Religion, Religious Fervour, and Universalist Education[*]

By

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This paper is conceived from a secular[2] perspective, and designed to address three elements identified in the call for papers: "Pluralistic tendencies", their counter-part of "exclusivist attitudes", and "creating an ethos of inter-religious harmony". I choose to tackle these aspects by (a) exploring the meaning of religion, (b) addressing a specific attitude often corresponding to religion, namely religious fervour, and (c) assessing the validity and instrumentality of facilitating a universalist education as a tool to de-fuse "mistrust and hatred among various faith-communities". The following paper is intended to serve only as a preliminary discussion guidance paper.

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[2] As much as a secular stand can be divorced from religious/faith bias. From a socio-anthropological perspective, I am a non-practising Jew; my secularism should be understood as atheism at the private individual level.
Absolutely nothing in this paper should be taken as heresy or disrespect for religious beliefs.

What is religion?

Religion may mean different things to different people. To me, two closest definitions – albeit with crucial reservations – are that of religion as "5. Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship;…",[3] and of faith as "2.c. The spiritual apprehension of divine truths. Often ascribed to the exercise of a special faculty in man, or to supernatural illumination."[4] Following the main line of these definitions, my understanding of religion can be paraphrased as "recognition on the part of human beings of some higher and external being harbouring the explanation for the universe's existence, and reflecting the spiritual humility of humans and the recognition of their ephemeral and comparative diminutiveness". Other, but not fundamentally different, ways to define[5] religion include, for instance, Haldane's understanding of religion as "a way of life and attitude to the universe"[6] and as a form of art.

Religion[7] is of a dual character. On the one hand, I consider religion as a state of individual self-awareness. It is therefore intrinsically a private matter. On the other hand, and at the same time, because individuals co-exist in groups, and have no existence in isolation from each other, religion has also a public dimension. Extrapolated from the private, and transformed into the public in a process of social, political, and cultural institutionalization, religion acquires this additional, separate and culturally specific identity. Support of the contention that religion emanates from the personal private experience and percolates into the public space can be found in the three monotheistic religions - in the missionary and revelatory roles played by central figures such as Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. In polytheistic religions, the mirroring of a social, in the divine, family circumstance also suggests that the public notion of religion nourishes on the private experience. In brief, religion as a private matter responds to the human person's spiritual quest for determinism regarding the meaning of one's own existence. Religion as a public matter is the social organizational embodiment of this quest. It is here where religion is becoming a way of satisfying human (not only spiritual) needs, legitimizing ethical categories, and consequently enhancing and securing political structures so as to install order and coherence to human society. In its public dimension, religion and its core – i.e. God(s) – become, at least partly, subservient to the needs of humans.[8]

In his novel The Double,[9] Saramago elaborates on the private quest for explanation of the human behaviour. The dialogues between Common Sense (public) and the individual character in the novel can be seen to echoing this religious dualism, the eternal tension

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[3] "Religion". *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3d Ed., 1968, p. 1697.

[4] "Faith". Ibid., p. 670.

[5] Or – for the lack of scientifically exact definitions – characterise religion.

[6] Haldane, John, Burdon, Sanderson. "Science and Technology as Art Forms." *Possible Worlds and Other Papers*. Harper, 1927 [hereafter: Haldane (a)].

[7] I am using religion and faith interchangeably, and will note when they are to be distinguished.

[8] For this interpretation, see writings by and about the controversial Yesha'ayahu Leibowitz, e.g. excerpt by Hartman, David. "Jewish philosophy in Modern Age", reproduced at http://tpeople.co.il/leibowitz/ArielBrosh/www.atheist.org.il/www.atheist.org.il/mem/hartman.html retrieved January 9, 2007.

[9] Saramago, José. *The Double*, New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 2005.

between the individual's temporal (related to the public sphere) versus the general and eternal human (related to the private sphere) conditions. From a secular perspective, Common Sense stands to represent the "pluralistic tendencies" in all human societies.[10] Thus, Common Sense reveals the traps into which individuals let themselves fall when ascertaining their place in organized society as, for instance, when it cautions the main character that "[y]ou know perfectly well that being of one mind doesn't always mean being in the right, what tends to happen is that people gather together under an opinion as if it were an umbrella".[11] This perceptivity leads me to the next subject of this paper, to the discussion of a particular attitude corollary to religion, namely religious fervour.

