevent widespread anticlerical feelings from influencing their adhesion to the general pattern. To some extent and in some parts of Europe, the anticlerical dimension came to be an ingredient of the new civil religion. In the most acute situations, anticlericalism became a civil religion on its own.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, European civil religion was a mixture of the past and the present, combining traditional Christianity, still strongly embedded in the national identities, and new political ideologies and cultures including first of all Liberalism and, in some contexts, anticlericalism.

During World War I, the Russian Revolution witnessed a new civil religion, which replaced Christianity with the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and prepared to divide Europe for the next seventy years. Between the two world wars, Fascism and Nazism also erupted. They brought an alternative and concurrent ideology, which also resulted in a sort of civil religion. Unlike the Soviet experiment, Christianity in Nazi and Fascist regimes was not banned in the name of an atheistic state; not in principle, at least. Concordates were signed between Hitler, Mussolini (and later Franco) and the reigning popes, which established an alliance between the Regimes and the Catholic Church. German Lutherans also compromised with Nazism.

The Fascist and Nazi civil religion attempted to couple the traditional pattern – national Christianity pulling together the established church and the confessional state – with modernity. In the case of Liberal democracies, modernity meant civil and economic freedoms. In the case of Nazism and Fascism, modernity meant totalitarian dictatorships and racism, which led Europe and the whole world into the nightmare of World War II.

3. Post World War II Europe as a secular construction. The civil religion of human rights in the free market.

At the end of World War II, the division of Europe in two parts separated by the Berlin Wall and the Cold War deeply affected the pre-existing patterns of civil religion.

The civil religion of Soviet Europe was Marxism-Leninism, an atheistic ideology, which fought all religions as incompatible with the goals and principles of socialist societies and states.

Liberal Christian Western Europe turned towards the Atlantic and elaborated a new variation of the civil religion inherited from the nineteenth century and defended against Fascism and Nazism – remember Winston Churchill's speeches rousing resistance in the name of Christian civilisation.

Human rights were thought of as the possible bridge between the two sides of the world. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 represented the unsuccessful attempt to unify the

bipolar world in the name of a shared vision of human dignity and rights.

In the 'Fifties, especially after the Hungarian revolt of 1956, it became clear that Eastern Communist Europe was frozen and isolated by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. A huge portion of Europe was condemned to oppression in the name of an atheistic civil religion deeply conflicting with the Christian civil religion of the Orthodox countries (think of Russia itself) and of the Catholic ones (namely Poland and Hungary).

Western Europe opted for a unity built upon the free market and upon civil rights and liberties. The Human Rights European Convention of 1950 expressed the shift towards a civil religion of human rights having the potential to develop a European common standard beyond national specificities. Christianity was not mentioned as the source for rights. What mattered was the adhesion to the catalogue of rights itself regardless of the underlying convictions or beliefs. The civil religion of rights and freedoms fitted better with an open society: secular faith in freedom and rights as the condition for growth and welfare had replaced religious faith in the transcendent meaning of worldly life.

The 1957 constitution of the European Economic Community developed the Liberal civil religion into a blueprint that aimed to increase European welfare beyond national borders through the construction of the single market. Free circulation of persons, goods, capitals and services accompanied Europe towards prosperity. It also fostered social and political unity. Despite Euro-scepticism, the European Union was a remarkable achievement expressing the shift in European civil religion: the new complex, shared sovereignty included the national states and regions in the name of subsidiarity; the framework supported competition and social welfare. The religious market also opened and became less national.

The making of Europe as a common space of both freedom and market embodied the traditional Christian legacy. The new civil religion of human rights and the free market was the new version of the Christian civil religion as it had been modernised through the Liberal Age. The ice of Christianity had melted into the water of the free market, human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Although deeply grounded in Christianity, the new civil religion was deeply secular. Secularisation was its reason, its environment and its outcome. Churches had no choice: no matter how strong the temptation to join forces with Marxists to protest against the inequalities engendered by the market, Christians – and all other religions – owed their freedom to the secular market and couldn't avoid supporting it.

This is how it came about that during the forty years of the bipolar West-East world, the civil religion of Europe – of Western Europe – transformed into the secular civil religion of the free market without giving up with its Liberal and Christian roots.

After the crumbling of the Wall and the events of 9/11, the picture has changed. We may easily capture the tension shaking the European civil religion in the form it has assumed from 1948 onwards. After 1989 the civil religion of the West spread and conquered all Europe. Christianity and the market triumphed together.

This was not, however, the beginning of a stable era.

No longer did the Communist enemy feed the inevitable alliance between capitalist countries and religion. An increasing multi-religious landscape made Europeans more aware of their Christian past and more concerned with its preservation. Global competition injected fear of other cultures and religions, namely Islam. The impact was heavy on the ideal of the European arena as an open space sweeping away nationalistic protectionism and enhancing competition, in the field of religion as well.

The original Christian civil religion had developed in the sense of an alliance between secularism, religious freedom and economic freedom. The present tensions and conflicts do not have the potential to undermine our secular environment. Instead they certainly challenge the alliance between religious liberty and economic freedom, an alliance, which lays at the core of European civil religion as it developed until now.