

VITTORIO POSSENTI\*

THE SECULAR STATE AND RELIGION'S CONTRIBUTION  
TO A GOOD SOCIETY

## THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL QUESTION

As a movement that regards the relationship between man and God, religion is a primary level of the human life, and involves individuals, human groups and communities: therefore it has a deep social impact. Consequently it makes sense to question on the religion's contribution to the building of a "good society". But what religion we want to talk about? I will turn to Christianity and in particular to western contemporary societies of late modernity, characterized by democratic and secular state and a strong secularization. We know the many challenges raised: ethical and bioethical problems, serious lack of education, mainly of young generations, crisis of traditions, are some points of this process, which ultimately attaches to the freedom rights of the adult a statute higher than that of other fundamental rights and of common good.

Present situation invites to face the always resurgent *theologico-political problem*, which includes the nexus between religion and politics, the role of religion in society, and basically the question whether from God's will derive instructions for a good society. Many modern thinkers, from Machiavelli to Hobbes and Marx, have developed a foundation of political order from an intramundane or earthly point of view, making marginal the theologico-political problem, until now a major nucleus of the political science. One architect of this revolution was Spinoza, at the source of many currents in which politics is freed from religion<sup>1</sup>. This situation persists generally in contemporary thought, but with some exceptions. In modernity the "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" was not only separated from the "Render unto God that which is God's," but to the first was rendered more than to the

---

\* VITTORIO POSSENTI – University of Venice; Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. E-mail: vittorio.possenti@tin.it.

<sup>1</sup> Spinozism as the root of modern politics is the thesis of L. Strauss in: *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*, Akademie – Verlag, Berlin 1930.

second: the Leviathan State swelled up more and more until the horrible outcome of the totalitarian State of the twentieth century.

But like any permanent problem, the theologico-political issue is present in the past and present century; it is still active and in fact emerges strongly in recent and less recent thought (J. Habermas, J. Maritain, J. Ratzinger, J. Rawls, Ch. Taylor), which rediscover the presence and role of religion in society<sup>2</sup>.

There are various ways of understanding the theologico-political question, such as that proposed by C. Schmitt, according to whom all the fundamental legal-political concepts are the result of a secularization of theological notions. Schmitt (and with him J. Maritain, A. Del Noce, K. Loewith, E. Voegelin and others) defended a “continuity solution”. This means that contemporary times and their spiritual framework are a secularization of Christian ideas, while H. Blumenberg (*Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*) thinks of the modern times as a new start, which is autonomous and does not depend on Christian heritage. Perhaps the most fundamental comprehension of the theologico-political problem refers to the relationship between knowledge of God and social life, the influence of the first on the second, and more specifically on the question whether there is a will or a project of God on human society. This issue is more original and primary than those, so often treated, on the relationships and boundaries between civil society and religious society.

#### THE CURRENT CONTEXT

As it is commonly recognized, European nations have been affected by a strong process of secularization, which has raised with new intensity the question of the place and role of religion – of Christianity – in them. Different philosophies are at the origin of this process, which led for a long time to consider religion only as *cultus privatus* (private worship). Since several decades something is changing and there are two very different trends, which we should take into account: the spread of naturalistic and scientific doctrines, frequently hostile to religions, and the return of religion into the public sphere. The second event involves a criticism toward a post-metaphysical and areligious modernity, which seeks to separate sharply

---

<sup>2</sup> I have devoted several books to this topic and some of them have been translated in Polish: 1) *Le società liberali al bivio. Lineamenti di filosofia della società*, Marietti, Genoa 1992 (Polish trans. PTTA, Lublin 2012); 2) *Oltre l'Illuminismo. Il messaggio sociale cristiano*, Edizioni Paoline, Rome 1992 (Polish trans., WAM, Kraków 2000); 3) *Religione e vita civile. Il cristianesimo nel postmoderno*, Armando, Rome 2001 (Polish trans., Pax, Warsaw 2005); 4) *Le ragioni della laicità*, Rubbettino, Soveria 2007; 5) *L'uomo postmoderno. Tecnica religione politica*, Marietti, Milan 2009; 6) *The Human Being as Believer and Citizen*, “Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly” 2005, no. 4, Winter 2005.

religion and reason, forgetting that for long periods they exhibited a genealogy with many points in common. It is mainly the scientific and positivistic model of rationality that opposes reason and religion.

