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Fundamentalism or Tolerance

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FUNDAMENTALISM OR TOLERANCE: WHAT IS THE PUBLIC ROLE OF RELIGION IN MODERN SOCIETY?

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This text deals with four topics: fundamentalism, tolerance, identity and religion and links between them.

1. Fundamentalism

In a widespread understanding, the term fundamentalism is today mostly linked to religion. Fundamentalism, in general, is characterised primarily by the notion of separation and exclusion and, in contemporary language, is very often linked with extremism. It is an expression of a passionate opposition to “liberalism” in all its possible forms. In Western societies fundamentalism is labelled by negative connotations and accompanied by the perception about its link to old-fashioned religious superstition that needs to be overcome. Fundamentalism is perceived as an enemy of Western democracies.

Along with the religious connotations, it is however acknowledged that it is also possible to speak about economic, political, national or ideological fundamentalism. In such cases, as with its “religious” equivalents, fundamentalism could be characterised by extreme posi-

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tions, rigidity and inability for dialogue. Following this approach, we can speak also about fundamentalism in its secular guise. A number of European countries in which religious symbols are prohibited from the public places exemplify this. Such a stance is backed by the presupposition that secularism has a worldview, a privileged position and, by the assumption that it is a value neutral system, stands above all religions, religious disputes, quarrels and differences. Fundamentalism has much to do with religion. To limit this phenomenon purely to religion is a superficial simplification unhelpful to a fuller understanding of this phenomenon. It is thus worth exploring the concept of fundamentalism in a broader context and in consonance with other trends inseparably linked to it.

Fundamentalism evolved as a Christian movement mainly within American Protestantism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries amidst conservative evangelical Christians who, in a reaction to modernism, actively affirmed a “fundamental” set of Christian beliefs. Strong commitment to the basic truth of certain religion, belief, ideology or conviction is the first and foremost characteristic of any, not only Christian, fundamentalism.

Since then, the use of the term has gone through substantial development and a shift of its original meaning. The widespread use of the word “fundamentalism” does not mean that its understanding is clear and shared by all. Fundamentalism is today mostly used as a phenomenological description linked to the world of Islam. Many Muslims, however, regardless of their place of origin, protest against the use of the term when referring to Islamist groups. The identification of fundamentalism with extremism, typical of the Western use of the term, is simply not shared. As an example, Shiite groups, which are considered fundamentalist in the Western world, are not considered as such in the Islamic world. As opposed to the Western use, “Islamic fundamentalism” is most often used by them in a limited sense: as a description of Muslim

individuals and groups that advocate Islamism, a political ideology calling for the replacement of secular state laws with Islamic law.

In evaluating fundamentalism, it is beneficial to make a cautious differentiation and carefully look at the balance between politics, religion and society. The realm of politics is where fundamentalism starts to be a dangerous instrument. An oversimplified negative labelling of fundamentalism as describing everything that does not fit with a vision of secular society cannot do justice to those who do not share the idea of secular dominance and who see religion as an integral and constructive element in a mosaic of society.

Differentiation between religion and politics is of utmost importance. Putting aside a political cover of fundamentalism and concentrating on its religious roots, it is not possible to overlook those signs which are very difficult to mark simply as negative. The basis of fundamentalism includes conviction, care, firm value orientation and strong social ties. These are worth noting, despite the generally negative attitudes to fundamentalism prevalent in Western societies.

Fundamentalism, since its inception, has been a movement of conviction. It is evident that it is not possible to speak about a person having a conviction and self-respect without recognising in this person strong roots for the person's conviction and character. Whatever this conviction may be, it is the fixed point in a changeable world that enables personal orientation. This is then the source of human individual and collective identity. It is acknowledgment of roots, of firm conviction and consequently of self-respect. It is an acknowledgment of a strong vision of the person and his/her place in the world as an agent of the change in this world: a vision of a person who has a task to do, a mission.

The presented arguments do not mean that our judgement of fundamentalism should start to be uncritical. It is a reminder of a Western simplified position and a reminder of the complexity which is associated with this term..

2. Tolerance

Europe is a continent that, in most of its parts, cherishes tolerance as one of its principal values, often presented as an opposite to fundamentalism. Tolerance has been instituted within the continent as one of the achievements in the effort to overcome the bloody religious conflicts of the 16th and 17th centuries. Since then, tolerance has been cultivated in the way of life of many different communities living in the continent and as the fundamental value found in numerous declarations stating the political principals on which European society rests.

In spite of that, practical tolerance has often been called into question and not only at times of conflicts that dominated Europe on several occasions since the Enlightenment during which an appeal to tolerance did not find an echo. Even in the modern era tolerance is not an instrument effectively implemented in all the tensions and conflicts within our reach. It suffices to look at some instances in which tolerance is about to play a major role and in which modern Europe has to face considerable difficulties. Tolerance may be seen as an ideal. Its full reality is, however, not at hand.

