SECULARISM AND SECULARITY*

Por Mary Ann Glendon

It is a real pleasure to be visiting the University of Navarra again. This great university is truly a beacon for those of us who believe that faith and reason must work together if we academics are to do our part in advancing what John Paul II called the civilization of love. And I congratulate Professor Alvira and his associates for having launched this project on Religion and Civil Society, a venture that directly confronts the challenges facing the world's democratic experiments.

With regard to the topic that I have been asked to discuss—secularism and secularity—let me begin by noting two recent developments that many people have found surprising. The first is the fact that one of the central themes of the current leader of the Catholic Church has been his praise of secularity. The second is the growing chorus of prominent atheists or agnostics who are expressing concern about the ability of their societies to remain free, democratic and humane without the support of habits and attitudes grounded in Biblical religion.

Both of these developments are signs of a more general ferment relating to the role of religion in a secular state. Until relatively recently, most people in western countries have regarded the position of religion in the polity as substantially settled along the lines of one or another of the two principal models of secularity that emerged, respectively, from the French and American revolutions.

Over the past few decades, however, all previous understandings about religion in society have thrown into turbulence. The pressures come from several directions: There are developments in biotechnology posing moral dilemmas that could not have been imagined by previous generations; there are the well known changes in behavior and attitudes in the areas of marriage, family life, and human sexuality; and in many countries there has been a marked increase in religious diversity due to migration. In addition, as even political "realists" have had to acknowledge, religion is playing an important role in shaping events in our increasingly globalized and interdependent world.

The retreat from rigid secularism on the part of many intellectuals and public figures is a remarkable sign of how these changes are affecting long-held attitudes. In the case of Jürgen Habermas, it was concern about biological engineering and the instrumentalization of human life that led him to conclude that the West cannot abandon its religious heritage without endangering the great social and political advances that are grounded in that heritage. Habermas stunned many of his followers a few years ago by announcing that, "Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options. We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter."

No less significant were the remarks of French President Sarkozy when he greeted Pope Benedict in 2008. Referring to the Christian religion as France's "living patrimony," Sarkozy added that "it would be crazy to deprive ourselves of the contributions of that patrimony to intellectual and cultural life." One can imagine Voltaire turning in his grave when Sarkozy went on to say, "For this reason, I am calling for a positive secularism. A positive secularism offers our consciences the possibility to [reflect on] the meaning we want to give to our lives….Positive secularism is an opportunity, an encouragement, a supplementary dimension to the political debate. It is an encouragement to religion, as well as to all currents of thought."

And consider the case of Tony Blair who never discussed his faith while he was Prime Minister of England because, he said, people would consider that to be "weird". But in a speech in Italy last year, Citizen Blair criticized such negative attitudes towards religion for allowing "the aggressive secularism in part of the West to gain traction." Persons of faith, he said, should "show how faith is standing up for justice, for solidarity across peoples and nations." He added that one thing he learned as Prime Minister was that "a society to be truly harmonious, to be complete, requires a place for faith."

Meanwhile, Italian Senator Marcelo Pera, a professed agnostic who is also a prominent philosopher, published a book last year with the provocative title: "Why we should call ourselves Christian." The preface to that book is a letter written by none other than Pope Benedict, who earlier, as Cardinal Ratzinger, had entered into a dialogue with Pera that was published under the title "Without Roots," a reference to Europe's neglect of its cultural foundations.

Clearly something important is happening when even the leader of France--the country that most strenuously defends the principle of the secular state--calls for a "positive secularism," echoing the very terms that Pope Benedict so often uses in his own calls for a "new reflection on the true meaning and importance of *laïcité*." Something is happening when the former head of the British Labor government says he wishes he had spoken more in public about his faith. Something is happening when the leader of the Catholic Church and a prominent Italian agnostic begin singing duets.

These developments inevitably have re-focused attention on the old French and American models of secularity—and they support the distinction made in the title of this section of our program: Secularity does not necessarily entail secular-*ism*.

What both the French and American models had in common, in their 18th century origins—and what set them apart from countries with official state churches—was their commitment to a secular, non-denominational state.

The principal feature that differentiated them from each other was that the French model, at the outset, was marked by hostility to Christianity in general and to the Catholic Church in particular: to Christianity because it was thought by many to be an obstacle to the creation of a free and rational society; and to the Catholic Church because it was thought to have had excessive temporal power.

The American model was more hospitable to religion because the descendants of Protestant Dissenters who had fled English persecution wanted a state where the various Protestant sects could live peaceably with one another. The English experience caused them to be more concerned about the threat that the State posed to religion than vice versa. In other words, the branch of the Enlightenment that was essentially anti-clerical and irreligious had little influence in America at the time of the Founding—except where the minority Catholic religion was concerned. Thus, it is commonly said that the American model of secularity was devised to protect religion and churches from government, whereas the French model, and the systems that followed it, were designed to protect government from religion and churches. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that the model contained a strong strain of anti-Catholicism that persists to this day.