In this process the intrinsic limits of the Enlightenment count heavily: perhaps the largest one consists in having considered the religious traditions an unnecessary burden, and having ascribed the monopoly of the truth to a reason firstly only ethical and finally only scientific. Consequently the basis of truths and values, needed to live together, becomes progressively more restricted.

But sooner or later the real problems come up again. We experience the inability of scientific thinking to steer towards the good life, because it lacks sufficient articulation of exemplary life, which are widespread in the holy scriptures and religions: these present a wisdom of life that must be safeguarded, for it cannot be produced on command. Nor can it come from a stunted professional expertise of secular specialists, who sometimes estimate a waste of time dealing with the human and divine meaning of religions. It would be necessary to listen here the passionate cry of M. Weber: "Specialists without spirit, hedonists without heart: this nothing guesses that it is ascended to a level of humanity never achieved before"<sup>3</sup>. It is a cry that implicitly appeals to the reserves of meaning of religion, against the instrumental rationality.

This means that deliberative democracy and the secular State have a huge need of a renewed public debate – which cannot be merely an expression of a restricted class of media professionals and opinion makers. The obligation to exchange good reasons in the public sphere is necessary but not sufficient, and cannot be the sole task of religion, finally admitted to express its positions in the big media circus. It should be necessary to implement communities' experiences as bearers of a more incisive understanding of the social role of religion.

#### THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGION TO DEMOCRACY

I narrow the topic of my contribution raising the question: if religions can contribute to a good society, their help will be limited to the *motivation*, or even to the *cognitive plane* which confronts the question of truth? In my opinion liberal States should encourage the participation of religious voices in the public sphere, *not only for their motivational value but also for their cognitive and truthful significance*. Churches and religious citizens in civil society are actors who perform tasks essential to democratic life, and it is not strictly necessary that they be forced to motivate in secular language their beliefs.

---

<sup>3</sup> M. Weber, *L'etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo*, BUR, Milan 1991, p. 241.

## 1. MOTIVATION

The great civil task of religion is to make the man good: through the virtues he becomes master of himself, participant in a political society, capable of not forgetting his obligations and responsibility towards the common good. This task concerns individuals, groups, peoples, political leadership, leading them to flourish in personal and social virtues, including in particular the justice that is addressed to the common good of a political society<sup>4</sup>. The common good is a very complex thing, reachable if and only if individuals, families, associations, government, operate according to ends of justice, freedom and shared responsibilities: on these aspects the fertilizing influence of a transcendent and humanistic religion is particularly high<sup>5</sup>.

Aiming at the vigour of moral life and virtues, religion reaches society at its nerve centre. In fact, contrary to the assertion of Marxist historical materialism, *the anatomy of civil life is ethics, not political economy*. Whoever manages to improve people's moral behaviour fulfils the most important task in society. As much as it may be endowed by very elaborate institutions, no society can exist in a decent manner and have an acceptable civil life, if its citizens surrender too much to vices and the unchaining of passions. If the State is subject to an excess of hedonistic and eudaemonistic demands, it cannot guarantee its own moral foundations and it must find these bases elsewhere: the secular State cannot by its own power create the basis from which it draws nourishment.

The motivational aptitudes of religions, especially of a religion of agape, are fundamental in every society, especially if we compare them with the "impotence of duty" reported by Hegel, and so present in the human experience of every age. The democratic State needs solidarity which is not available on legal demand, but it must be assumed at least in the sense that there are communities and social forces that make available it and with their integrity are able to foster it. We must take seriously the risk that the constitutional State be unable to renew its own bases and the framework on which it stands.

