



Jan Philipp Reemtsma

Must we respect religiosity?

On questions of faith and the pride of the secular society

It is said that Western societies are entering an age of post-secularity, in which there is a need for a truth beyond that offered by conventional science. Fine, say liberals, simply take your pick from the many faiths on offer. But from religion's standpoint, the idea that "You can believe what you want" seems indifferent and mistaken. Respect between the religious and the non-religious is necessary if this tension is not to become intolerance.

"When people refuse to see anything greater than themselves, any limits to their power, they always end up by debasing life: first Herod, who ordered the deaths of the children of Bethlehem; then, among others, Hitler and Stalin, who had millions of people exterminated; and today, in our own time, unborn children are being killed in their millions."

This was part of a sermon given by the cardinal of Cologne, Joachim Meisner. His words caused a stir. The president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Paul Spiegel, spoke of a slander against millions of Holocaust victims and against women forced to make a decision in a crisis. The cardinal claimed in response to have been misunderstood and left out Hitler's name in the printed version of his sermon.

For religious Catholics, life begins at conception. In their eyes, as far as the reprehensibility of the act is concerned, it makes no difference whether an embryo, a child, or an adult is killed. According to this view, when hundreds, thousands, or millions of abortions are taking place, mass murder is being committed, and there is absolutely no reason not to compare it to any another historical mass murder — even the Holocaust. So, for a religious Catholic, there is nothing scandalous in the cardinal's words. All he has done is express his religious convictions, as befits his office. Of course one may find his religious convictions scandalous. But what of it? A secular society is distinguished by the fact that religion can indeed be practised both in the private and in the public realm, but that the public realm is not defined by any one religion. Even where religion is practised in public, it is a private matter. In a secular society, religion takes place in public *because* religion is a private matter, and because in a secular society *many different* private views can play a part in shaping the public sphere.

What do I mean by "religiosity"? Of course I am using a broad concept that includes — or at any rate does not automatically exclude — not only Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but also Jehova's Witnesses and animists. Being religious consists in the belief that the world cannot be understood in and of itself. Of course, most non-religious people also take the view that

"there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in [our] philosophy". But that has nothing to do with being religious. Nor are people religious if they believe that there are other natural forces besides the ones known to us (for instance those at work in homeopathic medicine), or if they believe in ghosts, telepathy, telekinesis, and whatever else.

The division of the world into the accessible and the transcendent

People are religious if they believe that whatever we can still discover about the world by one means or another will not be that which holds the world together most fundamentally, the secret of the world, its meaning — its *essence* in some sense. And this essence is what matters. For someone who says that science cannot provide an answer to all these questions, but considers this by no means to be a shortcoming, is clearly not religious. The religious person divides the world into that which is accessible to our quest for knowledge, and which is precisely for that reason not the essence, and the other, essential part, to which there must be some different form of access.

A non-religious person cannot therefore prove a religious person's belief to be mistaken in this regard: Virchow failed to find a soul in the autopsies he performed, but, says the religious believer, that was not only not to be expected, it was indeed an impossibility. No space probe will ever be able to show that God does not exist, and no chemical experiment will be able to show that there is no such thing as Dao. Conversely, one who undertakes to prove his God through some form of ritual is not religious. He can take some event as evidence for the existence of transcendental powers — like the late pope, who believed that the Virgin Mary had personally deflected the would-be assassin's bullet that was meant for him — but no more than that.

Therefore, someone who believes that they know something more, something different, about the world than many other people is not religious; religious is rather someone who believes that, in the final analysis, such knowledge fails to grasp the world in its totality — or in its core, or its meaning. A religious person also believes, however, that it is precisely this comprehension which is decisive and even in some sense attainable, if only by means of a particular path, an essential element of which is the experience of division we have been talking about. It is in this perception that religions coincide; it is in the way in which they deal with this perception in rituals, convictions, teachings, writings, and social behaviour that they differ. Religiosity is the conviction that one has privileged access to a world — to the truth, let us say — that can only be understood by approaching it this way.

