

# The importance of religion in the development of our societies today and tomorrow

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It is a privilege and an honor to be here with you today to try to give some contributions to this discussion that deals about promoting humanity and transforming the World from a Catholic profile. As it was announced, my talk will be focused on the importance of religion in the development of our societies.

Human beings live under a kind of illusion about time. I think that, along history, mankind has constantly repeated the same sentence “we live in an unprecedented historical moment”. But I wonder, if all times have been unprecedented, does the Bible fail in Ecclesiastes, when it teaches us that there is nothing new under the Sun?

The truth is that this time is our time, for better or for worse. No one from the past or the future will live it for us. To live in the present time we need to understand this question: How is our world when it comes to religion?

Let’s start with statistics. We all know that surveys are fallible and unreliable, and this is especially true when the deal with religion, due mostly to conceptual issues (what is religion?), to the kind of questions asked or to the population target surveyed. Notwithstanding the foregoing, surveys offer some hints or clues about religion in the world nowadays. According to a recent Gallup International poll published in April 2017, 62% of people in the world define themselves as religious, 74% of people globally believe we have a soul and 71% believe in God; while 56% believe in heaven, 54% in life after death and 49% in hell<sup>1</sup>.

Simultaneously, a report conducted by Pew Forum reveals that the new home of Christianity is America and Africa, not the Middle East and Europe. Two examples of this: Brazil has more than twice as many Catholics as Italy and Nigeria now has more than twice as many Protestants (broadly defined to

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup International, *Religion Prevails in the World*, 2017, accessed 21 November 2017, in <http://gallup-international.bg/en/Publications/2017/373-Religion-prevails-in-the-world>.

include Anglicans and independent churches) as Germany, the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation<sup>2</sup>.

It is a commonplace that Western civilization in general and Europe in particular are experiencing a process of secularization. Secularization is a complex phenomenon in which many constituents meet, like institutional affiliation to churches, worship attendance, beliefs, cultural belonging, moral behavior, institutional dimension, etc. In recent times, sociologists have distinguished different groups related to their religious beliefs:

- those who belong to churches or religious groups;
- those who declare themselves spiritual, but do not belong to churches or religious groups;
- those who believe in religion, but do not attend religious worship regularly (believing without belonging)<sup>3</sup>;
- those who do not believe in religion but stem in high value the cultural, moral and social role of religion (belonging without believing)<sup>4</sup>;
- and those indifferent or hostile to religion or spirituality.

These different groups may interact in different ways. Spiritual and religious may coincide in the same people<sup>5</sup>. And non-believers may feel the social or institutional role of the Church more intensely than many religious people. In several cases, these groups are not watertight compartments and they show the complexity of measuring the significance of secularization.

In any respect, the figures contradict the plain conclusion of Europe as a secularized continent: in a 2015 survey, the Eurobarometer concludes that the percentage of Christians in the EU countries is currently 72% (45% Catholic, 11% Protestant, 10% Orthodox, 6% others), and the percentage of those with no religion is 24% (10% atheist, 14% agnostic). The percentage of Muslims is stated as 1.8%, Jews 0.3%, Buddhists 0.4% and Hindus 0.3%. Thirteen of the 28 EU Member States can be classified as predominantly Catholic (with a proportion of over 60%), three as predominantly Orthodox and two as

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2 Pew Research Center, "The Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population", accessed 21 November 2017, in <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

3 G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, 1st. ed., Blackwell, Oxford ; Cambridge, Mass, 1994; "El "tercer círculo" de los creyentes no practicantes", *Acepresa*, 31/12/2009, accessed 27 November 2017, in <http://62.22.50.72/articles/el-tercer-circulo-de-los-creyentes-no-practicantes/>.

4 B. Mountford, *Christian Atheist: Belonging Without Believing*, O Books, 2011.

5 A. Raney; D. Cox; R. P. Jones, "Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious", *Public Religion Research Institute*, 2017, accessed 21 November 2017, en <https://www.prii.org/research/religiosity-and-spirituality-in-america/>.

predominantly Protestant<sup>6</sup>. In some intellectual circles, the intuitive idea that religious population will increase in the future because religious people have higher fertility rates has gained strength<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps this argument can be valid at a micro scale, if we take as reference for instance the Haredi population in Israel<sup>8</sup>. Maybe it can not be extrapolated to the whole World.

In this landscape, there are three actors who may influence the presence and importance of religion: Governments, Markets and Mass Media. These three actors have a common feature: they are what some philosophers call “technostructures”<sup>9</sup>, impersonal corporate entities which include technicians and skilled professionals. Governments, Markets and Mass Media are part of the sign of the times. They mean both a threat and an opportunity for religions.