Moreover it is worth repeating what everyone knows, but which is frequently forgotten, namely that the political virtues are essential to politics, and especially for that demanding kind which is democracy. These virtues become even heroic when

---

<sup>4</sup> The legal justice addresses directly the common good, but it starts off under the influence of every other virtue, *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 61, a. 5, ad 4n. This is the classical thesis on the connection between all virtues (*connexio virtutum*). The justice that concerns the common good is a different virtue from justice which is directed to someone's private good, *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 60, a. 3, ad 2n.

<sup>5</sup> "Cum quilibet homo sit pars civitatis, impossibile est quod aliquis homo sit bonus, nisi sit bene proportionatus bono communi; nec totum potest bene consistere nisi ex partibus sibi proportionatis. Unde impossibile est quod bonum commune civitatis bene se habeat, nisi cives sint virtuosus, ad minus illi quibus convenit principari" (*S.Th.*, I–II, q. 92, a. 1, ad 3n). This leads Aquinas to consider the extreme case of the sacrifice of its own life: "Virtuosus civis se exponit mortis periculo pro totius reipublicae conservacione" (*S.Th.*, I, q. 60, a. 5).

one thinks of democracy as shaped by Kant, in which citizens are self-legislators, namely the creators of those laws and rules to which they will be submitted. Self-legislation demands to citizens something very challenging, and which can not be required legally.

In any case where can the secularized liberal State find the energy it needs? Responsibility, openness to others, moral resources adequate to achieve a lasting unity, sense of duty and not just rights and claims, are things that cannot be bought on the market. A strict secular-Kantian ethics is possible, but it will always be a reserve for the few. And what about the idea that only by putting aside God one can develop a true ethical life? The latter is the position taken by E. Lecaldano: "Only he who is agnostic or atheist can actually put at the center of his existence the demands of ethics"<sup>6</sup>. He reverses the position, wrongly attributed to the believer, which should argue that only the believer is moral. In fact believers and nonbelievers rely on natural moral law inscribed by the Creator in every human heart.

In addition some knowledge of existence's ultimate goal is necessary for human beings to be able to act with justice. The argument should be deepened in the direction of the individual's act of freedom and its relation to good: even those who, adopting an atheist conceptualization, turn to good as rectitude because it is good, are existentially directed toward the ultimate goal and God<sup>7</sup>.

To sum up, I would confirm the primary contribution of Christianity to a good society: the Christian leaven maintains the integrity and the dignity of the person as principle, author and purpose of social life; Christianity with its agape knows how to cater the missed lives; it fosters a sense of responsibility towards others.

## 2. TRUTH AND COGNITIVISM: DEMOCRACY IS A SYSTEM SENSITIVE TO THE TRUTH

While the motivational influence of religion is or can be understood by those who are not believers or even hostile to religion, the link between democracy, truth and the cognitive religious contribution to democracy is strongly called into question and requires greater attention: in fact a widespread view holds that politics and the liberal-secular State should counteract the reference to the truth: Kelsen has made popular the idea that democracy requires a relativistic culture. On the contrary the cognitive contribution of Christianity should be proposed and put to the test in comparison with competing visions, being aware of the possible benefits for both Christianity and the secular State: this one needs a lot of historical, judicial, scientific truths, as well as those most existential<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Etica senza Dio*, Laterza, Rome 2006, p. XI.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Maritain, *La dialectique immanente du premier acte de liberté*, OC, vol. IX, pp. 323–352.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Nicoletti, *Democrazia e verità*, in: *Il futuro della democrazia. Annuario di filosofia 2011*, a cura di V. Possenti, Mimesis, Milan 2011, pp. 164–179. Not only the trial of Jesus but also

I start with an assumption that presently arises less objections, in comparison with the past: the secular State cannot be bearer of a secularist vision of life and politics and cannot assign to secular and scientific conceptions precedence over religious ones. A key phrase of Habermas says:

The religious traditions have a specific effect of articulation for the moral intuitions, especially regarding the sensitive forms of civilized coexistence. This potential makes religious speech, in appropriate policy issues, a serious candidate for possible truth contents, which can later be translated from the lexicon of a particular religious community in a language universally accessible<sup>9</sup>.

