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On the Presence of Educated Religious Beliefs in the Public Sphere

Abstract: Discursive liberal democracy might not be the best of all possible forms of government, yet in Europe it is largely accepted as such. The attractors of liberal democracy (majority rule, political equality, reasonable self-determination and an ideological framework built in a tentative manner) as well as an adequate dose of secularization (according to the doctrine of religious restraint) provide both secularist and educated religious people with the most convenient ideological framework. Unfortunately, many promoters of ideological secularization take too strong a stance against the manifestation of religiosity in the public sphere. They claim that people may discuss, debate or adopt (coercive) laws and regularities only by means of secular public reasons and secular motivation. We argue that these secular restraints on the ideological framework are unfairly biased against religion, counterproductive and unreasonable. The exaggerated secular restrictions create a strict secular public sphere that appears to be a Pickwickian world suitable just for inoffensive, dull and lethargic people. Deliberately separated from the idea of truth, secular public reasons cannot sustain a complex adaptive system like discursive liberal democracy. Liberal democracy needs citizens with a strong sense of truth and with a sufficient will-power to follow both a personal ideal and a collective ideal. Religious beliefs provide people with just such a sense of truth and with the desire to have a certain kind of character. In the secularized public sphere of liberal democracy, people can manifest just educated religious beliefs that correspond to the real world and respect the principle of peaceable conduct. In the final part of the article we support the assertion that believers could and should educate their religious belief before expressing them in the public sphere. Educated religious beliefs have a wide enough propositional content, obey the moral imperative of William Clifford, are purged from all propositional

components against which there is strong evidence and are consciously cultivated by the mechanism of suggestion.

Keywords: discursive liberal democracy, secularization, public sphere, public reason, religious belief, educated belief.

1. The context of the issue: discursive liberal democracy

The history of all hitherto existing society might not be that of class struggle, but it is surely the history of constant struggle between myriads of doctrines or ideologies. Ideological confrontations differ widely with regard to their durability, spread, and intensity. Some of them are intermittent petty squabbles that bring about fleeting changes of mood at most, but other ones are enduring bitter clashes that all too often lead to brutal repressions, savage uprisings, bloody revolutions and devastating wars.

The European continent has been for centuries the scene of fierce ideological confrontations. Many of them were accompanied by bloody wars. The most recent and important ideological clashes led, on the one hand, to the marginalization of Fascism, National-Socialism and Communism, and on the other hand, to the affirmation of *discursive liberal democracy* as the dominant political ideology in Europe.

At present, for almost all public voices within the Euro-Atlantic area, democracy is the only acceptable form of political ruling and organization of a society, but also a panacea for all the diseases third-world peoples suffer from: wars, tyranny, corruption, exploitation, poverty, discrimination, environmental crimes etc. (cf. Minogue 2010). The principles and values of liberal democracy – the sovereignty of the people, the separation of powers, the protection of human rights, equality before the law, the limitation of government power from interfering in the lives of people or communities, the majority rule in decision making, the protection of minority rights, open debates on public policies etc. – are invoked permanently in political life and seem to be commonplaces in citizens' conversations (cf. Farte 2010).

Discursive liberal democracy is a self-founding political philosophy. It determines tentatively and in a prescriptive way its scope answering the following questions: (a) Who should rule? (b) How should rule be exercised? (c) What kind of rationale should one provide for one's political theses and actions? In general, discursive liberal democracy is fairly flexible so that it is possible to provide a wide range of satisfactory answers to above-mentioned basic questions.

With regard to the first question, one can say that a democratic society is always run by *the majority of a political body* that is constituted periodically through electoral battles between equals. Interestingly enough, this rough answer allows for a miscellaneous collection of specifications. The majority of a political body can be the better or, on the contrary, the worse part of society. It can also coincide with the whole political body. It is possible for the political body to comprise all adult male citizens who completed their military training, all adult men who pay taxes above a certain amount, all adult males, all adult persons without distinctions based on sex, property, race, color, religion, birth or other status, or the union of the living, their ancestors and their descendants.¹ The various designs of the political bodies cannot mask the pillars of democracy, namely *majority rule* and *political equality* (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1974, 29).

The answers to question (b) substantiate the prospective liberal trait of democracy. The ruling part of a society governs in a *liberal way* only if “each citizen enjoys the greatest possible amount of personal liberty” (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1974, 29). Obviously, liberty is a relative concept. The greatest possible amount of personal liberty depends on historical context, geographical location, economic or cultural circumstances, the prevalence of some virtues or vices etc. Nonetheless, whatever the circumstantial factors of a society are, it is possible to ascertain the basic level of liberal governance. A society is governed liberally only if the ruling body accepts and follows the non-aggression principle, in other words, the principle of reasonable self-determination. In order to respect this principle of civilized life, the rulers should refrain from the proactive use of force in an individual’s own sphere. The proper and inviolable sphere of someone includes (a) one’s life and bodily integrity, (b) one’s physical, psychological, moral and spiritual faculties and (c) the tangible and intangible goods which the individual has acquired by the free exercise of one’s own faculties and capabilities (Farte 2015). In a highly civilized society the amount of personal liberty of the less fortunate could be augmented by means of claim rights – the right to education, the right to science and culture, the right to health, the right to a decent life, the right to retirement pension, the right to unemployment benefits etc. – provided that the obligations on other parties regarding the right-holders are accepted voluntarily. When a highly civilized society increases the amount of personal liberty by generally accepted claim rights, it acts in a supererogatory manner.

¹ Edmund Burke describes the state as “a divinely ordained moral essence, a spiritual union of the dead, the living, and those yet unborn” (cf. Kirk 2001).

It is evident that democracy is not *eo ipso* liberal. On the contrary, “[t]here are certain totalitarian and monolithic tendencies inherent in democracy. (...) The marriage between democracy and liberalism came late in history and had the seeds of divorce in it” (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1974, 34). It is easier to preserve democracy than the liberal way of ruling.

The last question about the scope of discursive liberal democracy is of paramount importance because it requires us to determine (at the society level) not only the ruler and the way of running but also the frame of reference which the right answers might be sought in. Obviously, a partly self-referential question cannot be answered dogmatically but *tentatively* within a self-founding ideological framework. For example, I strongly believe that my above-mentioned assertions with regard to the question “Who should rule and how should the ruler run?” are true, but I know I have to consider other point of views in order to improve my “candidates for the truth”.

Throughout history, all democratic societies had to cope with many lamentable states of affairs: blatant political inequality², disenfranchisement of foreigners, slaves, women or the poor, unconcealed or disguised slavery, abortions, exploitation of children, confiscatory taxation, contempt of tradition³ etc. Depending on their frame of reference and prevalent discursive practices, they came to terms with these shortcomings or, on the contrary, got rid of them. In the absence of any transcendent principles, standards or means, only a framework built in a tentative (and precautionary) manner made it possible for a society to debate and solve such collective problems.

2. From constitutional secularization to ideological secularization in a liberal democracy

The main attractors⁴ of discursive liberal democracy – majority rule, political equality, the principle of reasonable self-determination, supererogatory extension of personal liberty, and the tentative manner of

² In a democratic society, each citizen has just one vote, but some people add many other political means to their vote: funds, media coverage, participation in deliberative bodies (town hall meetings, citizens’ panels, citizens’ forums, etc.), belonging to a numerous and politically active group, etc. Actually, it is *impossible* to achieve (full) political equality.

³ Our traditions synthetically express the votes of our ancestors. When we eschew our tradition, we nullify the votes of our forefathers.