In the West, tolerance is often portrayed as an opposite to fundamentalism. In its easygoing approach, tolerance is characterised by the scheme in which everything is possible, everything that does not limit freedom of the other is allowed and everything is of equal value. Another word for this kind of tolerance is indifference. An end product of this development of the value realm in Europe is the fact that European society is increasingly characterised by laxity, value relativism and opportunism.

One illustration of a kind of degenerated tolerance serving in Europe as the guiding value, as well as the operational strategy, can be seen in the attitude to a great number of immigrants arriving in the member states of the European Union. According to statistics, more than 20

million immigrants are living in the EU and every year hundreds of thousands of new incomers arrive. There are good human, political and economic reasons for this. Governments, NGOs and churches in Europe spend considerable effort in managing this influx. Living under the motto of tolerance, Europeans are in principle open to arriving newcomers. Then, however, their interest and care stops halfway. It is widely recognised that the integration of immigrants in Europe faces a considerable number of problems. Integration of incomers and their introduction to the cultural and value setting of their new home countries obviously does not happen in a way that could bring palpable results. The simple fact is that a large percentage of immigrants fail to integrate into European society.¹

The result is the fast growth of parallel societies and the creation of barriers between different communities, between “us” and “them”. Street violence in France in 2005 and the murder of the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh in November 2004 were visible demonstrations of the lack of integration. Very soon after these incidents it became clear that to consider them as isolated acts would be inappropriate. These are tips of the iceberg covering a serious problem. Tolerance, in the shape as presented in most of the continent, is not leading to the expected results.

There can be numerous explanations of the root causes of this situation. In our view, the problem is the widespread and dominating understanding of “openness” and “toleration”. To reduce tolerance to openness is insufficient. This kind of tolerance is limited tolerance, narrowed to its passive component. The active part, that requires not just “to accept” or “to be open” but requests to go far beyond is not at hand. In this way tolerance loses its proper meaning and content. In the absence of

¹ Even in the UK which has been portrayed itself as an example of tolerance towards migrants and one of the best examples of multicultural society almost 40% of population believe that the presence of Muslims in the country poses a threat to national security [Harris poll data presented in the Financial Times, 19 August 2007].

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active personal attitudes and in the absence of common standards tolerance becomes indifference and integration is replaced by ignorance. In such a situation, as the American philosopher Christopher Lasch reminds, the ideal of an open mind degenerates into that of an “empty mind”.

The key word in addressing this problem has to be ‘respect.’ Openness as well as tolerance has to go hand-in-hand with “respect.” There must be nothing cheap in this attitude. In observing tolerance stopping halfway is as equally dangerous as to accept only nice declarations without accompaniment by concerted effort for implementation. The problem is that we are determined to accept everyone, but we have forgotten that acceptance means little if it is not accompanied with respect and that respect has to be earned.

Tolerance without respect is, as it is called by Lasch, “a tourist’s approach to morality.” In order to be clear what the relationship between tolerance and respect is he writes:

Respect is what we experience in the presence of admirable achievements, admirably formed characters, natural gifts put to good use. It entails the exercise of discriminating judgement, not indiscriminate acceptance. Respect is not another word for tolerance or the appreciation of alternative lifestyles and communities.²

Here we are, I believe, at the core of the problem. True tolerance does not mean discarding the value of judgement. True tolerance does not mean indifference and indiscriminate acceptance. Tolerance stripped of one of its basic meanings is not able to fulfil its original role. Tolerance accompanied by respect would have an impact on the integration process in Europe, and is what is needed is to avoid an empty tolerance and replacement of tolerance by ignorance.

² Roger Kimball, Christopher Lasch vs. the elites, Vol. 13, *New Criterion*, 1995.

Respect as a necessary counterpart to tolerance is a difficult enterprise. It means attempting to understanding the context of values settings, which may be very different from those of the West and to launch a dialogue about these differences; dialogue that would be able to overcome barriers leading to assignment of those who are privileged and underprovided. Such a dialogue would be a dialogue between equally committed partners.

How strongly relativism combined with ignorance has been established in European society is demonstrated in the Europe values study 2005. Only 37% of EU citizens responded positively to the question as to how important it is to integrate minorities and other cultures into our societies.³ In comparison to the same question in Turkey where 63 percent of participants in the survey responded yes. Tolerance identified with openness to everyone, everything and closely linked to value relativism seems to be one of the mains signs of Western societies.