The most important part of this quotation is not in the recognition given to the ethical force of religious traditions, but in admitting that democracies are *sensitive to the truth*, so that the public indifference to the truth is a bad deal for liberal democracies. Many years ago an American public philosopher, W. Lippmann, had grasped the nature of the problem: “The defenders of a free way of life fight for the legal guarantees against any repression of opinions. But the town is empty, because the public philosophy came out and all that the defenders of freedom have yet to protect, is only public neutrality and public agnosticism”<sup>10</sup>. He added that the public philosophy, that advocated the path of human rights in XVIII century and beyond, began to enter into crisis when the highest truths by which it was inspired, were understood by liberal philosophers as a private matter: “And so the liberal western democracies were the first great society to consider a totally private affair the set of beliefs which shape the character of citizens” (p. 89). It is evoked here a serious lack of civic-moral education which affects long since liberal societies, and which does not seem solved: the educational lack is for them a huge ball and chain<sup>11</sup>.

Scientism and naturalism weaken the understanding of religious positions by the enlightened secularized citizens, who cannot confine themselves to see in the religious traditions only obscurantism and dogmatism, or to consider religious citizens as a species threatened with extinction.

### 3.

The dialectical dialogue between religious conscience and secular conscience happens currently according to intensities which vary widely in relation to different

---

the death sentence of Socrates show how delicate is the relationship between politics, democracy and truth, and how one-sided is the interpretation of Jesus' trial by Kelsen.

<sup>9</sup> J. Habermas, *Tra scienza e fede*, Laterza, Rome 2006, p. 34n.

<sup>10</sup> W. Lippmann, *La filosofia pubblica*, Ed. di Comunità, Milan 1957, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> On this matter see the book of mine *L'uomo postmoderno. Tecnica religione politica*, c. IV, Marietti, Milano 2009.

forms of secularism and secular State, ranging from a minimum to a maximum in the way of understanding the civil role of religion<sup>12</sup>.

Starting from the minimum, the hard secularism expresses a clear hostility to religion: it should not have any role in inspiring political decisions and in shaping institutions. Such a form of secularism often brings in itself an assessment on truth, in the sense that there is nothing over and above the *saeculum*. On the epistemological level this implies the ontological naturalism (nothing exists except natural beings), the postulate of closure of the physical universe, and on the ethical level the assumption that religions are factors of division and intolerance. This last element is still present in the neo-Enlightenment scheme, which in Italy is backed by the supporters of the secularism, and not infrequently by some important newspapers. You will be surprised by reading under the pen of one of its key player the need to “neutralize the anti-democratic force of truth, to which is exposed any religion, especially if monotheistic,” which seems to express an aversion to the very idea of truth, and especially to that of theological truth, considered nothing but ‘dogma’, that is the most problematic and suspect species of truth<sup>13</sup>.

The question of tolerance can not lead to relativism and signify acceptance of all forms of life and the parallel relativisation of one's well-considered convictions. It is just and fair that I respect civilly and morally the other, but without being obliged to accept his convictions and to change my meditate persuasions. I underline that in certain respects, tolerance is easier for the relativist who compares values considered interchangeable, than for a citizen convinced after due consideration of the truth that he professes. In any case when the truth-claims come into play, two major factors appear: the claim of universality that the truth implies, and the view that there may be not only different lives and values, but also wrong ones.

---

<sup>12</sup> It is not always easy to distinguish between secularism and secularization. Here I refer to secularism in order to understand the doctrines that oppose *saeculum* and religion, and to secularization to allude rather to a process of distinction between religion and politics. The secularization which confines religion in the private realm, is a “destructive secularization”.

<sup>13</sup> G. Zagrebelsky, *Contro l'etica della verità*, Laterza, Rome 2008, p. 164. The author adds: “the modern State was formed directly on the fundamental premise of religions' dissolution as the cement of political coexistence, for they showed themselves not joining forces but of division and conflict, so they had to be separated from the political dimension and conducted to the dimension of civil liberties” (p. 17). It is unfortunate that the present “neo-enlightenment” thinkers do not exceed the constant reference to the religious wars between ‘500 and ‘600 (four centuries ago), because the way they manage the issue of religion in the public sphere, haunted as it is by that past, is of little help in understanding the contemporary world. The greatest tragedies of modernity have emerged from totalitarian, atheist and anti-humanist option, not from religion.