⁴ “An attractor represents the organizing principle that brings regularity to a system (i.e., ‘attracts’ orderliness)” (Shaffer 2012, xvii).

building the political framework – configure a complex adaptive system characterized by adaptativity, nonlinearity, coevolution, punctuated equilibrium, and self-organization⁵. The last characteristic, self-organization, is of paramount importance because it is a necessary condition for the survival of discursive liberal democracy. To have and maintain self-organization, discursive liberal democracy “need[s] to operate in far-from-equilibrium conditions, where customary constraints loosen and random noise occurs, consisting of small but frequent aberrations from the expected that may become incorporated as the system evolves” (Murphy 2000, 454). It also requires “some form of internal redundancy in the form of attitudes, expectations, and behaviors” (Murphy 2000, 454).

Having emerged victorious from the confrontation with other doctrines and ideological systems, discursive liberal democracy seems to be undermined by an endogenous factor that has become in the Euro-Atlantic area both virulent and intolerant – *secularization*.

Generally speaking, secularization is associated with “the decline in the social significance of religion in modern societies” (cf. Davie 2013, 263) and with the removal of the control or influence exercised by religious groups or institutions. More specifically, as George Moyser judiciously remarked, secularization can be examined as a [gradual and] complex process consisting of five branches (Moyser 1991, 14-15):

- constitutional secularization
- policy secularization
- institutional secularization
- agenda secularization
- ideological secularization

By *constitutional secularization*, the official character and purpose of the state cease to be defined in religious terms, and religious institutions cease to be given special recognition and backing. Through the process of *policy secularization*, the state ceases to regulate society on the basis of religious principles, values or norms, and expands its policies into formerly religious areas. A society is in the process of *institutional secularization* when religious organizations and institutions lose their political weight and influence. *Agenda secularization* is the process whereby political issues cease to have overtly religious content, and the proposed political solutions

⁵ In the article *Contingency, Complexity: Accommodating Uncertainty in Public Relations Theory*, Priscilla Murphy provides an insightful analysis of these characteristics (Murphy 2000).

are no longer constructed on the basis of religious principles and values. Finally, one could recognize the progress of *ideological secularization* where the basic system of principles, values and beliefs used to evaluate the political realm and to give it meaning cease to be expressed through the language of religion (Moyser 1991, 14-15).

The process of secularization is not proceeding everywhere at the same pace in all its aspects. For example, the following articles extracted from the Constitutions of France, Denmark and Greece respectively show that *constitutional secularization* is more advanced in France than in Denmark and Greece.

(a) “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion” (Preamble, art. 1)⁶.

(b) The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the Established Church of Denmark, and) as such, it shall be supported by the State (Part I, art. 4)⁷.

(c) “The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. The Orthodox Church of Greece, acknowledging our Lord Jesus Christ as its head, is inseparably united in doctrine with the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople and with every other Church of Christ of the same doctrine. (...) The text of the Holy Scripture shall be maintained unaltered. Official translation of the text into any other form of language, without prior sanction by the Autocephalous Church of Greece and the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople, is prohibited” (Part I, art. 3)⁸.

The degree of *policy secularization* correlates with the fields of cooperation between church and state, on the one hand, and the “nationalization” of vital statistics (birth, marriages, deaths etc.), health care services and charity, the state compulsory education of children, the proliferation of social welfare programs unconnected to any spiritual needs or the predominantly temporal character of the government’s purposes, on the other hand. Taking for granted the remark made at the German Bishops’ Conference about the relationship between the state and

⁶ *Constitution of 4 October 1958*. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/english/constitution/constitution-of-4-october-1958.25742.html>.

⁷ *Denmark’s Constitution of 1953*. Accessed June 17, 2015. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Denmark_1953.pdf.

⁸ *The Constitution of Greece*. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.hri.org/docs/syntagma/artcl25.html#A1>.

the church – “the German view of partnership between church and state⁹ differs both from the principle of mutual independence with an emphasis on separation (as in France and the USA) and from the model of a privileged church (as in Great Britain, Sweden and Greece)”¹⁰ –, one can say that in Germany the degree of policy secularization is higher than in UK, Sweden and Greece, but lower than in France and USA.

Over the last decades, *institutional secularization* of Europe has advanced impressively. Some randomly selected facts speak for themselves. In 2009 and 2011 respectively, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated was estimated to be 23-28% in France, 25.7% in UK, 34.5% in Czech Republic, and 42% in Netherlands¹¹. These percentages could be higher because most churches “work on a model of opting out than opting in” (Davie 2013, 260) so that they encompass a huge range of believers and unbelievers. To illustrate the point, I mention just several data. “Whilst 27% of the French went to Mass once a week or more in 1965, they are no more than 4.5% in 2009. At a doctrinal level, 63% of practicing Catholics think all religions are the same, 75% ask for an ‘aggiornamento’ of the Church on contraception and even 68% for abortion”¹². Under these conditions, it is reasonable to assert that religious institutions exert only a weak (or moderate at the very most) influence in many European societies.

The adoption of a secular constitution based on an Enlightenment worldview tends to remove the supernatural purposes and reasons from the political *agenda*. Electoral platforms and governmental programs spotlight a general interest in the temporal welfare and seem to consign spiritual or supernatural wellbeing to oblivion. It is quite strange that politics today permeate the life of persons and communities in the same way as religion did in the past. The rhythm of people’s life is no more

⁹ “The [German] state demonstrates its respect for the social significance of the churches and their work towards the common good by giving them the status of corporate bodies under public law” (“The Church and the State,” *Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.dbk.de/en/katholische-kirche/katholische-kirche-deutschland/aufbau-ktah-kirche/kirche-staat>).

¹⁰ “The Church and the State,” *Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.dbk.de/en/katholische-kirche/katholische-kirche-deutschland/aufbau-ktah-kirche/kirche-staat>.

¹¹ “The World Factbook,” *Central Intelligence Agency*. Accessed June 17, 2015. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html>.

¹² “Game Over for France, or will someone do something about it?”, *The Anglo-Catholic: Catholic Faith and Anglican Patrimony*, January 9, 2010. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.theanglocatholic.com/2010/01/game-over-for-france>.

regulated by daily prayer, weekly liturgy, recurring religious feasts, and continuous meditation on eternal happiness, but by breaking news, newscasts, talk shows, electoral campaigns, parliamentary debates, and relentless striving after temporal (more exactly, material) benefits.

Lastly, *ideological secularization* constitutes the cornerstone of the whole process of secularization and moulds the ideological systems of discursive liberal democracy. Ideological secularization *per se* causes no harm, but any immoderate instance of it disturbs the other branches of secularization and undermines the discursive foundation of liberal democracy.

Such an exaggerated version of ideological secularization pertains to the presence of religious reasons and religious beliefs in the public sphere, especially if they are used to advocate or support coercive laws and public policies. The public voices that take a hard line on ideological secularization call for certain moral or legal restrictions to be applied on the discursive public sphere. Such restrictions range from a complete privatization of religious belief and the removal of the last vestiges of religious belief from public life to the requirement of political discussion to offer plausible secular rationales for each of the coercive laws supported thereby (cf. Eberle & Cuneo 2015).

By adopting a *deductive* approach, I will argue the following theses: (a) some secular restrictions on ideological framework are either excessive or difficult to put into practice, (b) the complex adaptative system of liberal democracy needs central, profound, entrenched, stable, intense, expansive and actionable beliefs (as religious beliefs are), and (c) the presence of educated religious beliefs in the European public sphere is both legitimate and useful.

3. Beliefs as objects of ideological secularization

To see how justified secular restrictions on the public manifestation of religious beliefs are, we need to know the essentials of belief.

First of all it is reasonable to assume that beliefs are *real mental states* (cf. Swinburne 2001, 38), like sensations, desires or intentions. Beliefs are distinct from physical events, although they stay causally connected with them, especially with certain brain events. Even if there are causal relations between beliefs, certain brain events, and the outside world, we will discuss the problem of religious belief not in terms of natural causation but in the language of praxeology respecting the following principle: “In the ordinary human relations one man is not

permitted to control another except by persuasion. To seek out other conditions of action would be an invasion of privacy. He will therefore explain human action in terms of belief, which is the point at which he may legitimately influence it” (Perry 1921, 148). Thus we are interested in exploring the religious beliefs – as real mental states – in respect of believers’ privacy without looking for certain physical factors which could determine them causally.

