

Government: Religious and Democratic

I realize the subject I chose for my presentation today is far too general, and that the literature about it is abundant. But this is exactly where or why the personal reflections of a dilettante may be of interest. In this case, my reflections begin with a meeting I attended last month in Florence. It was organized by the Pope John II Foundation and took place at the Institute for the Innocents, a convent built around the 15th century to cater for abandoned newborns. The main theme of the conference was ‘The Mediterranean And the City’, and as far as I could make out its organizers wished to highlight two main features connected to this subject, the first being to recall to mind the long-standing tradition of independent cultural and commercial exchanges that existed between cities around that sea, and the second being the prominence of the *citizens*’ role in the shaping of these exchanges. Together, of course, those two features meant that cities like Florence, through their citizenry, could and did play crucial peace-making roles at an international level, and the issue at the conference therefore being raised was whether the present-day Mediterranean city was not being denied such a crucial international role by virtue of the growing power and encroachment of the State, and whether human beings were not therefore the worse off for this development.

The significance of the theme of the conference, whose planning predated the political convulsions that started taking place in the North African countries of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, took on a special urgency and became clearer as news were beginning to reach of the drowning of people fleeing in packed boats and ships from the southern to the northern shores of the Mediterranean, seeking asylum in Italian coastal cities, and as debates on migration policies –already started in Italy but also in Europe more generally- centered now on the state of emergency which was declared by the Italian Government, warning its European neighbors of possible illegal infiltration of Tunisian

immigrants across its borders. But in the Pope John II Conference in Florence, which was co-sponsored by the City itself, the atmosphere was visibly different, the emergency felt having more to do with the human tragedy which was unfolding rather than with state-borders, and where first-hand accounts were being related by activists who had just returned from Lampedusa in Sicily, where asylum seekers were being offered warm hospitality at the hands of the small town's citizens. Here, then, the theme of the conference was being highlighted –as I saw this- in a very dramatic way, which I wish now to try to simplify by breaking it down to three of its basic components: first there was the Church, which was holding the conference, and seeking through it to highlight and to reawaken interest in transnational or extra-state religious values, making those out to be inter-substitutable with what one generally regards as human values; then there was the city, where the conference was being hosted. This was being presented as a paradigm of an independent political player that, because of its citizenry's size and the condition of human proximity making human relations in the political arena facial and direct, can therefore still retain- unlike the situation of human diffuseness in large States- a politics informed by *human warmth* or the human touch. A vivid example of this –as we were given to believe- was being witnessed in Lampedusa, where fleeing immigrants were being warmly received and catered for. And thirdly, there was the State, a distant and cold democratic governance structure whose decisions and policies are typically defined, not by the human element but by what the State perceives to be its larger –let me here say *materialist* interest –in this particular case, jealously trying to protect its borders and population profile, being more mindful of itself than of others seeking help.

The message I saw emerging from this triad was clear: religious values- those like charity, compassion, hospitality and brotherhood, to give but some examples of what I said are generally regarded to be values which are upheld by the Church and which we take to be *humanistic*, can only genuinely flourish

or be pursued at the political level in small human communities, primarily families and small groups, but also in such larger communities as those found in towns and small cities, rather than in larger political structures such as States. By the time political dealings and decision-making reaches the level of the State and its various organs, and has become abstracted from the conditions of human warmth that is typically found in small communities, values which can only be defined by such human warmth come to be replaced by those defined by human diffuseness, or by practices and decisions which could well turn out to be *heartless*! This, even though, or typically when, such States are democracies, and can boast having both values and beliefs of their own!

Given the convent's humane mission as background to our deliberations, I will not hide from you a fleeting wave of weakness that I felt- a softness for an imagined idyllic role of the Church as a divine guardian of human beings, a kind of caretaker of the innocents –the abandoned children of this earth. But there was, of course, an irony behind all this –not only, on the one hand, the Church's own scheming and bloody history; but also, on the other, the fact that the fleeing Tunisians and Libyans were fleeing secular and –in the case of Tunisia at least- ostensibly democratic States, one of whose appeals to the Western World precisely being these States' sworn enmity towards that other religion, Islam, especially in its militarized or politicized form –this also definitely not even pretending to offer on its part any consolation or solace for those seeking a world governed by human values. In short, for the innocents of the world, not only not in democracies, but neither in spire or minaret does it seem to be possible to seek and find real solace and consolation.