Zagrebelsky raises an opposition between faith and dogma, arguing that it is not faith as such but the dogma – its degeneration – to create problems for democracy (see p. 156). It seems to me that the term dogma is used here in a theologically incorrect way, diverting it from its fundamental theological significance. It is hard to see how the fundamental tenets of Christianity as the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word, the Church as the Body of Christ and other truths communicated in the creed can be dangerous for democracy.



The demand of respect for the other places on the shoulders of those who believe in truth and better life forms, a burden heavier than that laid on the “relativist”.

Another form of secularism I would call “immanent”, supports the full self-sufficiency of reason and ethics capable of complete self-legislation, a position which is roughly that of Kant and liberalism (I will return soon about this): it leads to understand religion as a private fact. Another form is that one of “moderate” secularism, which maintains the diversity of religion and politics, Church and State, but does not deny the possibility of their cooperation for the promotion of man. In this case we encounter a *positive secularism* and an *open secular State*.

Even the most severe secularist position has to deal with the permanence of the religions in the strongly secularized Western societies. Without fear of contradiction it can be argued that the forecast of a part of the Enlightenment that religion would disappear, failed: the outcome is still suspended and open.

#### 4. BAYLE, VICO, KANT

In short the reference to the truth can not be completely neutralized in democracy as a political form sensitive to the truth. The question is: how can last a deliberative democracy – one in which arguments are exchanged, and a political will is formed through “good reasons” – if the theme of truth is banished from the public sphere? Or must we think that the only form of truth is that one which comes from science?

Tocqueville saw clearly what is at stake, fixing his position in a famous phrase about the need to have common foundations and common beliefs in social life:

There is almost no human action, however particular it is, which does not spring from a general idea that men have conceived of God, his relationship with humanity, nature of soul and of duties towards their fellows. It is hard to deny that these are not the source from which everything else flows. The men, therefore, have an immense interest to get firm ideas on God, the soul and the general duties toward the Creator and their fellows, since the doubt on those points would abandon all their actions to chance and would condemn them, in a sense, to disorder and impotence. This is, therefore, the matter on which it is necessary that everyone has firm ideas, and unfortunately it is also one where it is more difficult to consolidate their own ideas with the sole effort of reason<sup>14</sup>.

So writing, Tocqueville argued the central role of truth in politics and democracy, and opened a space for the task of religion within the public sphere, as the only recourse to reason is not ultimately decisive. Note that Tocqueville makes specific reference to God, the soul and duties toward others, and this puts him under suspicion nowadays, when one thinks that these theological issues are to be set aside and that we can get away staying only on a moral immanent plane.

<sup>14</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *La democrazia in America*, l. III, Rizzoli, Milan 1995, p. 437.



Tocqueville therefore responds positively to the question that we now introduce: has the knowledge of God a vital importance for the good life and good society? He does not seem to side with the position of P. Bayle, for whom (see *Pensées diverses sur les comètes*, 1682) can happen and it happened that people without religion can follow a honest and orderly life: thus the atheist is not necessarily immoral, and his personal and social ethics would not need a religious and transcendent support. Bayle, raising the question of the relationship between morality and religion, attempted to show that a honest ethical conduct is possible without religion, and supported the Enlightenment idea that man is corrupted more by idolatry than by the absence of religion.

G. B. Vico criticizes Bayle position with strong words:

Wherefore, as soon as religion is lost among the people, nothing remains for them to live in society, nor a shield to defend himself, nor means to counsel, nor a support wherever they hold up [...] Let Bayle see whether it can be nations in the world without any knowledge of God [...] for only through religions the people do virtuous actions<sup>15</sup>.

In these expressions Vico manifests the religious origin of the peoples and civilizations. On a similar path moves J. Ratzinger, for whom “in all historical known cultures religion is an essential element of culture, or rather its decisive center; it is what defines the structure of values and therefore the internal order of the cultural system”<sup>16</sup>.