Nevertheless, Pope Benedict has often praised what he calls the "positive" American understanding of secularity, contrasting it with the "negative" form of secular-ism inherited from the French Revolution. He has even gone so far as to say that the American version could be a "fundamental model" for Europe, in that the United States is a place "where the religious dimension, with the diversity of its expressions, is not only tolerated but appreciated as the nation's 'soul' and as a fundamental guarantee of human rights and duties."

Models and Reality

As we social scientists know, however, reality is always more complicated than any model. The fact is that the so-called French model has long contained some elements of positive secularity, while the American model, increasingly, has drifted in the direction of negative secularism.

In present-day France, for example, a notable instance of "positive secularity" is the generous program of subsidies for the (mostly Catholic) religious primary and secondary schools that are attended by 17 percent of French schoolchildren--something that would be clearly unconstitutional in the United States—and in any case would never be approved by the non-Catholic majority . I would also note that France, like most European nations, has laws in many controversial areas—such as abortion, experimentation on embryos, reproductive technologies, and same-sex adoption—that are closer to the teachings of the major religions than the laws of the U.S.

As for the United States, elements of negative secularism have been introduced through a series of Supreme Court decisions that, beginning in the 1940s, have cast doubt over the constitutionality of nearly every form of public cooperation and accommodation with religious institutions.

Now I come to a sign of the times that should claim the attention of our project: it is that negative secularism in Europe and the United States alike has accelerated in the wake of the sexual revolution. That era of social experimentation saw the rise among opinion makers of open disdain for religious believers and open hostility toward religious institutions—especially those religions that make strong truth claims and strong demands on their members. Not surprisingly, that period also saw the appearance of new legal

rights in the areas of abortion, assisted reproduction, sexual orientation, and embryonic experimentation--rights that clash with the religious beliefs of many citizens. Today, there is powerful resistance to laws protecting the conscience rights of individuals and the autonomy of religious institutions. Religious freedom increasingly is coming into conflict not only with various "new rights", but with the interests of powerful lobbies such as the sex industry, the abortion industry, the population control lobby, and the assisted reproduction industry.

As a leading U.S. expert on religious liberty has put it, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was originally designed to limit government, has been increasingly interpreted by the Supreme Court to constrain religion and to relegate it to the private sphere. There are, of course, exceptions to these trends, some of which, like the exemption of religious institutions from taxes, are very important. But it is not an exaggeration to say that the present situation in the U.S. can best be described as one in which positive and negative models of secularity are engaged in a fateful struggle.

The eruption in 2002 of what has come to be known as the clerical sexual abuse crisis fell like a bomb into that volatile situation. There can be no doubt that incalculable harm was done to the cause of promoting secularity over secular-ism in the American model.

This brings me to an important, if obvious, point: There is no pure example of either positive or negative secularity in the world today. Each nation's system of Church-State relations is constantly being shaped and reshaped by complex political compromises.

And let me follow that observation with another point that should be obvious: no country's system can serve as a model for another if by "model" we mean something that can be copied. Each nation's system of church-state relations is the product of its own distinctive history and circumstances. Most of the continental European systems were decisively shaped by confrontations between Enlightenment secularism and Roman Catholicism, against the background of religious conflict. The American system was initially shaped by the desire to protect the various Protestant religions from the State, and to promote peaceful co-existence among Protestant confessions. That is why the Pope said, when he praised the American model: "Certainly, we in Europe cannot simply copy the United States; we have our history." What he meant when he referred to the U.S. system as a "model" is that the U.S. experience shows that a secular state need not necessarily be hostile to religion.

On his trip to the United States in 2008, he clearly demonstrated his awareness that the American model was in need of attention. He took the occasion to warn us that the erosion of the positive form of secularity would have serious implications for liberty as well as for religion. "The preservation of freedom," he said, "calls for the cultivation of virtue, self-discipline, sacrifice for the common good and a sense of responsibility toward the less fortunate. It also demands the courage to engage in civic life and to bring one's deepest beliefs and values to reasoned public debate. In a word, freedom is ever new. It is a challenge held out to each generation, and must constantly be won over for the cause of good."

The question of the relationship between religion and freedom brings us to the heart of the project that we are gathered to discuss. What is the role of religion in sustaining a free and humane society?

The classic analysis of that question still begins with the two propositions about religion and freedom advanced by Tocqueville in the preface to *Democracy in America.* One of those assertions flew in the face of everything that was held to be true by most devout Christians at that time. It was that freedom would be good for religion. The second proposition seemed equally preposterous to enlightened skeptics like most of Tocqueville's friends. It was that religion would be beneficial for emerging democratic societies.