Religious fervour

For the "common"[12] individual person, facing religion or faith (not unlike facing challenges of a moral, ethical, spiritual, social, and physical nature) alone, by oneself, is overly strenuous. Institutionalized public religion therefore offers the life-vest which comes to the individual's rescue. It offers comfort and alleviates the psychologically disturbing by-products of the quest to understand that which despite reason and science remains ungraspable. When religion becomes the *only* saviour, it produces the religious zeal, which is cause to many consequences, good or bad – depending on the judge. In this section, I refer to religious fervour as demonstrated in actions driven by fanaticism, a state of being possessed or obsessed with an idea unto the loss of independent moral and ethical judgment. Indeed, this negative manifestation of religious zeal is alluded to in the conference's call for papers, which reflects a state of perturbance:

As you know, religious plurality is an existential reality of the contemporary social order. Different faith-communities live side by side acting and interacting on daily basis, but unfortunately they tend to consider one another aliens and inferiors. This causes unwanted mistrust and hatred in inter-community relations. The resultant violence is tearing asunder the fabric of human society the world over. It requires a sincere and serious effort on our part to work towards rectifying the situation.

One factor responsible for this mistrust and hatred among various faith-communities is the exclusivistic attitude adopted by some faith-communities towards others, considering other religions invalid and other faith-communities pagans.

Since the 20th century, and particularly after World War II, the passionate clinging to religion, abdicating personal individual judgment, and shaking off one's own responsibility, have been attributed to a sense of malaise and deep disappointment from Western civilization, and particularly, the failure of its science to explain existence.[13] In fact, corrects Leibowitz, the so-called "disappointment from science" does not reflect distrust in science itself, but rather disappointment regarding the expectations, false *ab initio*, of the instrumentality of science in determining and choosing values. Science has absolutely nothing to do with providing answers to spiritual and psychological questions

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[10] And perhaps all faiths. This position is, of course, biased by the Judeo-Christian pre-disposition of Saramago and the author of this paper.

[11] Saramago, p. 52.

[12] "Common" in the sense of a-political.

[13] Leibowitz, Yesha'ayahu. "Religion and Science in this Generation's Scholarship" *Haaretz*, July 14, 1972, http://tpeople.co.il/leibowitz/leibarticles.asp?id=66, in Hebrew [hereafter: Leibowitz (a)].

of the human person; and nature - the relationships of which the scientific methods is designed to expose, is indifferent to purpose and values.[14] Moreover, the scientific observation and recognition of reality does not entail any respective personal obligation to adjust or adapt. For instance, argues Leibowitz, democracy (which is so much cherished in many quarters of the world) is not based on the belief in the *natural* equality of humans but rather on their equality in human and civil *rights*.[15] Hence, democracy is independent from science.

One of the outcomes arising from this *mistaken* and *ungrounded* disappointment from science and the modern Western civilization is religious zeal. Fanatic fervour reduces the personal quest for explanation[16] by abandoning science[17] in fervour of a fuzzy sense of belonging to a collectivity which is imagined to being lead and empowered by extraneous forces *only*. Religious zeal then comes very close to the notion of fate, or predestination.[18] However, as Saramago advises, "all fate's *reasons* are human, purely human, and anyone who, basing themselves on the lessons of the past, says otherwise, be it in prose or in verse, doesn't know what he or she is talking about, if you'll forgive such bold opinion".[19]

Fervour, which is not unique to religious believers, is an attitude adopted also by those loyal to a certain ideology. This transpires from the discourse on human rights, which is intimately related to this conference's goal as described in the call for papers: "If we wish to make human life in the world, which has now been transformed into a global village, peaceful and harmonious, we must learn to live with people of other faiths, to accept and appreciate the otherness of the others". Not unlike faith communities, in the largely secular international human rights movement, practices and positions have recently been criticized even by its most vocal adherents. In his work *The Dark Side of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarism*,[20] David Kennedy presents an ordered summary of his "pragmatic worries" regarding the exigencies of the international human rights movement.[21] Similar to the theologians' concern about the side-effects of religious fervour, Kennedy is troubled by, among other things, the legal regime of human rights, which "taken as a whole, does more to produce and excuse violations than to prevent and remedy them"; the professionalisation of human rights; the resources allocated to human politics; and "the way context affects the opportunity of human rights promotion by allowing the defence of repressive initiatives" and hence should be an object of scrutiny".[22] This is not far fetched from Haldane's criticism of religion when its believers insist that "it is a virtue to accept statements without adequate evidence".[23]