What is believed by a believer represents the *propositional content* (or the *proposition*) of the belief. Someone could entertain a relation of believing to a propositional content even though the world was different in a certain way. In that case the propositional content seems to be determined solely by the believer’s intrinsic properties so that any possible intrinsic duplicate of the believer would believe the same content. We may call such mental states *narrow content* beliefs. When someone’s belief depends for its existence on how the world is beyond the subject’s mental life, we can say that the propositional content of belief relies in part on the subject’s extrinsic properties. In that case there could be a possible intrinsic duplicate of the believer whose corresponding mental state lacks this propositional content. We call such mental states *wide content* beliefs (cf. Swinburne 2001, 32-33; Chalmers 2003).

Due to their idiosyncratic characteristics, narrow content beliefs can be seldom seen as outdated and anachronistic. As a rule persons remain resolute in their narrow content beliefs whatever changes occur in the outside world. Most narrow content beliefs emerge predominantly in the moral, religious or political life of human beings. In order to keep their inmost moral standards, religious faith or political creed, many people have been ready to make sacrifices and even to suffer martyrdom. On the other hand, people tend to update their wide content beliefs depending of various transformations of the environment they have to cope with. Sometimes, the holders of wide content beliefs are so responsive to the changes in the world around them and so eager to adjust to their new environment that they simply abandon their beliefs. Evidently, many wide content beliefs belong to fashion, economic and cultural spheres, but the phenomenon of institutional secularization and the voters’ sudden switches from one political platform to another prove a rapid and massive expansion of wide content beliefs in the entirety of human life to the detriment of narrow content beliefs.

When people believe something, they don’t simply consider a propositional content but give it their (cognitive) *assent*, even though there is no sufficient evidence for proving the truth of it. “Belief rests on

probability, not certainty, and yet it produces the emotional state that goes with certainty” (Britton 1998, 8). Let us consider, for example, the following propositional content: (a) Lower taxes spur investment and stimulate economic growth; (b) The remains discovered embedded in an altar of the Monastery “Sveti Ivan Island” (Bulgaria) belong to St John the Baptist; (c) On 11 February 1858, Bernadette Soubirous experienced her first vision of Virgin Mary. Despite the fact that these propositions could be related to very different corroborative evidence, people who believe them give them their assent to the same extent.

In general, beliefs are *unfalsifiable* or just *partially falsifiable*, since they are based mainly on ideas that can never be proved or invalidated. In other words, “people can (...) resort to emphasizing unfalsifiable reasons for holding a belief” (O’Grady 2014), and, therefore, their beliefs cannot be changed purely by facts, whether they are called evidence or counterevidence. As Cathleen O’Grady justly remarked, unfalsifiability is an important ingredient of both religious and political beliefs, it allows people to hold their beliefs with more conviction, and it also impels people to become more polarized in those beliefs (O’Grady 2014). In addition to O’Grady’s shrewd observations, it could be mentioned that unfalsifiability insinuates itself into many other spheres. Strangely enough, in the philosophical, cultural, artistic, economic, journalistic or academic sphere, we have to deal more with unfalsifiable polarized beliefs than falsifiable knowledge.

Beliefs are *passive and involuntary mental states*. Unlike knowledge, beliefs are generated by causes independent of our consciousness and will. They are not the result of a conscious and voluntary acquisition made by exclusively rational methods such as observation and experience (Le Bon 1918, 16-17). As in the case of resentment, forgiveness, and other feelings or attitudes, people find themselves in an involuntary state of believing that they cannot change in an instant at will (Swinburne 2001, 39). For example, it is impossible for a libertarian Catholic to believe overnight in the transmigration of souls or in the ability of a global political agency to eradicate poverty or slavery from the world. Any effort of will in this direction would be futile.

Although we cannot change our beliefs at will immediately, it is possible to take steps to alter them over a period of time (Swinburne 2001, 39). We are neither helpless victims nor powerful masters of our beliefs. People who did not strengthen their will in order to get the ability of self-control fall prey to morbid curiosity, unbridled passions, nameless fears and ... oppressive unwanted beliefs. Of course it is terrible for

anyone to be in such a situation, but it is more awful for one to resign placidly to one's "fate". What is to be done? A known cause, as the saying goes, is a controllable cause (Perry 1921, 144). If we could identify *the* cause of a certain belief, we would have the ability to control the cause and to modify consciously and at will that belief. Unfortunately, our beliefs are causally determined by a complex and uncontrollable network of instincts, mental events (other beliefs, knowledge, perceptions, desires, intentions, etc.), brain events and physical events from the outside world. Nobody knows which parts of that network should be adjusted in order to get a desirable change of our beliefs. However, we can educate our web of beliefs, for example, by knowing and consciously using the *mechanism of suggestion*. By suggestion, an idea from without abruptly enters the consciousness, becomes a part of the stream of thought, and tends to produce the muscular and volitional efforts which ordinarily follow upon its presence (cf. Sidis 1898, 8). If we know the mechanism of suggestion and the general condition of normal suggestibility – in an experimental environment: fixation of the attention on some spot, distraction of the attention from the objects employed for suggestion, monotony, limitation of the field of consciousness, inhibition, and immediate execution (Sidis 1898, 45-49) –, we can learn *in a tentative manner* (i.e., through trial and error) how to protect ourselves from suggestions that induce unwanted beliefs and how to expose ourselves to certain suggestions in order to improve our web of beliefs.

It is an undeniable truth that all religion have used the mechanism of suggestion for generating and strengthen certain beliefs. By means of sacred places, sanctuaries, holy books, objects of worship, symbols, rituals, ceremonies, sacred music, incense, etc., people are brought into a state of suggestibility, that is, into a peculiar state of mind which is favorable to suggestion. It is equally true that the other mass ideologies make use of the same mechanism of suggestion. In order to gain and keep citizens' support, the state employs a whole panoply of political means – dedicated buildings, historical sites, special clothes, symbols, rituals, patriotic music etc. – that is actually a pastiche of the religious "tool kit" for creating a state of suggestibility. The same is true for many secular vested interests that insidiously use mass media for suggesting new ideas, values or habits, many of them being in contrast with the old religious traditions. The proponents of particular systems of beliefs – whether they are religious or secular – know very well that it is not easy to sustain true assent to them continuously and at full intensity. When faith weakened and declined, they fall back on the strong persuasion exerted by "the

reality of the objects of faith” (Barker 1901, 332). This kind of “external” influence involves the mechanism of suggestion.

Belief is a *continuing mental state* (Swinburne 2001, 38) that sets implicit or anticipatory responses for specific occasions (Perry 1921, 140; 157). Everyone possesses at any one time a web of various beliefs, but they are aware only of some of them. More exactly, a person is aware of a certain belief when it impinges on her consciousness, and this happens when a particular occasion elicits a specific response or when the person deliberately looks up the belief in her network of beliefs by asking herself what she thinks about a particular issue (cf. Swinburne 2001, 38). For example, two people who realize they stay in an unhappy marriage acknowledge some of their (already existing) beliefs by searching for a good reason to support their choice to stay together. It is possible for them to be aware of a strong religious belief in the indissolubility of marriage or the conviction that they have too many shared financial interests.

Believers have a *privileged* (but not infallible) *access* to their beliefs (Mellor 1997-1998, 87). Generally speaking, “[a] belief is tested by trying the response on the occasion, or by trying it conjointly with other responses whose truth is assumed, or by comparing it with the responses of others” (Perry 1921, 157). By this assertion, Ralph Barton Perry suggests that people can infer the underlying reasons or beliefs of someone’s acts or conduct only through trial and error. They always run the risk of going wrong, inasmuch as “[a] single action could display diverse beliefs, depending on the agent’s wants” (Mellor 1997-1998, 89).