Lack of value orientation, and assigning one and the same value to all cultures and values also has another effect. If everything is acceptable and all directions are the same, this also implies that all religions are the same. If everything is accepted then everything has the same value and is equal. In such a situation there is no reason to be an adherent of this or another religion. Such relativism leads to ignorance, passivity and apathy as signs of decreasing ability for value orientation. Zeal rarely accompanies a point of view that remains apathetic to what is right or wrong. Inevitably, the passive relativist must yield to an absolutist who is willing to advance his viewpoint through force. Careful observation witnesses that exactly this lack of value orientation and the growth of relativism are increasingly present in European societies.

Attempts to be “objective” in looking at the different worldviews, cultures and religions is not a viable way forward for effective dealing

³ Social values, Science and Technology, Special Eurobarometer 225/Wave 63.1, June 2005.Special Eurobarometer 225 / Wave 63.1Sp

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with issues like tolerance and identity in a multicultural society. Even a conscious effort to be impartial and not to prefer any given worldview and religion does not guarantee an impartial approach. It is one of the widespread characteristics of Western societies – by claiming objectivity and impartiality it is in a hidden way giving priority over religious and cultural values of others to our own standpoint. It is giving the priority to rationality and the ideas of the Enlightenment. We have to be tolerant, because it is reasonable and rational, is one of the leading mottos in the West. Hand-in-hand with this notion of tolerance and rationality goes the feeling of superiority; thus a self-understanding is cultivated: “We are rational, therefore we are the best.”. This is one of the major points creating hate in non-Western societies. Western superiority is strongly challenged by non-Western societies. Together with challenging superiority, the Western concept of tolerance is also challenged.

The only possible conclusion is that this kind of superficial tolerance is not and cannot be a sufficient counterpart to Western understanding of fundamentalism. If tolerance is not fully developed to its full meaning – an effective instrument developing an identity – then it fails.

3. Identity

This leads then to the crucial element that needs to be addressed in this respect. It is a consequence of the narrowed tolerance *ad intro*, in the direction of human self and individual consciousness. Tolerance reduced to openness and indiscriminate acceptance is not enough for developing individual and collective identity. Not only because formulations of full acceptance are only a theoretical construction. It is hardly possible to implement it fully in reality because of limited human capacities. The limited human self cannot accept fully everything that surrounds him or her. Selection and value judgement are inevitable.

The concept of identity is very much linked to the question, who are we? and where do we belong? For positive answers to these questions material prosperity is not necessary. In the recent global survey looking for the answer as to where in the world live the most contented people, European countries did not figure prominently. Perhaps astonishingly, citizens of poor developing countries occupied the first places in the survey. A positive image of the life and positive identity does not necessarily need material prosperity, nor all the achievements characterising everyday life in Western Europe.

In searching for elements contributing to the development of identity it may be helpful to look at some of the characteristics of world development of recent years. Here we cannot overlook some conclusions relevant to the relationship between fundamentalism and identity. Some of the most important are:

a) Religion, particularly Islam, but also other world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, is becoming a source of identity, a source of popular movements and uprisings with increasing intensity. Almost any area in the Middle East (from Iran to Palestine) can be found as a particularly strong proof of this assumption. The situation in the Indian subcontinent is not far behind in providing the evidence with similar clarity. Secularism, imported to many of these places by Western influence, is making way for religious enthusiasts.

This has consequences for the situation in Europe as well. It would be a fatal mistake to expect that secularism, which attempted to be implemented in many places as a universal norm and all-embracing values system, could be a counterpart for a meaningful exchange for immigrants from these regions coming to Europe as well as for residents in all these countries,.

b) Western society is not only characterised by its belief to the capacity of human *ratio*. Yet humanism and renaissance, the Enlightenment and rationality are not the only sources of the Western worldview.

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The Western mind is also influenced by the heritage of Christianity and Judaism. The devaluing of the influence of religion – in particular Christianity – is an increasing tendency in Europe. Some difficult moments that European societies have had to face are, however, consequences of this contempt. The loss of a traditional religious dimension is one of the causes for the problem with European identity.

As opposed to secular rationalism, Christian theology questions the absolute character of the individual subject. The person is in Christianity characterised as an *individuum* who has an ability to step out of himself or herself, one who has the ability of self-reflection. The personality of the human individual is not as something already given and, in this respect, finished. The subject becomes a person only after an act of self-reflection. This process can be realised only as a conscious act, i.e. with an active use of the consciousness. This condition is however not the only one. The other one is that the process cannot be realised in isolation, without the presence of other persons. Full personality and full identity is gained only in relationship to other human beings. This means that overstated individualism leads necessarily and unavoidably to serious deficiencies in personal identity. The human being is truly human only in community. This is missing in secularism. Overstated rationalism and individualism are reasons why secularism is unable to deal easily with any kind of collective identity except for those defined by geography.