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] And salvation, which I am not addressing here for lack of space.
[17] Which can co-exist with religious faith.
[18] Often exploited by the politics of fascism.
[19] Saramago, p. 251 [emphasis added].
[20] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
[21] De la Rasilla del Moral, Ignacio. "Kennedy, David. The Dark Side of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarism. Book Review". *European Journal of International Law*, 17 (2006), p. 866.
[22] Ibid., p. 867.
[23] Haldane, J.B.S. quoted in Haught, James. A. (Ed.) *2000 Years of Disbelief.* Just as a side note, this attitude is very different from Leibowitz's for whom the essence of religious faith is worship almost to the extent of submission.

In the 21st Century, religion once again, and humanitarism - as a new ideology replacing the competing "isms" of the 20th Century - have acquired, in their public manifestation, positions of power. Juxtaposing religion with humanitarism as two ideational frameworks is important because it is in their posture of power that they tend to be exploited in fervour.[24] Zeal in the service of power is routed to what the organizers of this conference identify as religious exclusionism, which devalues the other, and operates as the divisive force, foreign to religion because it "is not a theologically proper attitude". This is echoed in Kennedy's worry that the "identification of human rights ideology with the Western liberal tradition compromises both the internal dimension of the human rights' prominence in the first world and its integration as discourse in the developing world."[25] And Saramago specifies the mechanics of zeal in the service of power when cautioning against the lure of faith, ideology, or as he puts it – fate; when identifying *necessity* as "one of the names adopted by fate when it suits it to go in disguise". [26] Necessity thus grants permission to do the non-permissible, i.e. fanatic religious fervour.

How, in practice, does fervour operate as an instrument of power? The most elementary activation of zeal occurs through the word.[27]

… what a lot of work was involved in creating those words, it was necessary, in the first place, to realize that there was a need for them, which may, who knows, have been the most difficult thing of all, then to reach a consensus on the significance of their immediate effects, and finally, a task that will never fully be completed, to imagine the consequences that might ensue, in the medium and long term, from these effects and from these words.[28]

Kennedy agrees that language and its use are critical to the human cause and effect relationship. He warns against "human rights' *newspeak*",[29] and the humanitarists' Gramscian hegemonic bend, the fervour of which finds expression in "'a policy-making vocabulary [which] can dominate thinking in a given field for years at a time'",[30] and "merge[s] the vocabularies of humanitarian restraint into the strategic calculations of military strategists."[31]

Power, its by-product of fervour, and fervour's tendency to term and use words to cement power, are key characteristics common and corollary to all faiths, whether in religion or secular ideology, deliberate or accidental. Therefore, it is at this universality, which enables the excesses of faith, that the efforts to rein them in must be directed. The extremes of fervour, namely when words translate into violent deeds, can be countered only by words themselves. Religious establishments must therefore put their power to the service of the "counter-word": Turning freedom of expression into a counter-hegemonic tool against zealous religious intolerance.

Towards a universalist education

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[24] Ibid., p. 868.
[25] Ibid. p., 867.
[26] Saramago, p. 289. This discussion leads to the questions of human's freedom of choice, ability of controlling destiny, and cause and effect, which are beyond the scope of this paper.
[27] "Necessity" is one example.
[28] Ibid., p. 55.
[29] De la Rasilla del Moral, p. 866.
[30] Ibid., p. 867.
[31] Ibid. pp. 867-868.