Kant maintains the autonomy of ethics from religion, in part supporting a position similar to that of Bayle: “Morality, as it is based on the concept of man [...] needs neither the idea of another being superior to man, by which he knows his duty, nor a motive other than the law itself [...]. Morality therefore in no way needs religion... but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason”<sup>17</sup>. It would seem that for Kant religion has no relevance for ethics, but he then adds that morality necessarily leads to religion, through which it thus extends to the idea of an omnipotent moral legislator (p. 6).

The Bayle answer is that one of Kant express something true in the sense that it is conceivable an orientation to the good moral behavior and righteous action even without the *explicit* idea of God, but are inadequate in various ways and not likely to catch the link between knowledge of God and social life, the relevance of the first on the second, and the link between ethics and religion. Their relations are very complex, and it seems difficult not to opt for a middle way that leaves aside the two poles of an ethics fully adequate without any religion and of

<sup>15</sup> G. Vico, *Scienza nuova*, Ricciardi, Naples 1953, nn. 1109–1110.

<sup>16</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Fede Verità Tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo*, Cantagalli, Siena 2003, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> *La religione entro i limiti della sola ragione*, Laterza, Bari 1979, p. 3.

an ethics totally absorbed by religion. We cannot exclude the religion's cognitive contribution to the force of the moral life and to the best knowledge of man and his destiny, which a modernization entirely left to sciences would turn in the sense of a positivist objectification of human being<sup>18</sup>. A more integrated knowledge of human being, is now the area where the religious tradition of Christianity can help most effectively projects of good life and good society.

### OPEN SOCIETY

In the secular and constitutional State an open society exists when is present a plurality of moral, philosophical and religious conceptions. From the multiplicity of views and values does not follow a sort of "break ranks", for the open society is based on firm values such as respect for others, dignity, freedom, equality, humanitarianism, rule of law, to which Christianity has contributed mightily (as claimed by Maritain in *Integral Humanism* and Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies*). The appeal to the idea of open society is fascinating, because nobody would like to live in a closed society, but it is little more than an undifferentiated appeal if its meaning and scope are not clarified. Now it is true that the free and in-depth comparison between different scientific theories and different philosophical positions is a stimulus for cognitive progress; however a society, in which basic moral and personalist values were not stable, might not be open but crumbling.

In my opinion, the Popper's representation of open society, and perhaps even more that of his disciples, wrongly transposes the epistemological theory of fallibility and the strife between different scientific theories, in a sort of universal method that is always valid, whatever the field of discourse: the extension of the fallibilism to any social context is not convincing. In a secular-democratic society the debate should start from some basic "traditional" values, which should be deepened, but that cannot be invented every morning again.

---

<sup>18</sup> In tying together the knowledge of God and good political life, we end up, as Thomists and not as Kantians, to put more or less consciously in relation theoretical reason and practical reason. They work in harmony. But here's a question which I signal in passing: admitted the fallibility of human reason, it is easier that speculative reason or the practical one be in error? And which of these two errors results in more serious consequences? Just a big problem...

## CONCLUSIONS

5.1. The cognitive and motivational contribution of religion to State and society, summarized in the famous saying of Böckenförde (“the secular liberal State rests on foundations that it cannot guarantee”<sup>19</sup>), shows that the State cannot but have an interest in religion: without an open, amiable and tolerant religion, civil society might break up, declining towards a commercial society of production and exchange. Kant, who started from the abstract assumption of the uselessness of religion for ethics and of ethics’ self-sufficiency, later on recognized that in practice things are different. Without a certain degree of morality got ready by religion, those ethical principles that underpin the co-existence and on which the political authority must count, hardly could survive. This is a reason frequently put forward to show the importance of religion for a good life: and I have no reason to deny it. I would add that religion offers a boost to the person towards love and others’ respect<sup>20</sup>.

The State cannot therefore be completely secularized in the sense of doing without any ethical and religious inspiration, nor the political reason is totally self-sufficient. A State founded only on reason is an utopia: if we are aware of the limits of the sole reason, we are open to complement the *sola ratio*. On the other hand the religions’ contribution to the civil life needs the help of reason (and vice-versa) in a reciprocal control in order to avoid the respective pathologies: that is an outstanding achievement of Habermas-Ratzinger dialogue in 2004<sup>21</sup>.