Let us return to the above-mentioned example. We know that two persons stay together in an unhappy marriage because they assent to one or more of the following propositions: (a) what God has joined together, man cannot separate; (b) there is a social stigma attached to divorce; (c) divorced people have too much money to loose; (d) divorce has a devastating impact on the children; (e) after divorce, it would be very difficult to manage contact with children; (f) after a certain age, divorced people will not meet anyone else etc. However, we cannot be sure to which propositional content a particular couple staying together in an unhappy marriage assents. Interestingly enough, it is not certain which beliefs determine the decision to stay together even if the couple would give us an explicit answer such as “We stay together because we believe that what God has joined together, man cannot separate.” It is very possible that these people are lying or are deluding themselves. On the other hand, although both the couple and other people can determine the underlying beliefs of a certain response on a specific occasion only

through trial and error, the couple is in the best position to determine their true beliefs. Besides pondering the observable expressions of those beliefs (like all the others), the couple can make use of introspection and might take a possible emotional backup into consideration.

4. Dimensions and traits of (religious) beliefs

Whether they belong to the political, economic, cultural, or religious sphere, beliefs can be characterized with regard to the following dimensions (James 1919, 2-4; Swinburne 2001, 34-37; Audi 2008, 89):

- liveness
- strength
- entrenchment
- centrality
- intensity

All human beings are believers, inasmuch as each of us give our assent to some propositional contents. Evidently, propositional contents are not equally believable for all people. The proposition that non-human entities – such as animals, plants, and inanimate objects – have spirits can be seen as an object of faith for some indigenous tribal peoples, but not for the civilized nations of Europe. In the words of William James, one can say that the above-mentioned proposition is a live hypothesis to tribal peoples but a completely dead one to European nations. This shows that deadness and liveness in a hypothesis or proposition are not intrinsic properties, but relational properties depending on the particularities of people to whom the propositions are proposed. Liveness in a propositional content correlates with the willingness to act, and the maximum of liveness is associated with the willingness to act irrevocably (James 1919, 2-3). In that last case we can talk about a full belief.

The strength of beliefs depends on two factors: (a) the presence of doubts and (b) the resistance to those doubts. Contrary to common sense, a belief does not clash *directly* with evidence or other beliefs (more exactly, with its rival beliefs), but with the doubts that arouse from the awareness thereof. It is strong enough to be considered a living belief provided that the persons who hold it dispel the doubts they have on the basis of the available evidence.

Let's suppose the following four situations:

- 1) As a credulous person, A believes that the remains discovered embedded in an altar of the Monastery "Sveti Ivan Island"

(Bulgaria) belong to St John the Baptist and she never doubted that the relics are authentic;

2) As a rational believer, A believes that the remains discovered embedded in an altar of the Monastery “Sveti Ivan Island” (Bulgaria) belong to St John the Baptist, because her only doubts about the authenticity of relics were dispelled after reading that “[s]cientists from the University of Copenhagen analyzed the DNA of the bones, finding they came from a single individual, probably a man, from a family in the modern-day Middle East, where John would have lived”¹³.

3) As a rational unbeliever, A does not believe that the remains discovered embedded in an altar of the Monastery “Sveti Ivan Island” (Bulgaria) belong to St John the Baptist, although she read the article in “The Telegraph”, because – for him – DNA analysis does not prove that the remains belong to St John the Baptist, but only to a man who lived in the early first century AD. She still has unsettled doubts about the authenticity of relics;

4) As a haughty skeptic, A scoffs at the idea that the remains from the Monastery “Sveti Ivan Island” (Bulgaria) belong to St John the Baptist. She never entertained that possibility.

The strength of belief is noticeable in the situations 2) and 3), where a person believes a propositional content, or the opposite, by assessing the evidence that – in principle – could nourish or dispel the corresponding doubts. The more numerous and serious are the doubts dispelled, the stronger the complementary beliefs are. The situations 1) and 4) present the manifestation of the weakest beliefs (that are also dead beliefs). Untried by (reasonable) doubts, beliefs held by the credulous and skeptical persons have no boundaries and consequently no substance. Ultimately, they are not actual beliefs.

The third dimension of belief – entrenchment – “is a matter of how ‘rooted’ the belief is, where rootedness is understood in terms of how much is required to eliminate it” (Audi 2008, 89). In general, entrenched beliefs are formed in childhood, or they are cultivated over a long period of time. During their long period of evolution, deep-rooted beliefs clash directly with many doubts and indirectly with many pieces of evidence

¹³ “Scientists find new evidence supporting John the Baptist bones theory,” *The Telegraph*, June 15, 2012. Accessed May 12, 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9333052/Scientists-find-new-evidence-supporting-John-the-Baptist-bones-theory.html>.

and rival beliefs. Figuratively speaking, they had to fight for survival and won. Emerged as adaptative strategies, entrenched beliefs underlie many complex webs of beliefs and connect intimately with personality traits, fundamental needs and goals, affective states, interests etc. Therefore, it is very difficult to uproot a deep-rooted belief, whether at the individual or societal level. On the other hand, if this happens, we have to cope with *unpredictable* dramatic changes in the life of both individuals and society. Every time an entrenched belief is eliminated, a Pandora's Box opens up. For example, it is a matter a fact that for hundreds of years the religious belief in the indissolubility of marriage was firmly rooted in the minds of European people, but, over the last few decades, it has faded away. Who could say how many other economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, environmental, etc. beliefs have faded away too, and who could envisage the medium- and long-term effects of that process? Perhaps the famous saying of Lucius Cary 2nd Viscount Falkland – “Where it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change” – expresses a needed *prudential norm* for all people who fight against traditional, deep-rooted beliefs. Humans cannot live by superficial beliefs only. They need long-time cultivated, entrenched beliefs.

The dimension of centrality correlates with the influence of belief over the whole of a person's psychology, especially on that person's conduct (Audi 2008, 89). A belief playing a central role in someone's life moulds to a large extent one's knowledge, opinions, emotions, mood, memories, attitudes, values, volition, behaviors, etc. For example, if person A strongly believes that the proactive use of force in someone's own sphere is always unjustifiable, and this belief plays a central role in her life, it is possible for us to notice the following clues of the belief¹⁴: A doesn't lie, cheat, or steal; A doesn't hurt anyone deliberately; A explicitly disapproves abortion, euthanasia, redistributive policies, compulsory taxation, superfluous governmental expenditure, union of church and state, compulsory religious or sexual education, and government-enforced discrimination or integration; A believes that no one should be punished for denying a scientific or historical truth; A controls her anger; A is a gentle, caring person; A strives for autonomy; A steadily increases her capacity for self-control. The above-mentioned attractors emerge from the same principle and consistently reveal a particular type of personality – the peaceful person.

¹⁴ We can identify the signs of a central belief only in a tentative manner, *i.e.*, through trial and error. Hence, the list of the manifestations of faith in the non-aggression principle is both incomplete and amendable.

In general, central beliefs are also strong and entrenched, but this is not always the case. Some people firmly hold certain strong beliefs, and these beliefs influence them considerably, but only from time to time and in connection with a very limited part of their lives. Other persons entertain some central beliefs, but these beliefs are not strong enough to elicit – publicly – certain specific responses in certain particular circumstances. For example, there are non-practicing Christians who regularly visit certain places of pilgrimage believing that in this way they will be safe from diseases and afflictions. The particular, quasi-magical belief in the (practical) benefits of pilgrimage plays a peripheral role in the pilgrims' life. On the other hand, there have been people having a consistent, unified, but weak personality that restrained the affective, cognitive, or behavioral manifestations of their political or religious beliefs in times of persecution. Perhaps many so-called “renegades” hid their central beliefs in privacy or relegated them to the innermost part of their soul because they lacked the required psychic energy to face the persecutions. It is the case of the *Moriscos*, the *Maranos*, the crypto-Christians, the crypto-communists, and other “cryptos”.