The general public in a secular society does not recognize the idea of such privileged access to the truth. A secular society is not a profane theocracy; in it, a scientific world view does not take the place of religion, any more than religious people are deemed insane or otherwise discriminated against for their views alone, for the idea that they have a privileged access to the truth. But it is not because religious belief deserves it, so to speak, that it is treated like this; this happens because a secular society is a secular society. It would cease to exist as such if it were to single out a particular non-religious world view by conferring upon it a monopoly on interpreting the world, because that monopoly would itself take on religious characteristics through such a role. In a secular society — and that is the sole issue here — a citizen's access to the public sphere is defined only by his or her status as a citizen, and not by what he or she thinks.

The false thesis of the lack of meaning in secular society

For this reason, a secular society does not concern itself with what must be most important for a religious person if he takes his faith seriously. For a religious person, a secular society is a mistaken society. This view is shared by the clerics of Tehran, the (orthodox) religious figures of Jerusalem, and the Church of Rome. Fighting this secular society is the clear goal of Islamist groups throughout the world, it is the goal of part of the political spectrum in Israel to fight it there, and it was the avowed aim of the late John Paul II to fight it across the world.

I am not saying that it is the aim of *everyone* with a religious mindset to fight secularism. But it must be borne in mind that there is a certain tension between a society that is based on the assumption that there is no privileged access to the truth, and people whose lives are imbued with the notion that there is indeed such a thing, and that they are in possession of it.

The problem of respect has its roots in the fact that many people, especially religious people, believe that a secular society needs a religious element, because it is only in religion that we find something urgently needed by every society, something that a secular society cannot produce in and of itself. When one asks what this is, one is told "meaning", or "binding values", or "orientation". I would point out that a notion is recurring here, one related to the fundamental structure of "religiosity". To quote the title of a James Bond film: "the world is not enough".

If it were true that a secular society is incapable of surviving alone, without religiosity, then it must also be true that religious belief should be accorded respect — for one should not disdain something on which one is dependent. One can argue that anyone who needs a God will just have to see where they can find one, and that that is a strictly personal matter. Or it can be argued that human beings cannot live fully without some transcendental orientations, and that *fostering* a culture that offers such orientations is a task for the entire community. To assert that religiosity must be respected only makes sense in the latter case.

In my view there are three possible ways to understand the argument about secular societies' lack of meaning. The first meaning occasionally given to the theory is one of a problem of origin. According to this version, certain concepts, norms, and values important in secular societies have a religious origin — we fed, as it were, on this religious foundation, on which ideas such as the equality of man — first before God, later before the eyes of the law — developed. Yet this suggestion does not lead very far, for ideas are not obliged to the contexts in which they originated; they emerge again and again in different contexts, and it is questionable whether the concept of civic equality in the eyes of the law is indeed the secularized version of the Christian idea of the equality of all human beings before God.

The second possible interpretation of the argument about lack of meaning is that secular societies fail to offer binding concepts of meaning, but that people need them. The first part of this interpretation is the definition of the "secular society" and, combined with the second, means nothing more than "human beings are not made for secular societies". That is — as the historical success of the secular society as a model shows — untrue. The third meaning of the deficit thesis could be a variant of this understanding — one that is not normative–anthropological, but empirical. Many people *have* a need for a

predetermined concept of meaning, and the reality of a society that tells them, "If you need it, we've got it, take your pick!" is too much for them.

It is true that there are many people who feel they cannot cope with the modern age, who are overtaxed by a society where people are distinguished according to the function they perform, with a plurality of roles, an unclear hierarchy of values, role-dependent modes of social inclusion where it is one's role that determines one's place in society, and so on. Such people therefore strive to drastically simplify their worldview. In extreme cases, these people will join groups which distinguish clearly between good and evil, which declare that they represent the good in the world, and declare war on all the rest — groups known by names such as al-Qaeda, Baader-Meinhof, the Manson Family, or Aum Shinrikyo. There are also less militant versions going right down to milder forms of ideological paranoia à la Michael Moore. Or they turn to those very offers of collectively established meaning offered by traditional religions or modern cults.