This attitude is behind an ethics of doubt, sometimes recommended. When it is systematically adopted, eventually it dries up the sources of life and action: the Cartesian methodical doubt did not give a good account of itself, having led to a geometrical *ratio* that leaves out everything that does not agree with its restricted measures. A reasonable ethics of the doubt invites to verify the degree of truth of own well considered convictions, by establishing their foundations.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. W. Böckenförde, *Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation und Utopie*, in: *Säkularisation und Utopie. Ebracher Studien. Ernst Forsthoff zum 65. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln 1967, p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> In this paper I kept in the background an important question raised by J. Rawls: “How is it possible – or is it – for those of faith, as well as the nonreligious (secular), to endorse a constitutional regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline?” (*The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, in: *The Law of Peoples*, Harvard University Press 1999, p. 150n.). The question of Rawls is directed not only to believers, but also to secular people. Confining myself to the first ones, I believe that the fundamental truths of Christianity are outside the constitutional system, and that their acceptance by citizens depends on cultural and spiritual factors, which only secondarily can be referred to the constitutional form.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. J. Habermas, J. Ratzinger, *Etica, religione e Stato liberale*, “Humanitas” 2004, no. 2, pp. 232–260.

5.2. *The post-liberal point of view* which I adopt, also asks: can the individualistic tradition ensure a form of civic republicanism with a solidarity that extends beyond the realm of private relationships? The first task of politics is to safeguard the basic rights (and duties), without which there is no political society. So it is part of policy makers responsibility to safeguard those religions and cultures that consider the human being as a creature endowed with dignity and rights, proceeding from the hand of God. The secular State cannot take a neutral stance before cultures and religions that undermine human dignity.

From these sides the present situation is disquieting, for the liberal radical streams opt for an individualistic and non-dignitarian version of human rights, which exhibits four basic misunderstandings: 1) the whole scope of the human rights is reduced only to freedom rights, forgetting that several basic rights are not freedom rights (right to life, to work, to natural family, to health); 2) the balance between rights and duties is largely shifted in favor of rights and mere claims; 3) with the help of technique, the subject wants to reshape the real anthropological differences up to the point to cancel them; 4) the principle of non-discrimination is applied in a wholesale manner.

An open religion, an humanistic ethics, a “dignitarian” concept of human person are in my opinion the best independent foundation of the secular State. On this matter I refer again to Tocqueville: what he wrote about the United States of America, namely that religion is in them the independent foundation of the *res publica*, is valid universally<sup>22</sup>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Böckenförde W., *Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation und Utopie*, in: *Säkularisation und Utopie. Ebracher Studien. Ernst Forsthoff zum 65. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln 1967.
- Etica senza Dio*, Laterza, Rome 2006.
- Habermas J., *Tra scienza e fede*, Laterza, Rome 2006.
- Habermas J., Ratzinger J., *Etica, religione e Stato liberale*”, “Humanitas” 2004, no. 2, pp. 232–260.
- L'uomo postmoderno. Tecnica religione politica*, Marietti, Milano 2009.
- La religione entro i limiti della sola ragione*, Laterza, Bari 1979.
- Lippmann W., *La filosofia pubblica*, Ed. di Comunità, Milan 1957.
- Maritain J., *La dialectique immanente du premier acte de liberté*, OC, vol. IX, pp. 323–352.
- Nicoletti M., *Democrazia e verità*, in: *Il futuro della democrazia. Annuario di filosofia 2011*, a cura di V. Possenti, Mimesis, Milan 2011, pp. 164–179.

<sup>22</sup> “Religion, which in America will never mix directly to the government, must therefore be regarded as the first of political institutions, because if it does not give the Americans the taste of freedom, it greatly facilitates the use of it? (*La democrazia in America*, p. 295). See also I. II, c. IX.