Finally, “intensity is roughly a matter of the felt conviction – the sense of truth – that accompanies a belief [when it impinges on our consciousness]” (Audi 2008, 89). As rightly remarked by Pamela Hieronymi, “[b]elief is answerable to the truth in that, by nature, its justification rests on meeting standards of consistency and evidential support that have to do with the truth” (cf. French & Wettstein 2009, 38). In order to believe in something, people must feel a real need of true knowledge and must be convinced that the propositional content they assent to “corresponds to the truth of things”, by immediate evidence, by mediate proof, or by the testimonies of some reliable witnesses (cf. Livi 2005, 35).

The intensity of belief correlates directly with the sentiment of being close to the truth and anchored in the objective reality. Nobody can hold an intense belief in a Pickwickian sense. If a person considers a proposition only in a merely hypothetical sense and accepts it just on the basis of a perceived general consensus, she actually holds a shallow or flat belief that cannot motivate action. When European Christians felt that their religious beliefs corresponded to the truth of things, they built great cathedrals and preached the Gospel to all nations¹⁵. Nowadays many

¹⁵ Unfortunately, it is also true that they sometimes ruthlessly persecuted the dissenters. However, there is no causal connection between the intensity of (religious) beliefs and the tendency to persecute dissenters.

European Christians are no longer interested in the truth of their religious beliefs. Therefore, they have lost any missionary zeal.

Faith in a supernatural order of the universe governed by a transcendent absolute being generates religious beliefs through a very complex process that involves – besides presumed supernatural revelations – psychological responses to stress, alienation, anxiety or despair, the effects of suggestion techniques, the social influence of some coercive or persuasive institutions (such as state, church, school or family) etc.

Religious beliefs manifest the main characteristics of any religious experience. Following the excellent contribution of George Moyser (1991) on politics and religion in the modern world, we take into consideration only three of them, namely *transcendence*, *sacredness*, and *ultimacy*. Religious beliefs give people the sense of transcendence, inasmuch as the believers enter a supernatural reality, encounter powers that are much greater than their own, and give the religious order precedence over the social order of everyday life (Moyser 1991, 9). Sacredness implies a system of interdictions that protect and isolate sacred things from profane ones. As rightly remarked by Emile Durkheim, “[r]eligious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things” (cf. Moyser 1991, 9). Finally, religious beliefs and religion in general “relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence” (Moyser 1991, 9). Because of their ultimate meanings (which include values such as goodness, truth, justice, beauty, utility, etc.), religious beliefs orient the lives of believers to a symbolic vision of reality that transcends mundane facts.

5. How secularized should the public sphere be in a liberal democracy?

Having the above-mentioned characteristics, religious beliefs tend to be livelier, stronger, more entrenched, closer to the core of the believers’ personalities and more intense than other types of beliefs. Religious beliefs are genuinely subjective experiences, but (due to their sense of truth) have the propensity to manifest themselves outside the believers’ minds, especially in the public sphere.

Roughly speaking¹⁶, the public sphere is the discursive environment in which the individuals that constitute a society – especially its political body – formulate, discuss and debate general issues in order to prepare the way for collective actions. The public sphere does not exist as a natural state of affairs, but it *emerges* wherever people recognize their countrymen the following four rights: (a) the right to be present or to participate, (b) the right to know what is going on, (c) the right to judge actions by means of inter-subjective criteria and (d) the right to impose the observance of certain rules of conduct. By respecting these rights, people generate a public sphere that – by sharp contrast to the private sphere – has the following essential characteristics: (a') openness, (b') transparency, (c') external evaluation, and (d') external control.

For Frank Cunningham, the public sphere is “a unique world, free of rivalry and competition, characterized by consensus and cooperation, where everyone can value their potential, develop their personality and live a virtuous life” (Cunningham 2002, 7). Reality categorically refutes this normative definition. The public sphere seems to be a rather unique world, characterized by openness, transparency, external evaluation and external control, where people pursue their private interests in competition with their fellow citizens¹⁷, on the basis of a consensus regarding the rules of fair conduct. It must be emphasized that the consensus on the “rules of the game” entails the public expression of axiological judgments. Axiological indifference is very appropriate in the private sphere, but it is pernicious in the public sphere, because it infringes upon critical thinking, the free exchange of information and the freedom of debates.

As I mentioned in the first part of this article, (discursive) liberal democracy does not hinge on some transcendent fundamentals, but on a self-founding ideological framework. This frame of reference emerges progressively (but not linearly) by means of free discussions, arguments and debates within the public sphere. People who discuss, argue and debate plead their causes or points of view using *reasons* – in other words, “real or supposed circumstance because of which an agent with purposes acts or refrains” (Charlton 2006, 52) – as main instruments of

¹⁶ The distinction between the public and the private sphere is discussed in more detail in the article *Mass Media and European Cultural Citizenship* (Farte 2009, 24-27). In this context, I present a simplified version of the topic.

¹⁷ The pluralism of private interests does not imply the pluralism of public spheres. On the societal level, we cannot speak of a pluralism of public spheres – such as the black/Latino public sphere, the LGBT public sphere, the women’s public sphere etc. – but of a plurality of interests represented in the public sphere.

persuasion. Inasmuch as the ideological framework of liberal democracy is a self-founding one, we must discuss with a critical eye all (legal or moral) restrictions imposed on the information flow, especially on the process of expressing publicly people's reasons for action. In what follows, we will weigh up some secular constraints that some important philosophers and social scientist have proposed to restrain the manifestation of the religious belief in the public sphere.

At first, we refer to several restrictive constraints proposed by one of the most important secular voices, namely Richard Rorty. To better understand Rorty's remarks about religion, religious institutions, religious beliefs and religious reason, it is important to take into consideration his philosophical stance and political project. As an anti-representationalist, Rorty has stated that "[our] language cannot reflect, represent, or mirror the world as it actually exists" (cf. Bradizza 2014, 204) and denied any "metaphysical" or "redemptive" truths, including God's existence (Bradizza 2014, 204). As a "friendly atheist,"¹⁸ he conceded that "[r]eligious belief (...) is not irrational, or intrinsically wrong-headed" (Rorty 2003, 142). Rorty's political project is the attainment of a liberal (and egalitarian) society consisting of radically autonomous persons who think "that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (cf. Bradizza 2014, 204-209). This society "would be one in which political action conducted in the name of religious belief is treated as a ladder up which our ancestors climbed, but one that now should be thrown away" (Rorty 2003, 142).

Referring to the so-called "Jeffersonian compromise" (that the Enlightenment reached with the religious in the USA), Rorty reminds us that this settlement consists in *privatizing religion*, more precisely, in "keeping it out of the public square and making it seem bad taste to bring religion into discussions of public policy" (Rorty 1999, 169). The Jeffersonian compromise defines the *separationist position*, i.e. the view that "politics must be constitutionally separated from religious conviction", that "an individual's religious convictions are expected to remain private and divorced from his or her political decision-making, which [is] publicly grounded in reason" or that "laws should be advocated for and acted upon for secular reasons" (cf. Perlin 2011, 337).

In congruence with his separationist stance, Rorty manifests an explicit anti-clericalism that advocates the eradication of "ecclesiastical organizations", that is, the "organizations that accredit pastors and claim to offer authoritative

¹⁸ The term was coined by atheist philosopher William Rowe for denoting those "nontheists who reject belief in God but nevertheless maintain that belief in God is rational" (cf. Beckwith 2014, 195).

guidance to believers” (Rorty 2003, 141). In Rorty’s imagined secularist utopia, religion would be pruned back to the parish level¹⁹ (Rorty 2003, 142).