In a recent article,[32] Ayaan Hirsi Ali urges the Muslim countries to teach the Holocaust. Against the backdrop of the recent Holocaust denial conference hosted by the Iranian President Ahmadenijad, she recounts her experiences in Africa and the Middle East, where development assistance to places of worship, hospitals and other charitable initiatives were accompanied by systematic insults toward the Jews. This direct and deliberate hate has been reinforced by the silence of the many international organisations and NGOs providing development assistance, secular as well as religious, and marred their benevolent work by messages of hate. She concludes by calling on the Western and Christian NGOs to rise to the duty of approaching the caritative and anti-Semitism fomenting Muslim organisations and inform both Muslims and non-Muslims of the Holocaust. Similar to Kennedy and Saramago, Hirsi Ali's concrete experiences lead her to see the core of peace – or mutual understanding, tolerance, and non-violent co-existence, in the word and its message.

One way towards achieving the goal of this conference to "creat[e] an ethos wherein all inter-religious tensions will cease to exist giving way to love and harmony in inter-community relations" runs through education in its most rudimentary sense – namely the dissemination of factual knowledge. Knowledge of facts consistent with reality should not be mistaken for truth, particularly truth in the theological context, which incorporates that which in a more general sense is considered to be "[o]f the right kind, *such as it should be*, proper. […] That is rightly or lawfully such; rightful, legitimate…".[33] The distinction between factual and "other"[34] knowledge has been recognized by both scientists and believers. Haldane maintains that "[s]tatements of fact made in its [science's] name are generally right in detail, but can only reveal the form and not the real nature of existence."[35] Leibowitz adds that the scientific method is intended to answer only the "how" question, and does not even recognize the "what?".[36] Moreover, knowledge of the fact represents only the stage of learning and should not be confused with education. For learned knowledge to transform into education, guidance and direction towards a specific purpose are required. This demands planning, which is informed by values.[37]

Universalist education therefore represents a specific plan based on the belief in a certain *value* as well as the intention to create a reality reflecting this value. In the case of this conference, the value is expressed in the call for paper to "creat[e] an ethos wherein all inter-religious tensions will cease to exist giving way to love and harmony in inter-community relations". This value is the common ground bringing the participants at this conference together and reflecting their acceptance of the existence of religions as a fact whether the objects of their faiths can be demonstrated empirically or not. Universalist education could therefore become a moral plan for this conference participants.

For the believer, there may exist no relationship at all between terrestrial facts and truth of faith. Leibowitz, for instance, maintains that from the perspective of the believer, there

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[32] Global Viewpoint, 20 December, 2006 (received by e-mail).

[33] "True. 4. b. & c.". *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, p. 2255 [emphasis added].

[34] I use "other" as a neutral term. For believers, the word "truth" would apply here; for Haldane, for instance, it is "myth" and "miracle".

[35] Haldane (a).

[36] Leibowitz (a).

[37] Ibid.

is no conflict between religion and science as the two never meet.[38] This however is of little consequence to the non-believer, and perhaps also to the believer who worships faith differently than Leibowitz. To the latter, freedom of choice may be crucially important, and determinism (cause and effect) offers the gallery of choices.[39] Therefore, to gain the attention of the latter, universalist education must distinguish between two consecutive and necessary paths leading to the accomplishment of its objectives, living up to its value.

First is the stage whereby the material facts of reality are disseminated to all learners (all of human society during each person's entire life cycle). It requires the transmission of the facts in the most "neutral" way possible: Genuine, fair, and honest. Second, and only after and concurrent (which refer to the past and immediate past/present, but not future) with the communication of the facts can education venture into offering an interpretation, assessment, judgment, evaluation, and prognosis of the facts, i.e. translate them into truth of faith. In order to remain loyal to the distinction between facts and interpretation, knowledge[40] and theological truth these two paths must be carried out in separation of each other as much as possible. This separation is crucial if the dualist character of religion – the private, which involves freedom of choice, and the public, which pertains to social programming, are to be respected. To me, this respect is vital in order to promote growth of "love and harmony".