That people are *able and allowed* to do this — so long as they do not contravene any laws, if they opt for terrorism for instance — is guaranteed them by the secular public. It guarantees — in contrast to theocratically constituted societies — that the range of "offers" of meaning in life is as diverse as the needs for it are multifarious. The notion that the secular society somehow needs to compensate for its lack of meaning through religion is quite simply a false description of the situation. Only in a theocratically constituted society is meaning prescribed — *and it is only this prescription that the secular society lacks*. But this defect is its dignity. And it is this defect that guarantees that everyone can believe what they want — and also that they need not feign any belief if they do not believe in anything at all.

The respect that a secular society shows to the religious person is the same respect it shows to the non-religious. It is the respect for their private life. It is summed up in the famous maxim of Frederick II of Prussia that "everyone must find his own salvation", or in Thomas Jefferson's argument that "it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

What seems, therefore, from the perspective of one who not only accepts the secular society but views it as an ideal, to be no more than natural respect, is, in the eyes of a religious person, a demonstration of a failure to see what actually matters. "You can believe what you want" — this liberal principle seems to him sheer indifference and, what is more, a misjudgement. One who believes does not believe that he does so because he has *made a choice* to believe one thing instead of another. The act of choice, as the decision to follow a particular faith appears to be to the non-believer, is interpreted by the believer as a revelation, an epiphany, a deeper insight: not as something arbitrary, but as something deeply necessary.

The new pope, when he was a cardinal, put it trenchantly: "Meaning that is self-made is, in the last analysis, no meaning at all."¹ In his writings, Benedict XVI has inveighed with great verve against theological *à la carte* in religion. Faith, as he understands it, is not something from the great supermarket of meaning. His religion is about truth, and for him there is something deeply absurd in the idea that truth has to move with the times in order to adapt to people's preferences. And I must concede — if someone is convinced that a particular form of sexual ethics is the product of insight of the will of God, then to observe that one can become infected with Aids through unprotected

sexual intercourse is not a valid objection.

The necessary respect for what others hold sacred

Benedict XVI demands respect, in plain words, for the faith he stands for, even in a society with majority that does not share his fundamental beliefs. He speaks of the necessary "respect for what is sacred to others", calling it an "essential aspect of all cultures".² The pope (or rather the cardinal, as he still was at the time of writing) and I agree on this point, at least — how did he put it to Jürgen Habermas? — "in operative terms".

It is worth reading the next passage: "[...] particularly respect for what is sacred in a higher sense — respect, or rather reverence, for God — something which one finds even in people who do not believe in God. In a society where this respect has been violated, something essential has been lost."³ It is self-evident that the theologian sees my willingness to respect his religious belief as an indication of my own disposition to believe. But it is this perception that is the foundation of his, the theologian's, respect for what I deem important in my life — something that I, however, would not describe as "sacred". If he considers this to be evidence of freely chosen idiosyncrasies, rather than of faith in an undeveloped state, then what is called for is a lesser kind of respect, at best. And therein lies a process of differentiation which can scarcely be disregarded: respect cannot be demanded for any kind of nonsense purely because someone considers it important, particularly if one considers "respect" to mean more than simply letting people do as they please, as long as they do no damage.

Let us talk about respect. This much is clear: neither the pope's nor my willingness to respect is unconditional; on that we are agreed. I do not respect piety, devoutness, and theology merely because they exist: I do not respect any intellectual content which is meaningless to me, or which I consider to be nonsense — interesting nonsense maybe, but nonsense nonetheless. Nor do I respect people for making their lives difficult unnecessarily. And yet, these factors do play a part in one's respect.

As far as I am concerned, this respect is guided by the opinion that, to quote Christoph Martin Wieland, "we cannot all see the world through the same keyhole", and life is hard enough for one simply not to worry about it. This respect is sustained by the conviction that it is better for us to live together on the basis of such mutual respect than without it. Here an element of reciprocity comes into play which proves to be utterly decisive.

In fact, I cannot have any respect for fanatics. I cannot respect them like a kind of knightly foe: you might kill him, but you respect him nonetheless. That may be a part of the creed of warlike virtues, but it has no place among the civil virtues. Respect is given in return for respect. So it is clear that I do not respect the religious person for the reason which matters to him or her. I feel no respect for what he or she considers holy in a higher sense, but rather for the individual, part of whose outlook on life is to foster feelings of holiness, at least as long as he or she does this within the bounds of civil decency.