For supporting his anti-clerical position, Rorty advances the following arguments: (a) “ecclesiastical organizations typically maintain their existence by deliberately creating ill-will toward people who belong to other such organizations, and toward people whose behavior they presume to call immoral” (Rorty 2003, 142); (b) “[h]istory suggests to us that such organizations will always, on balance, do more harm than good” (Rorty 2003, 142); (c) during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, “[t]he Protestant and Catholic churches of Western Europe did keep up a steady barrage of contempt, combined with support for politicians running on anti-Semitic platforms, and with silence concerning the sadistic pogroms-cum-gang-rapes which provided weekend amusement for the devoutly religious peasants of Central and Eastern Europe (Rorty 2003, 145); (d) “[n]owadays the problem within most of the countries in which Christianity is the majority religion is not the possibility of religious war, but the sort of every day peace time sadism that uses religion to excuse cruelty” (Rorty 2003, 145).

Before discussing the above-mentioned reasons, it is useful to remind us that man is essentially an imperfect being, and he is often inclined to cruelty. Hence, it is impossible to have human organizations (implicitly ecclesiastical organizations) free of shortcomings and wickedness. However, the ecclesiastical organizations are not worse than others, but quite the contrary. If ecclesiastical organizations from Europe deliberately create ill-will toward people who belong to other such organizations²⁰, what about political parties, states or media trusts? It is a matter of fact that political parties elicit hatred and other negative emotions towards the competing parties. Election campaigns always and everywhere involve a language of violence and degradation or even physical violence. It is also a fact that war – the most grave form of violence – is waged by the states (not churches), and the media incite jealousy, hatred or contempt insidiously and on a daily basis. As inherently imperfect organizations, churches did both good and harm, but states and corporations, for instance, did the same. Who could calculate how much human misery and human well-being respectively were caused

¹⁹ Rorty differentiates between the “congregations of religious believers ministered to by pastors” and “ecclesiastical organizations.” The former would be consistent with a secular liberal society.

²⁰ Nowadays it is difficult to find official statements and actions of Christian ecclesiastical organizations that deliberately create ill-will toward other people.

by the Christian church in comparison to the European states and corporations throughout history? The crimes of the French Revolution, the horrors of Nazism and Bolshevism, and the two world wars far outweigh the crimes and miseries caused by the Christian church. Perhaps during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Protestant and Catholic churches of Western Europe did not take and maintain a strong stance against anti-Semitism. However, there were always many clergymen who combated anti-Semitism, and in the last decades the European churches are virtually unanimous in condemning it. Finally, it is true that there is a sort of every day peace time sadism that bring about a climate of cruelty. At present, the entire social life of the European societies is infested with disrespect, teasing, contempt, sarcasm, mockery or scorn. However, there is no evidence that the European churches created such a climate.²¹ Under these conditions, it is reasonable to grant the ecclesiastical institutions the same degree of acceptance as in the case of political parties, states or media trusts.

Rorty's secular constraints on the public reasons stem from the correlation of religious beliefs with so-called *redemptive truth*. Redemptive truth "would not consist in theories about how things interact causally, but instead would fulfill the need to fit everything (...) into a [natural, destined, and unique] context" (Rorty 2000, 2). It implies the "conviction that a set of beliefs which can be justified to all human beings will also fulfill all the needs of all human beings" (Rorty 2000, 10). Because of the sense of absolute truth, believers would tend to use prematurely their religious beliefs as *conversation-stoppers*, although "citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible" (Rorty 2003 148).

First of all it is worth mentioning that many people strongly believe that they live in a natural, destined and unique world and assiduously try to know how things interact causally in that world. True believers have a strong sense of reality and do not try to shape their life or the life of their fellow citizens on the basis of certain fictions treated as such. They do not postulate that other people must have the same beliefs as theirs, but they believe that there are certain objective laws and regularities in the social reality²² (as a part of the whole world) that *all* people should take into account when forming their own beliefs. It seems

²¹ If the European churches practice a sort of every day peace time sadism, what about the media? Is not mockery *à la Charlie Hebdo* a form of "peace time sadism"?

²² Obviously, we come to know these laws and regularities only in a tentative manner, through trial and error.

likely that the holders of redemptive truth in the pejorative sense are the people who believe that there is no ultimate or objective reality that underlies human existence and yet strive to impose their ideological framework on the entire society (or world).

Secondly, it is not just religious believers but *all* people that invoke – implicitly or explicitly – conversation-stoppers when they discuss, argue or debate certain social issues in the public sphere. If religious beliefs (with their underlying sense of metaphysical or redemptive truth) are used as conversation-stoppers, various feelings, desires and interests, as well as a myriad of economic, political, philosophical or aesthetic beliefs play the same role. For instance, it is highly probable that people would sooner use a “sense of vital interest” as a conversation-stopper rather than their Christian beliefs.

Finally, it is not always a good idea to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible. At least the political debates having the aim of taking decisions of general public importance should be correlated with a *clause of completion*. That clause should specify the circumstances in which the deliberations have reached the goal so that the decision might be taken and the discussion on the subject can be (at least temporarily) closed (cf. Țuțui 2010, 96). Besides the clause of completion, we could take into consideration certain *clauses of interruption*. When our fellow citizens manifest strong bias, exaggerated self-interest, invincible ignorance, uncontrollable emotions or inconsistent thinking, it is better to interrupt the conversation than continue it.

A second class of secular constraints on the ideological framework of liberal democracy belongs to Robert Audi. By means of two secular principles – the principle of secular rationale and the principle of secular motivation – Audi normatively indicates the so-called adequate secular reason and adequate secular motivation that citizens should have when they advocate coercive laws or public policies.

The principle of secular rationale: “[C]itizens in a free democracy have a prima facie obligation not to advocate or support any law or public policy that restricts human conduct unless they have and are willing to offer adequate secular reason for this advocacy or support; for instance, for a vote” (Audi 2007, 328).

The principle of secular motivation: “[O]ne should abstain from advocating any law or policy unless one is sufficiently motivated

by (normatively) adequate secular reason. It is a part of civic virtue only to be motivated by secular reasons” (cf. Trigg 2007, 40).

Audi argued that observing his principles preserves liberty, facilitates good relations between different religious traditions and between religious and non-religious people, encourages reciprocity and autonomy, establishes conditions under which citizens can respect one another as free and dignified individuals, reduces suspicion, resentment and the risk of religious polarization, and encourages mutual trust. He also implies that violating them could lead to civil strife (cf. Weithman 2002, 149-150). Presented – without conclusive proof – as the panacea for all problems in the discursive public sphere, Audi’s principles have some contentious aspects.

It is worth noting from the start that citizens can support and (more specifically) vote some restrictive laws and public policies on the basis of certain religious beliefs. As long as a person keeps her religious beliefs private – as strict subjective experiences – nobody else can prove that she voted a (coercive) law by virtue of them. Evidently, Audi knows and accepts this fact. Moreover, he accepts that citizens publicly support any non-coercive laws, whether the reasons for supporting them are secular or religious. Audi’s requirement of secular (that is, non-religious) reasons should be fulfilled only in the public sphere and just with regard to the coercive laws, because it is supposed that “laws and policies which restrict liberty must be justified by ‘accessible’ or (...) ‘intelligible’ reasons” (cf. Weithman 2002, 148).

Even if Audi seems to soften his stance on the public reasons, the principle of secular rationale is unfairly biased against religion. If the fundamental need for public reasons is to be accessible or intelligible, it would have been better to talk about the “principle of accessible/intelligible rationale”, taking for granted that most religious reasons are not accessible. Thus the scope of this principle could encompass – besides some religious reasons – lots of heavily biased secular reasons, such as the rationale behind many projects of social engineering that are quite unintelligible for common voters. In Europe, people frequently demonstrate and riot against certain economic policies, not against religious institutions or practices. Perhaps the political establishment itself does not follow the principle of intelligible rationale, as long as so many

European citizens do not understand and accept the secular public reasons behind the economic policies²³.