Let’s start with some ideas about Governments. Since the beginning of Modernity, Governments have gained the monopoly of force (Hobbes), in exchange of a promise of preserving social peace and guaranteeing human rights. And all this is quite important, indeed. More recently, the Welfare State has amplified enormously its influence in areas like health, the care of the elders, the immigrants or the orphans, the education of disfavored groups, etc. These areas were, and are, an important dimension of the mission of religiously inspired organizations who nowadays face a twofold challenge: Complying with the legal conditions that governments require to develop charitable activities and complying with the requirements to obtain public funds. And as you well know complying with this might be quite difficult, if not impossible, when those conditions are at odds with the organizational religious ethos. At times, States appear before the citizens as distant structures, lacking soul and credibility, afflicted with the evil of political corruption. And this is one of the reasons why religions continue to play a fundamental role in the area of charity, they instill confidence<sup>10</sup>.

Markets have become global. Markets command the world today. Markets are so powerful and dominant, that they impose their rules on other sectors of society. Religion is not immune to the influence of those rules. Under a market

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6 Y. El-Menouar, “The religious landscape in Europe”, *Europeinfos. Christian Perspectives on the EU*, 209, 2017, accessed 21 November 2017, in <http://www.europe-infos.eu/the-religious-landscape-in-europe>.

7 E. P. Kaufmann, *Shall the religious inherit the earth?: demography and politics in the twenty-first century*, Profile, London, 2010.

8 Y. Elizur; L. Malkin, *The War Within: Israel’s Ultra-Orthodox Threat to Democracy and the Nation*, 1 edition, The Overlook Press, New York; London, 2013.

9 A. Llano; R. Spaemann, *Europa: ¿Comunidad de valores u ordenamiento jurídico? El carácter relacional de los valores cívicos*, Fundación Iberdrola, Madrid, 2004, pp. 31-32.

10 L. R. Iannaccone; E. Berman, “Religious Extremism: The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly”, *Public Choice*, vol. 128, 1-2, 2006.

scheme, religion is conceived as a commodity in the big marketplace of ideas and beliefs<sup>11</sup>. Religion has become something that consumers can pick and choose, mixing different beliefs according to personal preferences, a cafeteria-style religion as it is called. Cafeteria-style religion may imply accommodation, softening requirements, dogmas, ethos, etc., losing or changing its identity to gain followers in a very competitive market. Is it advisable to do that? Moreover, in the long run do strong religions (as they are labeled by secularist sectors) gain anything in this trade-off?

Marketed society has accelerated globalization. Besides, global markets (among other constituents) have provoked what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has labeled “a cultural climate change”<sup>12</sup>. The conditions under which religion may flourish in this cultural climate change are new. In addition, these conditions affect not only religion, but the whole human ecology Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have written about<sup>13</sup>. In this vein, the task of the Church is reduced more and more to preserve what is human<sup>14</sup>.

There are several opinions about Mass media and religion. Globalization changes the perception of the information that has been received, so that very distant news seems to be nearest than problems of relatives or neighbors. Mass media has altered partially our way of perceiving, processing and understanding the World. Quite often, reality dwells not around us, but only inside our smartphone or laptop screen, it is disembodied: “in vitro veritas”<sup>15</sup>. We see images, not persons; perhaps we see problems, conflicts, but circumscribed to a screen. Mass media centers our attention in what is “newsworthy”, which means violence, unusual situations, strange behavior... The media may be more inclined to teach the “evil” of religions rather than their goodness, which is not newsworthy. How can religions show their real face before the World?

In sum, Governments, Markets and Media may lessen or may amplify the visibility or the importance of religion in our societies. However, religion is important in itself, notwithstanding the influence of Governments, Markets or Mass media. Let me show you some proof of this.

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11 *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919), Dissenting opinion Oliver Wendell Holmes. The marketplace of ideas metaphor born in the philosophy of John Milton and John Stuart Mill.

12 J. Sacks, “Cultural climate change and the future of religion”, *MercatorNet*, 2017, accessed 22 November 2017, in <https://www.mercatornet.com/mobile/view/cultural-climate-change-and-the-future-of-religion>.

13 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centessimus Annus*, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1991, n. 39; Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lodato Si'*, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2015.

