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On

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Sixty-four years ago, the creation of the State of Israel, an expression of the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in the ancestral land, caused the favourable conditions for the examination of the concept of separation between religion and politics. In those days of the initial stage, undertaking the separation of these joined phenomena was both possible and desirable. Nowadays, after having co-existed as close as Siamese twins for sixty-four years, the separation between the 'two kings sharing a crown' - Judaic religion and the State of Israel - risks leading to a scenario where, metaphorically speaking, both 'kings' would lose their garments and wake up to find themselves naked, having lost all their possessions.

If, during that initial weaving of relations between religion and the state, the political leaders and the religious authority had given this matter its due consideration, a mutually satisfying consensus, concerning the demands of both sides, could have been reached. The state that was established as the Jewish state would have thus conferred itself a particular Judaic 'physiognomy' by consciously adopting certain elements of the Judaic tradition in its applied legislation. On the other hand, had religion conserved its independence towards political power, it would have not become a constringent religion, bureaucratically imposed on the quotidian life of the majority of the population.

Had the religious instance, represented by the Israeli rabbinate, resisted the temptation to become a 'state rabbinate' - which offered the perspective of the transformation of rabbis into 'public servants' subordinated to the political authority - then the preoccupation of religious authorities during this first period of the existence of the state would have been to engage the problems of the new reality. Thus, it would have infused its own sphere with 'fresh blood' and it would have cultivated the formation of personalities with spiritual values and first hand leading qualities, thus generating a phenomenon of evolution and rebirth. However, as religion practically lost its independence, and subordinated itself to political power,

the rabbinate in Israel has become deficient in its spirit and means, its existence being dependent on political power and national budget.

If, during the first days of the existence of the state, the leaders (both political and religious) had not been animated by an endless appetite for dominion, even concerning religious life, then the state would have cared for the satisfaction of the religious exigencies of the people by providing the rabbinic institution with independence towards political power. This would have been done so that the rabbinate could develop to become a moral and spiritual 'brake', a sort of 'main king and priest', after the model that had existed in the ancient Judaic Kingdom; in other words, a balancing factor and an element of opposition to the material and physical strength of political power. However, the politicians' aspirations to obtain absolute power (consequently to rule over everything and everyone) and to disallow anything that was beyond the authority of power and political institutions, have led to the subordination of religion to the state. This greatly deprived religion of its vital space and led to its weakening and transformation into a frail organ, feeble and sickly in the intricate and delicate social texture of the State of Israel.

Six decades ago, at the birth of the State of Israel, both the religious authority and the political power were powerful enough to autonomously face needs and co-exist in a parallel fashion without *ipso facto* decreasing the possibility to exercise their influence over the new life that was forming in the new country. In those days, first rank personalities were leading religious institutions in the state; they possessed great knowledge that covered a wide spectrum both in exact sciences and in abstract thinking. Also, they had not become isolated in the perimeter of cult problems and in the ivory towers of study centres.

In those times, religion in the State of Israel had begun to successfully deal with the issue of creating a new model of religious person, involved in modern society and actively participating in all domains of public life.

The new 'religious person' was not different from his ancestors in respect to the practice of religious cult but he did not portray the 'natural reservation' of a Jew living in a small town in Eastern Europe or in North Africa. On the contrary, in him converged everything that the laic generation of socialist readers wanted to see in the new Jew formed on the ancestral land: 'a blond, blue eyed Sabra'. The new religious and modern Jew, when compared to the laic Jew, had the advantage of not having

disconnected himself from the religious tradition and from the Judaic cultural inheritance, thus avoiding the estrangement and the identity crisis which manifested itself in a large number of laic members of his generation.

The progressive religious family, the religious education that produced character, the highly ethical religious kibbutz, the religious pioneering youth movement, all these initiatives captured the minds of many and became, either knowingly or unknowingly, an educational model worthy of being emulated.

In those times, the great majority of religious and bigoted citizens integrated the moderate side of the Israeli society. Political extremism and religious fanaticism constituted an insignificant and uninfluential minority of the religious population and of the global Israeli society.

Had the religious authority not abandoned its effort of conquering the hearts of the citizens through peaceful ways and through personal example (this due to the fact that it pursued the aim of becoming a 'state religion', which establishes the relation between religion and country), then religion would have, in time, become a determining factor in the life of the population and in the creation of the country's physiognomy.

So far, I have presented the situation of religion during the creation of the Israeli State and during the first years of its existence. From now on, I will refer to the religious situation in the laic society and to the democratic conception of religion and state, as it was professed by the political leadership of the that time.

Back then, the majority of the Israeli people harboured such a close connection with the Judaic tradition and cultural inheritance, that we could say that even the citizens who defined themselves as laics or even as atheists, were deeply anchored in the Jewish culture that they had relished in since their childhood. Therefore, the separation of religion from political power was admissible and feasible, as this endeavour wouldn't have eliminated the Judaic inheritance from the cultural patrimony that was set on the solid ground of the Judaic conscience.

In the first years of existence of the state, the majority of the leaders were people with profound European affinities, anchored in values that had been elaborated during the 19th century. Even leaders who originated in Eastern Europe, and who displayed a certain Bolshevik influence, proved that their fundamental conception about the essence of the state had a Western-democratic orientation and the construction of their ideology was, in fact, liberal. It was therefore normal that, when they became engaged in elaborating the structure of political organization of the state, they opted for a separation between politics and religion. However, on the one hand, the anticlerical complex (born thanks to the Marxist principle of 'religion as opium for the people', which found its place in the political society through the Marxist, revolutionary influence, assimilated by leaders from the Eastern, Bolshevik Europe) and, on the other hand, 'constraints of a political nature' (that appeared among the religious parties), added to the general fear of the 'expansion of the reformation phenomenon' made leaders deviate from the 'grand highway of democracy' and slip onto the narrow path of the union between religion and state (politics).