In this regard it may be interesting to mention one of the examples of how this is dealt with identity at this continent. In the closing address of the European Intellectual Summit “*Europe. A beautiful idea?*”, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands Jan Peter Balkenende said: “Europe is unique because it has so many different identities. This makes it impossible to define European identity once and for all.”⁴ In our perspective

⁴ “Europe A Beautiful Idea”, European Intellectual Summit, Rotterdam, December 2004.

there are good reasons to criticise this and similar statements. The reason for criticism is not the notion of multiple identities in Europe. It is this fact that needs to be taken seriously and that requires serious work. The reason for criticism is the second part of the statement that from the right premise leads to the wrong conclusion. A refusal of the definition of Europe's own identity and lack of effort to develop one is alarming.

4. Religion

There is an underlying assumption in Western secularism that there is something wrong with religion. The heritage of the Enlightenment and humanism is strong, particularly in Western Europe. Secularism of society is one of the dominating tendencies here. Aside from Western Europe, there is a rise of religious feeling on the global scale. As Juergenmeyer demonstrated in his remarkable book, Western democracies in the post-colonial era made quite an effort to establish secular political regimes in numerous post-colonial countries of Africa and Asia that would, according to Western standards, push religion out of public sphere.⁵ It is increasingly clear that this effort is not going to be successful. The tragic failure in Iraq is just the latest episode in this long-term process. The crucial question in this regard is why secularism has failed to inspire millions in developing countries all over the globe?

In pursuing this question one cannot overlook one of the basic features of Western effort: the claim of secularism to universality. An appeal to rationality that it supposes to be above religion should make of secularism a universal platform that would enable it to judge all other worldviews and religions. The link of secularism and rationality should have created a universally acceptable norm. It is interesting to observe

⁵ Mark Juergenmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts The Secular State* (University of California Press, 1993), p. 26.

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how this claim goes hand-in-hand with such attractive privileges as impartiality and objectivity. Only the secular view, according to its own judgement, could have been universal, impartial and objective. The other no less questionable characteristic of secularism has been its overstated individualism.

The claim of universality, impartiality and objectivity has been very difficult to accept in non-Western societies. In addition religious communities all over the world make Western secularism responsible for the moral decline on its own territory, in Western society. It is interesting that communities all over the world, otherwise behaving to each other as enemies, are united in this judgement. Widespread mistrust of Western secularism in non-Western societies is to be noted all around. Other continents refuse to subscribe to Western secularism and to the universality of its two pillars individualism and rationalism. Following de Tocqueville, it is increasingly recognised that in secularism, in spite of its fervent hostility towards religion, elements of religion are also present. This leads to the conclusion that secular rationality based on the Enlightenment does not provide the superior platform that allows for judging other worldviews and religions. It is *one* of the worldviews. Secularism can be described as a kind of natural religion.⁶ In its basic characteristics it includes doctrine, myth, ethics, ritual, experience and social organisation. Both secularism and religion are expressions of faith.

Secular rationalism as a political and social strategy in the global scale proved not to be able to fulfil expectations to be a universally acceptable platform superior to all other worldviews and religions. In judging it from this perspective it cannot be said anything else than it has failed. Secular rationalism is not a universal worldview superseding religions and creating a universal framework into which a plurality of

⁶ Mark Juergenmayer, *ibid.*

religions operates. Secularism has to enter into relationship with other religions as one of the worldviews, not as a universal platform.

This has, however, a substantial impact on the critical question of the relationship between individual and society. Based on the idea of a strong self-centred and rational individual, self-sufficient with his/her rationality to decide everything that is needed on their own, is a Western attitude characterised by the conviction that religion is a private matter of each individual. This is in significant contradiction to the self-understanding of all the world religions, which all claim to provide not only fulfilment of man's personal needs, but also to have substantial contributions at the communitarian level and in the building of society.

The relationship between individual and society seems to be the cornerstone of all religions. In this point both religions and secular rationalism fulfil the same function. Both provide a glue that holds together broad communities. The issue is that in both cases the bond functions with very different mechanisms and leads to different results. The question of identity is one of those that are influenced by these different mechanisms the most.

After rising doubts about the universality which both secularism and rationality make claim to, and noting some of the similarities and differences between secularism and religion, we come to the final point. This is a question, which is of crucial importance in this regard, the role of religion in public life.

Europe should not renounce religion at the expense of preference for secularism, nor be negative towards influence of religion in society. In spite of some historical excesses where religion was identified with the political power, a positive influence of religion can be witnessed, in particular of Christianity, demonstrated throughout European history. This influence is to be seen not only in culture, art, spirituality and the way of thinking in Europe, it is to be seen also in how society has been organised. Taking the role of religion(s) in society more seriously can

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free the way to clarifying important issues that seem to be increasingly deficient in the society on the continent nowadays.

Nobody in Europe can today seriously call for the establishment of theocracies. To find a place for religion in public life is, however, a necessary condition for a healthy society. It is one of the deep challenges for the future development of European society.