Provided that the rules of living together are respected, I respect the meaning which all people give to their actions. I respect the way people seek to give their own life meaning — though they will not understand this meaning as one they have given to their own life. This is something we view differently, and neither of us can demand that the other take their view of things. What I am

entitled to ask, however, is that religious people behave in such a way that the result of their conduct appears the same as mine. They will think differently in the process, and will therefore, at best, respect me because they believe that they see, in that part of me that they respect, something of which I know nothing. They respect it because they would like to see in it the very thing which matters to them. They respect me as a potential believer, I respect them as fellow citizens: it's like oil and water. In a secular society there is at least a tendency for the view that I have here described as my own to hold sway. In this context, one can interpret the respect for religious people as defined by Benedict XVI to mean the same thing. Perhaps that is what we should do, if only for the sake of peace and quiet.

Liberal abortion laws are not necessarily part of a secular society. However, what is integral to secular society is that the independence of the legislature is not limited by obligation to a creed. Our legislation and established case law make abortions exempt from punishment under certain conditions, that is to say, they are permitted in practice. Anyone whose religious creed holds that human life not only begins at what is called conception, but must from this moment be treated as equal to born human life — since this life then becomes the bearer of an immortal soul — must view such sanctioning as legalized murder.

When Cardinal Meisner equates such legalized murder of millions of unborn lives with the murder of millions of born lives, he is following his religious convictions. He is saying the same thing as John Paul II, who asserted,

If man can decide by himself, without God, what is good and what is bad, he can also determine that a group of people is to be annihilated. Decisions of this kind were taken, for example, by those who came to power in the Third Reich [...] Comparable decisions were made in the Soviet Union. [...] After the regimes founded on ideologies of evil were overthrown, these forms of extermination ceased in their countries de facto. There is still, however, a legal extermination of human beings who have been conceived but not yet born. And this time, we are talking about an extermination which has been allowed by nothing less than democratically elected parliaments, where one normally hears appeals for the civil progress of society and all humanity. [...] We are entitled, no, impelled, to wonder whether another, new, ideology of evil, perhaps more insidious and secretive, is at work here.⁴

A consistent Catholic not only can, but must, think like this. It is obvious that a judgement which equates the Holocaust with abortion legislation in this way can deeply offend the survivors of Nazi Germany's policy of extermination, as well as women who have decided to have an abortion. But what can be done? If I do not want to do away with religious freedom, I must accept that such views exist. But it scarcely follows that I have to *respect* them. I respect the freedom of my fellow man to hold religious beliefs to which I profoundly object. That this freedom entails the potential to cause offence to fellow citizens must be accepted — up to a point.

Yet we must be clear about the verdict pronounced on our community by this way of thinking. I am not suggesting that either the late or the current pope has equated the persons in Germany's parliament and its federal government with

the Nazi leadership. But both groups are, in their eyes, agents of an insidious ideology of evil, of a "culture of death", as both popes have also called it. The jargon with which the late pope used to express his verdict on the secular society does not differ in any way from fundamentalist cant elsewhere, where the US is referred to as the "Great Satan".

At another point in his book John Paul II talks of "another form of totalitarianism [...] which hides insidiously behind the appearance of democracy,"⁵ meaning the Western liberal democracies. "Again and again we see the signs of a society which, if not atheist in programme, is most certainly positivist and agnostic, since its principle of orientation consists in thinking and acting as if God did not exist. [...] To live as if God did not exist is to live outside the coordinates of good and evil."⁶

Indeed: in ruling that no priest, no pope, no imam, no rabbi, no inquisitor, and no guru may have the right to determine the laws a society should live by, what the art people take pleasure in should be like, what kind of knowledge should be taught in schools, secular society states that its *citizens* are the ones who make the laws and agree mutually on what kind of values these laws follow.

John Paul II perceived an anti-divine pattern of thought in the tradition of Western philosophy since Descartes, a pattern of thought that opposed God — even in thinkers who had professed themselves to be "good Christians". All thinking that does not take God as its starting-point is, he said, "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" and therefore an "unforgivable" sin.⁷ One who holds such views cannot live in peace, but only ever in a state of temporary armistice, with a society so constituted that it places human beings, not God and the citizen, not the priest, at its centre.