The principle of secular rationale seems to create confusion between “to be accessible/ intelligible”²⁴ and “to be acceptable”. In fact, people understand very well both religious and secular (or atheistic) reasons. Even if a religious reason is partially unfalsifiable, it could be understood by most people in the same way that they understand other partially unfalsifiable reasons from the economic, political, or cultural sphere. To be fair, some (intelligible) religious reasons often cause cognitive dissonance to the unbelievers, but the same phenomenon occurs in the case of many secular reasons. What kind of reasons would remain in the public sphere if they had to be both accessible and (psychologically) acceptable for the majority of people?

The condition to be sufficiently motivated by (normatively) adequate secular reason is excessive and unrealistic. First of all, it is difficult for a neutral observer to assign a certain motivation to a certain person. Someone could give an *ex post facto* reason for his action, but that reason does not coincide with one’s genuine motivation. Hence, the principle of secular motivation cannot be legally enforced; it could be merely a moral imperative. Even as a moral imperative, the principle of secular motivation is hard to follow. We mentioned previously in this article that a believer does not hold a single belief but a web of beliefs. Religion tends to permeate the whole personality of the believer; therefore, it is practically impossible to isolate a *secular enough* belief, reason or motivation. It would be a bit cynical to ask religious persons to “purify” their motivation from all “malign” religious ingredients before entering the public sphere. Who should ascertain that they are motivated only by secular reasons? Their conscience, or their fellow citizens? Obviously, there is no acceptable answer. It is not fair that only religious persons should be confronted with such issues of conscience when acting in the public life of a society. It is also not fair that non-religious people

²³ How many voters from Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy or France do understand the secular rationale behind the financial policies of Eurozone?

²⁴ “Accessibility” is a fuzzy concept. It lacks clarity and is difficult to test or operationalize. Within a liberal democracy, the political body is a *heterogeneous mass*. It includes literate, intelligent, educated, learned, experienced and competent persons, on the one hand, and illiterate, uninformed, misinformed, uncultivated, uneducated, obtuse and incompetent people, on the other. If the accessibility requirement for public reason should be fulfilled with regard to the whole political body, one’s speech (in the public sphere) could be just a collection of (secular) clichés and truisms. Obviously, no neutral observer would be able to confirm that the accessibility requirement was met.

should have to concede that the motivation of religious people is secularized enough to be allowed in the public sphere. If enforced, the principle of secular motivation would have a demotivating effect on religious citizens, because they could not afford the psychological cost of political participation.

The softest stance on the scope of secularization belongs to Chris Eberle and Terence Cuneo who gave it the label “Doctrine of Religious Restraint”. In contrast with Rorty’s position on secularization, the doctrine of religious restraint “does not require a thorough-going privatization of religious commitment” (Eberle & Cuneo 2015). It permits religious considerations to play a prominent role in the citizen’s political life. “Citizens are permitted to vote for their favored coercive policies on exclusively religious grounds as well as to advocate publicly for those policies on religious grounds. What the [doctrine of religious restraint] does require of citizens is that they reasonably believe that they have some plausible secular rationale for each of the coercive laws that they support, which they are prepared to offer in political discussion” (Eberle and Cuneo 2015).

Although the doctrine of religious restraint entails an important asymmetry between religious and secular reasons²⁵ (cf. Flannagan 2015, 3-5), it is highly reasonable for all the people that constitute a liberal democratic society. Within a complex adaptive system that is essentially imperfect, we cannot use the imperative of symmetry as a guiding principle. The living world does not have and cannot have a linear or symmetrical development. Moreover, if ecclesiastical organizations can ask their members to meet a certain standard of religious knowledge and moral conduct, the political body of a diverse society can also require their members to have a minimum amount of secular reasons with regard to some coercive laws.

The doctrine of religious restraint is congruent with the attractors of discursive liberal democracy (majority rule, political equality, reasonable self-determination and an ideological framework built in a tentative manner) and provides the most convenient ideological framework both for secularist and educated religious people. A theocracy, that is, a social system or state controlled by religious leaders, is sheer hell for the secularist. It does not seem attractive to educated religious people who wish to live together with their fellow citizens in a diverse society (that functions as a complex adaptive system). A healthy dose of

²⁵ Secular reasons can themselves justify state coercion but not religious reasons.

secularism allows religious and non-religious people to build a peaceful liberal democracy living together as civilized human beings. Too large a dose of secularism alienates religious people from the public life of society and radicalizes their idiosyncratic (religious) beliefs. If assumed, the doctrine of religious restraint creates a social climate that favors the manifestation of educated or enlightened religious beliefs in the public sphere.

6. Educated religious beliefs as useful attractors in the liberal democratic public sphere

So far I have argued that the pillars of discursive liberal democracy work as attractors of a complex adaptive system. In order to emerge as a liberal democracy, any society needs to undergo an adequate process of secularization. More exactly, it requires a healthy combination of constitutional, policy, institutional, agenda and ideological secularization.

Unfortunately, increasingly more secularists take too strong a stance against the manifestation of religiosity in the public sphere. Under the banner of promoting a secular society, they suggest an unreasonable restraint of religious messages and practices in the public sphere. As the old saying goes, too much is never enough. People who advocate normative proposals relying on their wishful thinking instead of evidence and proof cannot reach a limit of their requirements. For the present, they try to exclude religious beliefs from the public sphere. Perhaps tomorrow they will propose the banning of some aesthetic, moral or philosophical reasons under the pretext that these reasons – like religious reasons – are discriminatory, divisive or non-accessible.

Normally, the burden of proof with regard to the presence of religious reasons or beliefs in the public sphere should lie with the secularists who advocate their ban. By analyzing some secularist positions (especially the proposals of Richard Rorty and Robert Audi), we have claimed that the biased secularists do not provide sufficient warrants for their stance. On the one hand, the evils committed in the distant past in the name of (the Christian) religion do not sufficiently support the thesis that at present the manifestations of (the Christian) religion in the public sphere will bring about the same tragedies. Actually, most people tacitly admit that there is here no causal relationship inasmuch as anyone may advocate in the public sphere the ideas of the French Revolution and communist theses in spite of the crimes, abominations and atrocities that were committed in the recent past in their names. On the other hand, there

is no ground for believing that the absence of religion from the public sphere would generate a sort of secular heaven (like that imagined by Robert Audi).

In order to advocate the presence of the religious reasons or beliefs in the public sphere, it is not enough to show that religious reasons are not worse than many secular reasons. Therefore, in what follows, we will argue that the manifestation of educated religious beliefs in the European public sphere is both legitimate and useful.

First of all a strict secular public sphere does not provide a motivational climate for the members of the political body. A Pickwickian world suitable for inoffensive, dull and lethargic people can be easily constructed by means of (secular) public reason, which (a) “does not aim either at consent or truth”, (b) “requires that our moral or political principles be [only] justifiable to, or reasonably acceptable to, all those persons to whom the principles are meant to apply” and (c) cannot contain “controversial claims about religion, morality, or philosophy” (cf. Quong 2013). Unfortunately for the utopian secularists, the real world is full of evil and pain. Life is not an easy game but a fight for survival in a hostile world. Human beings need energy, endurance, courage and a great capacity for strenuous effort in order to cope with life’s evils. These requisites for living in the real world necessitate *a sense of (metaphysical) truth*, and religious beliefs provide it essentially.