- Possenti V., *L'uomo postmoderno. Tecnica religione politica*, Marietti, Milan 2009.
- Possenti V., *Le ragioni della laicità*, Rubbettino, Soveria 2007.
- Possenti V., *Le società liberali al bivio. Lineamenti di filosofia della società*, Marietti, Genoa 1992 (*Zarys filozofii polityki. Społeczeństwa liberalne na rozdrożu*, Polish trans. A. Fligel, PTTA, Lublin 2012).
- Possenti V., *Oltre l'Illuminismo. Il messaggio sociale cristiano*, Edizioni Paoline, Rome 1992 (*Katolicka nauka społeczna wobec dziedzictw oświecenia*, Polish trans. K. Kubis, WAM, Kraków 2000).
- Possenti V., *Religione e vita civile. Il cristianesimo nel postmoderno*, Armando, Rome 2001 (*Religia i życie publiczne. Chrześcijaństwo w dobie ponowoczesnej*, Polish trans. T. Żeleźnik, Pax, Warszawa 2005).
- Possenti V., *The Human Being as Believer and Citizen*, "Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly" 2005, no. 4, Winter 2005.
- Ratzinger J., *Fede Verità Tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo*, Cantagalli, Siena 2003.
- Rawls J., *The Law of Peoples*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999.
- Strauss L., *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*, Akademie – Verlag, Berlin 1930.
- Tocqueville A. de, *La democrazia in America*, t. 3, Rizzoli, Milan 1995.
- Vico G., *Scienza nuova*, Ricciardi, Naples 1953.
- Weber M., *L'etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo*, BUR, Milan 1991.
- Zagrebelsky G., *Contro l'etica della verità*, Laterza, Rome 2008.

### Summary

The article analyzes the relationship between man and God. Religion is a primary level of the human life, and involves individuals, human groups and communities. Therefore it has a deep social impact. Present situation invites to face the always resurgent theologico-political problem, which includes the nexus between religion and politics, the role of religion in society, and basically the question whether from God's will derive instructions for a good society. Many modern thinkers, from Machiavelli to Hobbes and Marx eliminates the religion, so the life of individual and society, seeing it as a threat to the good of society. But like any permanent problem, the theologico-political issue is present in the past and present century; it is still active and in fact emerges strongly in recent and less recent thought (J. Habermas, J. Maritain, J. Ratzinger, J. Rawls, Ch. Taylor), which rediscover the presence and role of religion in society.

Keywords: state, religion, secularization, common good, philosophy, politics

## PAŃSTWO ŚWIECKIE A WKŁAD RELIGII DO DOBRA SPOŁECZEŃSTWA

## Streszczenie

Autor artykułu analizuje relację, jaka zachodzi pomiędzy człowiekiem a Bogiem i religią w odniesieniu do życia ludzkiego, tak na płaszczyźnie życia indywidualnego, jak i zbiorowego. Zwraca uwagę na głęboki wpływ religii na życie społeczne. Cel, jaki sobie stawia, to ukazać wkład religii w dobro społeczeństwa. Religia, którą analizuje pod tym aspektem, jest religią chrześcijańską. Autor rozważa rolę religii w zachodnich społecznościach, które charakteryzują się demokratycznymi i świeckimi rządami oraz silnym trendami sekularyzacyjnymi. Autor zwraca uwagę, że wielu nowożytnych myślicieli, a także i współczesnych, począwszy do Machiavellego do Hobbes'a i Marksa i ich kontynuatorów, programowo ruguje religię, tak z życia indywidualnego, jak i społecznego, widząc w niej zagrożenie dla dobra społeczeństwa. Z tej racji autor chce pokazać nieprawdziwość tych ujęć i przywołać argumenty nie tylko historyczne, ale i merytoryczne na rzecz wielkiego wkładu religii chrześcijańskiej do budowania dobra ludzkich społeczności, przywołując dyskusję, jaką na ten temat prowadzili m.in.: J. Habermas, J. Maritain, J. Ratzinger, J. Rawls, Ch. Taylor, a także C. Schmitt i inni, w której wskazuje się na ścisłe powiązanie religii z jakością życia społeczności ludzkich.

Słowa kluczowe: państwo, rząd, religia, sekularyzacja, dobro wspólne, filozofia, polityka