Some people say that whoever claims not to be religious is merely refusing to acknowledge that he or she is also religious, but just in a different way. They do not believe in God, but instead in man or in the blessings of the secular society. This is just playing with words. Someone who does not believe in something does not believe in its negation in the same way that someone who believes in something believes in its affirmation. The difference might be suggested in the appealing anecdote about the response given by Bertrand Russell, a notorious atheist, to an anxious student who asked him what he would say if, contrary to his expectations, he were one day faced with God: "You should have given us more evidence."

And yet there is also an existential moment associated with the idea of a secular society. Secular society came into being in a way which was perceived by those who attended and welcomed its formation and development as a kind of "struggle" — a perception which has persisted through the generations. Of course, in sociological history the process of secularization would not be described as the ultimately triumphant struggle of independent intellectuals against a dull-witted clergy; but it would acknowledge that, in the course of secularization, those who considered themselves its protagonists increasingly idealized themselves and the process, and that idealization became in turn an important element of the process. Thus Voltaire's "*Écrasez l'infâme!*", or Kant's polemic against the "guardians of intellect", and the quotation from Horace "*sapere aude*", chosen by Kant as the watchword of the Enlightenment and translated by him as, "Have the courage to use your own intellect", became iconic phrases of the secular society.

Because of this self-image, though it is of no relevance to our present situation, we feel connected, perhaps obliged, must still, or once again, fight this struggle. It is because we have this image of ourselves that initiatives such as the repeated attempt to replace evolutionary theory in schools with Bible reading or "creationism" provoke not only opposition, but distinct feelings of indignation. The same goes for the restrictions which some Muslims are subjected to from within their families. I am not talking of acts of violence — that is another story entirely — but of lifestyle restrictions which are acceptable, of course, if they are voluntary, but which we often view suspiciously, since it is difficult here to discern the difference between free will and the submissiveness dictated by tradition. Here, problematic areas in the legal structure of the secular state are revealed.

On the one hand, secularism — as an opportunity to seek modes of meaning according to one's own taste — protects us from involuntary religious communities; on the other hand it means not interfering with religious forms of expression. The latter manifests itself in the form of civil rights, the former in the shape of ensuring that certain laws are observed.

The teacher's headscarf, and other fashion accessories

We have just witnessed a highly controversial debate about the limits to free expression of religiosity: the so-called headscarf debate. Naturally, citizens of a secular state must be allowed to express their affiliation to a particular religious denomination if they are so inclined; equally naturally, if school attendance is compulsory the secular state must provide non-denominational schools, and as part of this provision must guarantee that, while religion may be offered as a subject in one form or another, no religious influence whatsoever is exerted.

Therefore, some argue, female teachers who profess their Islamic faith should not be allowed to wear any garment which overtly demonstrates this belief. According to the counter-argument, such a ban contravenes the right to practise one's religion freely and discriminates against religious Muslims, since it denies those who feel obliged to wear a particular form of dress access to certain professions.

It seems to me that one dimension of the problem has been missed in this debate and this dimension is related to what I would like to call the *pride* of the secular society. In this case, this consists in not letting one's view of clothing be dictated by a religious creed. In the eyes of the secular state, the veil should be treated as a fashion accessory, and people are entitled to wear what they like — within limits, of course. There are certain rules of decency, but they are not defined in religious terms. These rules of decency define, if anything, how *little* one may wear, not how much. All cultures have attached importance to denaturalizing the body, even if only through the application of colour or through disfigurement by means of scarring. Cultures differ in the ways, places, and extent to which they cover the body, make parts of it invisible or accentuate them; but they all agree that there is such a thing as decent and indecent clothing.