14 F. Hadjadj, *La suerte de haber nacido en nuestro tiempo*, Rialp, Madrid, 2016, p. 34.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

In their social experiment, Richard Sosis and Bradley Ruffle pointed out that collective rituals have an important impact on cooperative decisions, so that a comparative study between two *kibuzzim*—one of religious believers, another of secular—yields more solidarity results in favor of the religious one<sup>16</sup>. Harvard University Professor Dominique Johnson, also argues that transcendent compensation seems to improve human cooperation<sup>17</sup>. Another empirical research of Harvard Business School shows that people are more conducive to generosity with their goods precisely the days of worship, what it has called the "Sunday effect"<sup>18</sup>. John Atran, anthropologist at the National Center for Scientific Research in France, and Jeremy Ginges, associate professor of psychology, demonstrated that only a small part of the wars of which we have current and historical record of are caused by religious reasons<sup>19</sup>. Another recent comparative sociological study shows that public support for democracy is more intense in the educated classes of both Catholic and Muslim countries; contrary to conventional belief, which assumes that the most fervent believers are less receptive to democracy. It turns out that religious practice has a positive impact on the desire for democracy in both types of societies<sup>20</sup>. In general, religion can be a positive element to achieve democratic regimes in authoritarian countries, if religions have some detachment from political power<sup>21</sup>. A work published in 2007, showed actions of pacification carried out by people of different religions<sup>22</sup>. Many faith-based organizations work specifically for the promotion of peace and the resolution of conflicts: among them the Catholic Relief Services or the Community of Sant'Egidio. A recent study focused on Europe shows a positive correlation between religiosity and happiness<sup>23</sup>. Another one centered in the United States concludes that there is

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- 16 B. Ruffle; R. Sosis, "Does it Pay to Pray? Evaluating the Economic Return to Religious Ritual", *Harvard NOM Working Papers*, Working Paper No. 03-50, 2003, accessed 23 November 2017, in <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=441285>.
- 17 D. Johnson; J. Bering, "Hand of God, Mind of Man: Punishment and Cognition in the Evolution of Cooperation", *Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 4, 1, 2006, accessed 23 November 2017, in <https://doi.org/10.1177/147470490600400119>.
- 18 D. K. Malhotra, "(When) are Religious People Nicer? Religious Salience and the «Sunday Effect» on Pro-Social Behavior", *Social Science Research Network*, Rochester, NY, 2008, accessed 26 March 2014, in <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1297275>.
- 19 S. Atran; J. Ginges, "Religious and Sacred Imperatives in Human Conflict", *Science*, vol. 336, 6083, 2012, accessed 26 March 2014, in <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/336/6083/855>.
- 20 E. J. Bomhoff; M. Gu, "Religion and Support for Democracy: A Comparative Study for Catholic and Muslim Countries", *SSRN eLibrary*, 2011, accessed 10 July 2013, in [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1740133#](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1740133#).
- 21 M. Künkler; J. Leininger, "The multi-faceted role of religious actors in democratization processes: empirical evidence from five young democracies", *Democratization*, vol. 16, 6, 2009.
- 22 D. Little, *Peacemakers in action: profiles of religion in conflict resolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- 23 J. Cuñado; J. G. Sison; R. Calderón, "How does religious belief and practice affect happiness? A European perspective", *The Association of Religion Data Archives*, accessed 25 November 2017, in [http://www.thearda.com/asrec/archive/papers/Sison\\_Religious\\_Belief.pdf](http://www.thearda.com/asrec/archive/papers/Sison_Religious_Belief.pdf)

a correlation between income improvement and institutional religious belonging, more stable than in secular groups adherence<sup>24</sup>.

In conclusion, religion is important and relevant, from different points of view: demography, community ties, peacebuilding, spreading happiness... At the same time, the "cultural climate change" (in which Governments, Markets and Media have a huge influence) sets new environmental conditions for religion to flourish. How can religion tackle these new conditions? Following the previously mentioned Jonathan Sacks, we can say that there are three possible options for religion nowadays:

- The first is to retire to closed communities, which is partly the proposal of the so called Benedict Option<sup>25</sup>, especially in vogue today, and that is discussed and contested by many.

- The second could be to conquer society by force, the proposal of fundamentalism. This is an option which contradicts the Christian message. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "the Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; she imposes nothing"<sup>26</sup>.

- The third is to re-inspire or regenerate society, giving people a new form of hope, proposing religion in the public square. And what does religion mean in the public square? Quoting Jonathan Sacks: religion means "a consecration of the bonds that connect us, religion as the redemption of our solitude, religion as loyalty and love, religion as altruism and compassion, religion as covenant and commitment, religion that consecrates marriage, that sustains community and helps reweave the torn fabric of society. (...) religion can be a minority, but it can be a huge influence."<sup>27</sup>

True: religion can prosper in this new scenario. And I think that you can play a big role in all this.

Thank you.

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24 J. J. Park, "Religion and Income Inequality: The Paradox of the South", *Huffington Post*, 07/29/2013, accessed 27 November 2017, in [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/julie-j-park/religion-and-income-inequ\\_b\\_3659949.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/julie-j-park/religion-and-income-inequ_b_3659949.html).

25 R. Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Sentinel, New York, New York, 2017.

26 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7th 1990, n. 39.

27 J. Sacks, "Cultural climate change and the future of religion", cit.