Tocqueville was emphatic in advising his skeptical friends to get over their prejudices against religion if they hoped for the success of free and democratic government. "Lovers of liberty," he said, "should hasten to call religion to their aid, for they must know that one cannot establish the reign of liberty without that of mores [by which he meant the habits and attitudes of citizens and statesmen], and mores cannot be firmly founded without beliefs." Religion, he wrote, "is the guardian of the mores, and the mores are the guarantee of the laws and pledge for the maintenance of freedom itself." In other words: Culture is prior to politics and law, and religion is at the heart of culture.

For a long time, however, many intellectuals clung to the belief that the free society could get along just fine without religion, and that the sooner we got rid of religion the freer we would be. They did not dispute that the preservation of a free society depends on citizens and statespersons with particular skills, knowledge, and qualities of mind and character. But a number of political philosophers, of whom John Rawls is perhaps best known, contested Tocqueville's assertion that the democratic experiment was dependent in crucial ways on a culture nourished by Biblical religion (by which he meant religion based on the Hebrew Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings). Rawls and others maintained that the experience of living in a free society was sufficient in itself to foster the civic virtues of moderation and self-restraint, respect for others and so on, that a decent society requires.

That faith in the ability of democracy to generate the virtues it needs in its citizens has been shaken, however, in the social and cultural upheavals of the late 20th century. With families, schools, religious groups, and other institutions of civil society in distress, non-believers like Habermas and Pera are starting to express concerns about the political effects of the breakdown of so many habits and customs that once provided cultural supports for liberal democracy. They have begun to ask, for example: Where will people learn to view others with respect and concern, rather than to regard them as objects, means, or obstacles? What will cause most men and women to keep their promises, to limit consumption, to answer their country's call for service, and to reach out to the unfortunate? Where will a state based on the rule of law find citizens and statesmen capable of devising just laws and then abiding by them? Habermas has gone so far as to assert that the good effects that Rawls and others attributed to life in free societies may well have had their source in the "legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love."

In this new situation, there are really no models to follow because so many of the challenges are so new. But to say there are no models is not to say there is no wisdom and experience on which to draw. Historical experience indicates that there is a high correlation between religious liberty and the maintenance of a democratic state that respects individual freedom, equality, and the rule of law, and that attends to the needs of its least advantaged members. Conversely, there is a high correlation between the denial of religious liberty and the denial of other basic freedoms.

In 2009, the non-partisan Pew Forum reported on the growing body of empirical evidence that underscores the contribution of religious freedom to democratic governance, domestic tranquility, economic development, women's advancement and international peace. A Pew researcher found, after conducting research on 200 nations around the world that "the presence of religious freedom in a country mathematically correlates with the longevity of democracy" and with the presence of other goods, including civil and political liberty, women's income, press freedom, literacy, lower infant mortality, and economic freedom."

So, how do things look for the civilizations of Europe and the Americas as they face the challenge of protecting religious liberty within a secular state? In a sense, we would seem to be well-equipped. Despite many differences, we all are the beneficiaries of a common cultural inheritance in which religion and liberty are inextricably intertwined. It is an inheritance that includes the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings, the explosive energies of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the concept of the rights of man, and so much more.

But under present circumstances, it will take great wisdom and prudence on the part of citizens and statespersons in free societies to find ways to keep the public square open to religiously grounded moral viewpoints, and to protect the intermediate institutions that compose each country's “moral ecology.”

Equally, if not more, decisive will be the response of religious individuals and groups themselves. As we all know, it took a long time for mainstream Christianity to accept that liberty would be good for religion. For the Catholic Church, the major turning point was the Second Vatican Council where the Church officially declared the acceptability of a secular state in which Christianity, while fairly treated, enjoyed no special legal status. It is a remarkable sign of how far we have traveled that a Catholic Pope is now able to say as Benedict XVI has done, that, “It is necessary to welcome the real achievements of Enlightenment thinking—human rights, and especially the freedom of faith and its exercise, recognizing these as elements that are also essential for the authenticity of religion.”

I conclude with this thought: If the calls from various quarters to develop more healthy and positive forms of secularism are to succeed, the challenge for religions will be as great as the challenge to governments. It will be up to religions to encourage their members to the responsible exercise of freedom. It will be up to them to teach their

members to advance their religiously grounded moral viewpoints with reasoning that is intelligible to all men and women of good will. It will be up to them to reject ideologies that manipulate religion for political purposes, or that use religion as a pretext for violence. And it will be up to them to find resources within their own traditions for promoting respect and tolerance. (That, of course, was Pope Benedict's main message in the famous Regensburg address, a message almost completely obscured by the controversy that followed.)

The stakes are high. For who can doubt that the progress of free societies is being closely watched by the eyes of persons who respect neither liberty nor the religions that have supported it and flourished under it? Today, there are still places in the world where neither of Tocqueville's propositions is accepted, and where religious freedom in all of its dimensions is regularly, and often brutally, denied. Whether those societies will find the resources within their traditions to promote the synergy between religion and freedom—and how long that process will take--is a fateful question that hovers over the human future.

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