We can ask the question: 'why can't we nowadays accomplish what was desirable to have been done back then? Why was it permissible and possible to separate religion from political power and why is that option currently impossible?

The answers to this complex question are no less complex themselves. Religion is not an amorphous phenomenon, disconnected from human beings. And the state is not an abstract notion, foreign to citizens.

From the first day of the coexistence between religion and politics, the phenomenon that had thus sprung was not a success. For over six decades, the pair religion-state has known an existence characterized by struggles and continual crises. This 'life together', under the same roof has given birth to a reality different from the one displayed when the State of Israel was being formed. The Israeli State is no longer the state that used to be during that initial period and neither is religion.

Religion has changed its guise. People in charge of religious institutions nowadays lack the sight of ample perspectives and do not have spiritual and moral eminence; their gaze does not go beyond the walls of their homes or those of the houses or prayer. These deficiencies are mainly the consequence of the fact that religious leaders have become a sort of 'public

servants' promoted to positions of authority sometimes even out of political reasons and by the political authorities.

Religion nowadays is not preoccupied with people's problems and does not manifest any interest for the actualization of the fundamental values and themes of interest in the field of education and morality. The Israeli rabbinate's interest focuses on a narrow field of problems concerning marriage and funerals, on money-making businesses related to the ritual discipline of *kashrut* and on rabbinical promotions, this being a prerogative granted by the political power. The religious instances in Israel preoccupy themselves intensely with finances and repartitions in rabbinical positions supplied by the political power.

Religion has changed its guise and so has the aspect of the religious cult and the practicing Israeli's lifestyle. The intellectual and rational Judaism is no longer in fashion. The Judaic philosophy, the moral and its principles, among which 'the principle of associating the study of the Torah with civic politeness' no longer enjoys a high position on the list of preferences for the majority of the religious citizens. Their place has been regrettably filled by the practice of downright fanaticism, of the sacred elusion of civic duty, and by the degenerative laziness of the yeshiva student life, hidden under the justifying mask of pretentious evasion, camouflaged in the pseudo-principle: 'study is his mastery', as well as by exaggerations and sterile culinary interdictions, by the cult of 'holy shrines', 'miracle-makers', of the 'demon exorcists'. In a word, we are dealing with a society that's estranged (and that keeps drifting away) from the idea of liberalism and democratic principles.

Religion has changed its guise and consequently, the guise of numerous religious groups has changed as well. Religion has changed its guise and has become sectarian and impermeable. Many, very many of the religious Israelis have changed, from a society that aspired to rationality the progress to a community of people with a narrow horizon, which consecrate the power of the physical and the military action.

Religion has changed its guise and therefore, the guise of the majority of the religious public has changed as well. The typical religious family, not only the religious family, is no longer reasonable. Education in religious schools no longer forms character and pedagogical values. The religious youth movement no longer stimulates pioneering. The majority of the

religious public is no longer moderate. Religious fanaticism and political extremism have removed Judaism, conceived as an appropriate dialogue in favour of peace, and have installed fundamentalism and nationalism in the vacated place.

However, it hasn't been only religion that has changed its guise; the country has, as well, and consequently, the entire Israeli society has changed. The country has changed its guise: the close relationship with democracy and liberal ideas (stimulated in the past by leaders and citizens alike) has greatly weakened, as larger and larger segments of the Israeli society, including official leaders, manifest reluctance toward the classical democratic processes and undermine its foundations. Not few are the citizens and state leaders that have distanced themselves from the rational and liberal thought system and aspire to return to values of old.

The country has changed its guise and, consequently, the entire Israeli society has changed as well. The relation of the majority of the country to the Judaic inheritance is very feeble. The Judaic conscience of the majority of the laic population limits itself to the festive and commercialized Bar-Mitzvah (when an adolescent reached maturity), to the unpleasant experience of participating to a marriage ceremony performed by a rabbi, to the joyous and carefree atmosphere that surrounds a circumcision ceremony, and finally, to the prayer for the dead, painstakingly read at funerals in a mumbled tongue. Many of the religious citizens are not properly acquainted with the cultural inheritance preserved in documents that have been transmitted by past generations. They know the liturgy, but do not know anything other than the norms of the religious cult practiced in synagogues and fragments of the Judaic tradition and folklore.

Religion has changed its guise and the result of laic Israeli education in particular (but even the fruit of the religious education in general) no longer preserves elements of the post-biblical Judaic culture in its structure. The rich spiritual creation of many generations of Jewish people is inaccessible, as though it had been written in a foreign language, both for many of the country leaders and for the majority of the citizens, including teachers and pedagogues.

The majority of the Israeli people do not desire and are not interested in the separation between religion and political authority. Citizens wallow in the current situation, which is seen as a comfortable one; it is convenient for

them that the state and the religious servants strive to entertain a certain connection with the Almighty on their behalf.

In other words, the unfortunate, more than six decades long association between religion and state has generated the situation where the compulsory resort to religious bureaucracy, in days of joy and in days of mourning, has remained the only connection of the majority of the Israelis with the Judaic tradition and inheritance. The laic Israeli does not want the undoing and the ceasing of this connection. He would care for a few cosmetic changes, even a plastic surgery of the religious bureaucracy's physiognomy, but not a surgical separation of religion and state authority.

In conclusion, when religion was still of the classic and radical Judaism type, when the country was one of authentic social justice, one where the ideal vision of liberalism, humanism and authentic democracy mattered, then the separation between religion and state was feasible and desirable. When the two entities have transformed into Siamese twins, neither enjoys a veritable life, but their separation is no longer feasible and desirable for what is at risk now is the very existence of both – religion and political authority.