One is tempted at this point to take a closer look at the unfolding picture, for example to give some thought to the question whether one is called upon to distinguish between two sets of values, those which I said one normally associates with the

Church, or more generally with what one might call ‘spirituality’ –expressing, as I said earlier, or embodying, *human warmth*- and those on the other hand which one associates with rational political endeavor, such as the values we associate with democracies, and which one might suspect of being more inclined to be –at least through their application- statistical and quantitative, and therefore cold-bloodied. I believe this to be an important point that we might often gloss over as we refer to moral or human values, packaging compassion, say, or mercy, or brotherhood, together with what we call *the right*, say, to education, or to equality, or to health services. By some fortunate accident, I recently came across the *Journal* of the 19th Century Genovese Man of Letters, Henri-Frederic Amiel, a philosopher-poet for whom this distinction was self-evident, and who perceived the rising ideology of democracy in Europe and America to be a threat to the real (as opposed to what was being touted as the liberal) individuality of the human being: “*Liberty, equality –bad principles! The only true principle for humanity is justice, and justice toward the feeble becomes necessarily protection or kindness*” (96). We need not here dwell on the thoughts of this very important but neglected thinker, nor, by highlighting the important distinction he makes, and which is often glossed over, thereby assent to all his judgments. But it is worthwhile noting the concern registered by a humanistic intellectual of the 19th century regarding the mutation in values being brought about by the rising democratic ideology, a mutation signifying a departure from values defined by human warmth, to ones defined by, or which are eventually transformed into clinical statistics –often simply by virtue of the inevitable machination of the democratic State’s various bureaucracies. I do not claim that one set of values is better than another. But what I think I would like to claim is that one could only lose if, by further featuring rational values, one tosses overboard, or neglects, religious values, or what I am calling ‘values of the heart’.

The second *parting* (not just distinction) I feel one needs to make here is that of religious values from beliefs. Typically, religious beliefs are dangerous, in that they are often a prelude to physical and political conflict, and the conflicting beliefs themselves are often simply irresolvable. This is the reason why, returning to my remarks about Florence, I mentioned irony in the context of Church history. I need not go into great detail here, but my own homeland is a typical case of what I am saying: did the first, or second Jewish temple exist? And was either of them in fact built on the very same spot where the Dome now is? Is the location outside Nablus deemed to be Joseph's tomb (a perennial clash-point between Israelis and Palestinians) really the spot where he was buried? Did God really promise the Land of Can'an to the Jews? Is the ingathering of the Jews really a prelude for the final vindication of Christianity? Is Palestine really a Muslim *Wakf* Trust any of whose parts cannot be forsaken in a negotiation deal? These are just some of the unverifiable and irresolvable beliefs driving physical conflict in my homeland. It must for a Martian seem to be a great source of paradox that those beautiful values of the heart, like brotherhood, kindness, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, love, peacefulness, humility, and suchlike, turn out to be claimed to originate from the very same religious roots that feed these uni-dimensional and unfortunately combative and deadly beliefs. Once again, I will not dare to claim here that religious beliefs should be debunked. But I do believe they should as far as possible be kept to the inner world, and not be allowed to impact, especially in a negative way, and especially through the use of violence or intimidation, events in the external world. There just *may* be, I believe, a converse corollary to the above, namely, that as we cross over from religion to democracy, and assuming we can make out a clear distinction as we do so between values and beliefs, we might well find that it is democratic beliefs, such as those espoused in the Declaration of Human Rights, as opposed to values, such as brotherhood or honesty, which flourish precisely in the external

world or public space, where such beliefs held by different groups cannot but converge.

Moving on, there is one final observation I wish to make about the thoughts that came to my mind in and following the meeting in Florence, which is to do with the cynicism we often feel towards and about leaders and institutions professing to do good – a cynicism brought about by the absence of full-proof mechanisms which can prevent the abuse of responsible public office, whether secular or religious. As is well known and often repeated, the devil's best disguise is that of a devout man or a priest. Here it may be thought that democracies are better equipped than religious hierarchies in having an in-built self-adjustment mechanism through elections to cater for such mishaps, but it is well-known on the other hand that country-wide elections are more and more becoming subject to controls by parties and power groups whose inner constitutions are not necessarily governed by the same self-adjustment mechanisms, and that financial resources, in the world's largest democracy, the United States, have become a determining factor in the choice of leaderships, both in Congress and in the White House. One wonders in this context whether there isn't a danger of such a democracy slowly and imperceptibly becoming a modernized version of an ancient feudal aristocracy system, where properties rather than individuals mattered.

Let me now, to be true to the title of my talk, and having presented my Florentine picture before you as prelude, finally address, however briefly, the issue of government. And straight away I will finally admit what is probably already obvious to many of you, which is that all the little vignettes I have been portraying are but aspects or manifestations of the larger picture of the after-effects of the historical confrontation between spire, or minaret and state. Today's divide between them is land, this now being under the strict control of the State, with minaret and spire trying to compete for men's hearts both within but essentially also across those borders. The church clearly admits

of no borders, national or linguistic or racial. Its governance is of its human flock, of God's children, whom it is always happy to multiply, and to receive more of. That is why a trans-Mediterranean network is the most natural milieu in which the Church can operate. Not so the State, which is jealous about its borders as well as –very often- about the racial constitution of its citizens. Almost all States with Muslim majorities, for example, and those of them that constitutionally define themselves, to some extent or the other as Muslim, foremost being the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, have iron-clad border restrictions. So does Israel, a country that, though ostensibly *religious*, in professing to be both a medium for a divine plan and catering for *Jews*, nonetheless *acts* like a State with a restrictively defined population, and a jealously guarded geographic boundary. On the other hand, just like Church movements Muslim movements, such as the Brotherhood, operate throughout the Muslim world, respectful of no national or state borders, and they both propagate and seek, ideally though not always seriously, a governance of the Muslim flock, or *ummah*, in an attempted replication of an idealized version of the pre- First World War system of caliphate-hood. Of course, this religious outreach across borders could be benign, and a *modus vivendi* could well come to exist within borders between church and state, such as in many countries in Europe, and now perhaps, as in Turkey, also between mosque and state. Yet something still seems to jar. In this overall evolutionary process of the peoples' government of themselves, not all the bits and pieces seem to have found the right places to settle in, as is evidenced by the observation that today's political reality, in both the secular and religious worlds, would seem to be strong on beliefs but short on values.