A pre-requisite for engaging in the first path of factual knowledge dissemination is good faith and good will in separating the facts from their interpretive truth. In Baudolino,[41] Umberto Eco suggests that inter-faith cooperation, even partnership in friendship, are possible at this first stage of knowledge sharing. In Chapter Eight "Baudolino in the Earthly Paradise", the main character Baudolino[42] is described studying in Paris where he befriends his Muslim co-sophomore Abdul, the Christian cleric Boron, (and later in the book) the Jew Rabbi Solomon. Certainly, such entreprise requires leadership, mentoring, and role modeling[43] within each faith community. Shedding further light on the conditions for the materialization of the first path, is Kennedy who warns against the political abuses of vocabulary and the "mantra-like" promotion of ideas, and proposes "to use the first person in their [humanitarians] policy proposals instead of relying on an invisible 'them'". [44] Arguably, use of the plural person, which often implies authority, is misleading where no such authority is recognized to exist. This certainly applies to the first path of learning factual knowledge. The plural person, which offers anonymity and refuge from responsibility to the individual person, consequently often operates to the detriment of the dissemination of factual knowledge. Saramago hits the nail on its head when distinguishing factual from interpretive knowledge: "The wheel was invented and stayed invented forever and ever, whereas words, those and all the others, came into the

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[38] Leibowitz, Yesha'ayahu. "Science or bible – Who Is Right?" A personal letter dated March, 1972, http://tpeople.co.il/leibowitz/letters.asp?id=2, retrieved January 8, 2007.

[39] I will not elaborate on these ideas for lack of space.

[40] By knowledge I mean simple, "common sensically" observable, knowledge, not necessarily academic scientifically valid knowledge.

[41] New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2002.

[42] Native of the early 13th Century Northern Italian town of Frescheta.

[43] Not unlike the recent and so common practice adopted by many women professional organisations.

[44] Ibid., pp. 867 and 868, respectively.

world with a vague, diffuse destiny, as highly provisional phonetic and morphological clusters…".[45]

The second path in the universalist education, namely proposing interpretations of facts, and the ensuing "bidding of truth"[46] by the faith communities, requires mutual respect for the various convictions that distinguish the faiths from each other. At the same time, it also demands to acknowledge and accept that what binds all faiths at the most fundamental level is their rivaling confidence in owning the absolute truth. Indeed, this is precisely the intersection from where love and harmony versus fervour are branching out in opposite directions. Eco describes this tension when the friends embark on the journey to unknown lands in search of Prester John. The time spent in studies in Paris represents the stage of sharing factual knowledge (first path of the universalist education), and which lays the ground to the forming of the interpretive knowledge (second path of the universalist education):

In Paris we worked very hard. For example, after the first years, we were already taking part in debates, and in debate you learn to posit objections and to move on to the determination, that is, to the final solution of a question. And you mustn't think that the lessons are the most important things for a student, or that the tavern is only a place where they waste time. The good thing about the *studium* is that you learn from your teachers, true, but even more from your fellows, especially those older than you, when they tell you what they have read, and you discover that the world must be full of wondrous things and to know them all – since a life time will not be enough for you to travel through the whole world – you can only read all the books.[47]

It is during the second path (and stage) of education that Baudolino's and his friends' common journey gets often marred by fervour leading to lies, distrust, and mutual harm. This becomes plain in chapter 17 "Baudolino discovers that Prester John wrote to too many people", when even Baudolino – himself the skilled and eternal liar - is scandalized by the idea that believers' loyalty to their faith is subject to abuse by their religious guides.[48] To forestall such branching out of the second path of the universalist education requires to acknowledge that one may not have the absolute truth, and that there may be multiple legitimate ways to the truth. I leave this discussion for another time.

As a political scientist and jurist, my practical recommendation regarding the translation of the first path in universalist education into real deeds is twofold: All faith communities, down to their lowest organizational hierarchical level, will prepare written statements of acknowledgment whereby they recognize that the disseminating of factual knowledge is of vital importance to the integrity of the faith. This should also be re-iterated in verbal communications. In addition, all faith communities, must (a) include in their religious schools libraries (and establish libraries where there are none) housing the factual knowledge pertaining to all peoples and faiths, and (b) include a representative sample of this information in all of their religious school teachings. This will include the story of the storming of the Temple of Amritsar, the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, and the Golden Age in Muslim Spain, to name just a very and non-representative, few.

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[45] Saramago, p. 55.
[46] For the sake of facilitating an ethos of love and harmony, it is important to leave to each learner the individual choice of which truth to adopt, if at all.
[47] Eco, pp. 67-68.
[48] Ibid., p. 224.

I hope that the participants of this conference will debate, and perhaps agree, on the first path to universalist education.