The sense of truth does not divide people. On the contrary, it provides durable bridges between them. If we start from the assumption that there is no objective truth, we should accept that everything can be negotiated, changed or eliminated. Under these conditions, no survival strategy can emerge. To be fair, religious people have the same *sense of truth*, but they could have different *representations* of truth. Of course, every true believer is convinced that he/she is right and those who have other representations of truth are wrong. However, under normal circumstances, he/she does not try to eliminate the dissenters but to persuade or convert them.

Religious beliefs provide citizens with another important requisite for acting in public life, namely the *will-power*. As Henry Hazlitt remarked, man is a bundle of conflicting desires (Hazlitt 1922). In order to live a life worthy of a human being (as members of a peaceful, civilized society), people need to keep under control those conflicting desires that urge immediate gratification. It is not recommendable to control our desires by stifling them. Desires constitute the engine of our life; without them, nobody can act. The best way to control our desires

consists of putting them under the umbrella of a second-order desire, namely the *will*. The will may be defined as “our desire to be a certain kind of character” (Hazlitt 1922). The will is a desire for remote gratification, which “persists and predominates for a comparatively long period” (Hazlitt 1922). Like any other desire the will has its price. More precisely, one can follow one’s will only if ready to sacrifice some of one’s immediate desires. Obviously, individuals sacrifice their immediate desires provided that they dedicate themselves to an ideal high enough that is seen as their own (Hazlitt 1922).

The Christian religion provides people with a high ideal, and throughout history it has shaped admirable characters²⁶. During the entire Christian era, people of all social classes epitomized the Christian character enriching their mind and elevating their soul. They illustrated a main idea of Henry Hazlitt, namely that the will must be permanently “vivid and powerful enough to be acted upon in preference to any other fleeting or recurrent desire that may beckon him” (Hazlitt 1922).

Perhaps the Christian character is not attractive enough at present, and many people living in a liberal democracy prefer to follow other ideals. Nevertheless, the manifestation of Christian character and Christian beliefs in the public sphere would be beneficial because it can attract the attention on the way of cultivating one’s own will and gaining the necessary will-power. It is a pure illusion that people can build and cultivate a vivid and powerful will on a bundle of tepid public reasons in a Pickwickian world. In order to shape characters by means of second-order desires, the viable alternatives to the Christian system of beliefs should have similar characteristics.

So far I have argued that all religious beliefs provide believers with a sense of metaphysical truth and second-order desires by means of which they follow certain ideals and shape their character. However, it is a matter of fact that man is an imperfect being and has a propensity to do evil. As human products, religious beliefs involve errors that cause harm to both believers and the others. In the name of religion, many people practiced extreme mortifications, committed plunder, rapes and crimes, aroused civil strife and waged devastating wars. Therefore, religious beliefs continuously need to be cultivated or educated. Otherwise, they cannot be allowed in the public sphere of a liberal democracy.

²⁶ There are thousands of examples at hand. In this context, I arbitrarily mention only Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Charles I of Austria, Marie Adélaïde Clotilde Xavière de France, Blaise Pascal, André-Marie Ampère, Vincent de Paul, Hildegard von Bingen, and Benoît Labre.

It is important to note from the start that to educate a religious belief does not mean to adjust it at anybody's request. To be fair, all believers should follow the principle of peaceable conduct²⁷, but they are not morally obliged to spare all sensitivities. In fact, to educate a belief means to confront it with the real world and the imperatives of a civilized life.

As mentioned above, many pieces of one's web of religious beliefs have only a narrow propositional content because they are determined predominantly by the believer's intrinsic properties. In the context of liberal democracy, it is recommendable for believers to widen prudently the content of their religious beliefs in order to reduce their idiosyncratic characteristics. A believer who behaves erratically cannot convert anybody to his or her system of (uneducated) beliefs.

Even if the concept of *insufficient evidence* is a fuzzy one, it is useful to take into consideration – when we evaluate our assent to some religious beliefs – Clifford's ethical imperative: “[it is] wrong to believe on insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation” (Clifford 1879, 182-183). Evidently, we cannot acquire any belief in a fully controllable manner, and we cannot erase a certain belief from our mind at will. Moreover, we cannot voluntarily doubt our beliefs. However, we have the moral obligation to take into consideration our involuntary doubts and all the evidence that support them. For example, if I have some doubts about the authenticity of certain relics, I have the moral obligation to ask some plausible evidence before worshipping them. Such evidence can make the authenticity of the relics more plausible or, on the contrary, the evidence can infirm it. More specifically, if it is said that the relics from a monastery belong to St Andrew the Apostle, the evidence can show that they are connected to a Jewish man who lived in the first century A.D. The evidence alone does not prove that the relics belong to St Andrew the Apostle, but the corresponding educated belief becomes more plausible. On the contrary, if the analysis of the relics shows that they belong to a woman or a man from the 16th century, it would be *immoral* to nourish the false belief that the remains belong to St Andrew the Apostle.

Although they are partially unfalsifiable, religious beliefs can be tested at least with regard to the character they are supposed to build. Thus, it is said that Christian character yields a harvest of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, forbearance, gentleness, faith, courtesy,

²⁷ I presented some aspects of this important principle in the article “The Principle of Peaceable Conduct as a Discrimination Tool in Social Life” (Farte, 2015).

temperateness and purity. Throughout history, a myriad of Christians have shown these character traits. Hence, it is reasonable to nourish the conscious belief that the Christian faith supports civilized life by bringing about love, joy, peace, patience, etc. If certain so-called Christians do not live up to the assumed ideal and do not show the corresponding character traits, we can remind them the implications of their commitment.

Finally, as mentioned above, we can educate our (religious) beliefs by knowing and consciously using the mechanism of suggestion. First of all people should focus their mind on the desire to have a certain kind of character. They should know what kind of feelings, thoughts and behaviors are correlated with these character traits. Thus, they can learn in a tentative manner (that is, through trial and error) how to protect themselves from those suggestions that induce unwanted and destructive beliefs and how to expose themselves to the reality of the objects of faith in order to improve their web of beliefs.

7. Conclusion

We took it for granted that discursive liberal democracy emerged in Europe as the best of all possible forms of government and have argued that the public sphere of liberal democracies needs an adequate dose of secularization. Unfortunately, many promoters of ideological secularization take too strong a stance against the manifestation of religiosity in the public sphere. They claim that people may discuss, debate or adopt (coercive) laws and regularities only by means of secular public reason and secular motivation. We provided some strong arguments for the thesis that these secular restraints on the ideological framework are biased, unfair, counterproductive and unreasonable. Religious reasons are no less accessible and intelligible than many other aesthetic, moral or philosophical secular reasons. Hence, it is not fair to ban only religious beliefs with regard to the so-called principle of accessibility. The ban of religious beliefs in the public sphere cannot be enforced and brings about perverse effects. If banned from acting openly on religious grounds, religious people can still participate in the political life on the basis of their idiosyncratic beliefs. Excluded from the public sphere, these beliefs cannot be checked and educated so that people who (privately) assent to them can manifest disruptive behaviors. The exaggerated secular restrictions are unreasonable because the strict secular public sphere they create appears to be a Pickwickian world suitable for inoffensive, dull and lethargic people.

As Robert Spaeman insightfully remarked, “[t]he personality of man stands and falls with his capacity to grasp truth” (Spaemann 2005, 618). If it does not aim either at consent or truth, secular public reason cannot sustain a complex adaptive system like discursive liberal democracy. Liberal democracy needs citizens with a strong sense of truth and with sufficient will-power to follow both a personal ideal and a collective one. Religious beliefs provide people with just such a sense of truth and with the desire to have a certain kind of character.

In the secularized public sphere of liberal democracy, people should manifest just educated religious beliefs that correspond to the real world and respect the principle of peaceable conduct. Educated religious beliefs have a wide enough propositional content, respect the moral imperative of William Clifford, are purged from all propositional components against which there is strong evidence and are consciously cultivated by the mechanism of suggestion.

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