Consider, again, pronouncedly religious states in the Muslim world such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, but also less religiously confrontational similar states, like Qatar, or also, looking away from Islam, and notwithstanding other differences, Israel, where the shortfall in human values seems to be compensated for by a

volley of extreme *beliefs*, the belief, for example, that women count less than men, or that eating pork is an offense of the first order, or that homosexuality is a sin, or that a third temple must be built, or that women must not show their faces or hair or ankles to strangers, etc. Democracies also boast strong beliefs, for example the belief in equality, or freedom, or the belief in what are considered basic human or natural rights; but again these stop short at borders, or at considerations deemed to be of more important state or strategic interests. And, as was said earlier, the very belief in equality often stands there as a mechanical fill in for the glaring absence of brotherhood, or compassion, or kindness. Typically, with meticulously worked out definitions, it -that is, equality- manages even to turn a blind eye to the poverty-stricken. And certainly, as we look further at the foremost council of states, namely, the Security Council of the United Nations, we do not find Malaysia or Portugal or Iran as permanent members, but States that between them divided the political bounty of the second world war. Here, then, equality is ingeniously defined out of existence altogether!

So what, you might now ask me, are you proposing, if anything? One question that comes to mind is whether, given that not all matters in our evolutionary political history seem to have quite settled in their right places yet, some way can still be found to rearrange the pieces, for which of course there should be a prior agreement that such a rearrangement is necessary and desirable. More particularly, the question that forces itself is whether, under some mixed structure of religious and democratic governance, some way can be found to keep alive or to activate values of the heart- what generally go under the name of religious values- while suppressing religious beliefs, or confining them to the inner spaces of individuals and communities; and to breathe life, simultaneously, into dummy democratic values, while ensuring the actualization in the real world of democratic beliefs, in such a way that gives off the best result for the well-being of citizens.

I am not sure how much of a tall order this is. But returning to Florence, where we started, one path that may be explored to fulfill it could consist precisely in a reinforcement of the political roles of cities and communities, and therefore of citizens, in a process which one might dub as ‘bringing political power back to the people’, alongside a corresponding devolution of representative democracies and a decentralization of state sovereignties. Such a process is becoming more conceivable with improved communication technologies, where citizens could directly access and vote on issues of general concern, without the need of elected contractors to do the work for them. And where issues of immediate concern to their respective communities arise, citizens can engage with these issues directly, bringing the human touch back to the management of human relations. Paradoxically, if improvement in communications at one stage in history made city states redundant, having by necessity of one kind or another to be replaced by larger political structures, further improvement has now brought us back the full circle, where central authority itself is beginning to seem redundant (as well as, in some cases, detrimental to the well-being and further evolution of the citizen).

To bring us back from theory, let me finally present you with a practical application of what I have been saying. The object of the exercise: Israel. I already referred to this as a part religious and part democratic polity that suffers from precisely the ills I have been pointing out in the abstract, namely, sham democratic values and strong religious beliefs. But this is not the only reason why I pick it up as an example, since it does not stand out in the world, or indeed even in the region, as a paradigm of those ills. Rather, the reason I pick it up as an example is to show how a re-shuffling of perspectives and a replacing of an old approach by a new one can actually help resolve what otherwise seems like a stuck political situation.

According to the new perspective, then, we forget about both a single state and a two-state solution. Instead, we begin to devise a federated network of communities, primarily Jewish and Arab, both within pre-'67 Israel and without. Existing state authority can slowly be devolved to those units or communities. Different communities could then interact with one another in a way that mutually best suits them. A group of them, for example, might decide to forge or to maintain an already existing special relation or union between them, to the extent even of calling such a union a state, or regarding the existing devolved State as the political nexus between them. But this would neither be the existing State nor the state of the two- state solution, but a less centralized State run in parallel with the authorities exercised by the communities and regions that constitute it. There is no reason to exclude from this picture the possibility of a redefinition of borderlines that accounts for communal aggregations on religious grounds, thus ensuring some form of territorial identity for one religious or national group or the other. Such a national or religious aggregate would not constitute a threat to the other, since any such threat would be a threat to the complex structure, and therefore to itself. One could consider such a structure a federation. It is possible to see this arrangement as one that maximizes the conditions favorable to direct citizenship involvement in political affairs, and therefore to humanizing these relationships and to the deconstruction of myths each side has about the other. Once properly realized, which they would be in such a situation, democratic beliefs will begin to assume a more defining role in inter-communal relations than religious beliefs, the latter beginning to be held under the reigns of its respective community. Values, on the other hand, both democratic and religious, would have a better environment in which to flourish.

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