But that varies from one culture to another and from one fashion to another. The secular state makes questions of fashion independent of religious convictions, as far as questions of decency are concerned. The man who goes naked for religious reasons — if such people still exist; in antiquity, they were called Gymnosophists — is not tolerated. The woman who covers her face for

religious reasons *is* tolerated. That is all. It is not for a secular state to concern itself with what a form of clothing "means" for a religious man or woman. How would it go about doing so anyway? It may be that a woman wears the veil because she wants to exhibit her convictions overtly and to signal that she wants a devout Islamic society in which all women wear the veil. It may be that she does so because she is simply following the precepts she has deemed binding for her. Who can know?

It is not the place of a secular society to concern itself with this, nor should it even seek to find out. Arguably it has the right, and the duty, to supervise the ideological neutrality of its state schools, but this is done by supervising the content of what is taught and how it is presented by the teachers. If religious indoctrination is taking place, teachers can be dismissed and in extreme cases excluded from the profession. It has been objected that our state also bans the wearing of the swastika. But that is banned as the symbol of a banned party; and if the headscarf were the symbol of a banned religious group, there would be nothing objectionable about its being banned.

Again: if a teacher abuses her position to spread religious propaganda, she should be dismissed. But for that to happen, she has to *do* something. Showing that she *believes* something different from the other teachers or students is not enough. If disciplinary proceedings are initiated against the teacher, the fact that she wears a headscarf can be allowed as part of the evidence — but as a single piece of evidence, it cannot suffice.

Conversely, is it necessary — if despite all this the headscarf is banned — also to ban the cassock of the chaplain who gives religious education lessons, or the crucifix round the neck of the maths teacher? A mistake is not improved by making another one in order to be fair. But the fact is that a society which restricts the right to wear headscarves, but not crucifixes, lays itself open to the suspicion that it is not concerned about the ideological neutrality of its schools, but rather with making life difficult for Muslims.

My tolerance for forms of clothing dictated by religion in no way means that I respect the ideas the person concerned may have about the purity or sinfulness of the human body; instead, I respect his or her way of life. As long, that is, as they respect the ground rules of the secular society and therefore do not bully their daughter over and above the level of intolerance that might be generally accepted in parents.

They have my respect as fellow human beings; as fellow citizens, my promise to support their rights; and as an employer, it is not for me to take an interest in matters of fashion — headscarves, crosses and other accessories — so long as they do not offend against the relevant norms of decency, as I have said. Headscarves should remain a matter of fashion for the school authorities.

It is only through actions and relevant contexts that symbols become symbolic. Therein lies the concept governing etiquette in a secular society: that meaning arises out of communication and context. That meaning is fixed and comes from without is the view of the religious, not ours. Respect for religions can only be founded on the basis of this dissent. And that is why laws which ban women teachers from wearing headscarves in schools are laws which offend against a secular society's sense of self-respect.

The current pope calls our opinion "the dictatorship of relativism" and says, plainly, that the view that religion is a private matter and that its potential

public role is defined on the basis that it is a private matter is an act of aggression against religion. And the late Pope, as an acknowledged enemy of an open, secular society, called this view the "unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit".

Therein lay for him the meaning of the story of the Fall — and this is a coherent theological interpretation: "That is what the words of the book of Genesis refer to: 'Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil'; that is to say, you will decide for yourselves what is good and what is evil."⁸ The pride of the secular society actually consists in living in this kind of sin.

This essay is the revised and abridged version of a lecture first given by Jan Philipp Reemtsma on 19 May 2005 in the Dresdner Kulturpalast.

-
- ¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum. Vorlesungen über das apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis* (Introduction to Christianity: Lectures on the Apostolic Creed), Düsseldorf 2002, 47.
- ² Ratzinger, *Warum hasst sich der Westen?* (Why does the West hate itself?), in *Cicero*, June 2004, 67.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ John Paul II, *Erinnerung und Identität. Gespräche an der Schwelle zwischen den Jahrtausenden*, (Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium), Augsburg 2005, 26.
- ⁵ Ibid. 68.
- ⁶ Ibid. 67.
- ⁷ Ibid. 21.
- ⁸ Ibid. 20.

Published 2005–12–02
 Original in German
 Translation by Saul Lipetz
 Contribution by Le Monde diplomatique (Berlin)
 First published in *Le Monde diplomatique* 8/2005 (German version)
 © Jan Philipp Reemtsma/Le Monde diplomatique
 © Eurozine