

EUROPE | SPECIAL REPORT: DEMOCRACY 2016

Reconciling the Conflicting Aims of Church and State

By STEVEN ERLANGER SEPT. 14, 2016

LONDON — The fuss over the burkini on French beaches this summer is just the latest and most ridiculous iteration of France's uncomfortable confrontation with Islam.

The French Republic, having overthrown the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church in 1789, has made *laïcité*, or secularism, the cornerstone of citizenship, seeming to prioritize it over liberty, fraternity and, let's not forget, equality.

But the contretemps over the burkini, like that over the burqa (actually the niqab) and the hijab, or head scarf, before it, is emblematic of a deeper discomfort with religion throughout the Western world.

The relationship of liberal democracy to religious belief has always been fraught. But now, as the conception of liberal values seems to be expanding to issues like same-sex marriage, it is becoming more antagonistic to Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants and Jews, as well as to Muslims.

Most nation-states arose out of ethnic and religious identities, and many conflicts among nations were, at their heart, religious wars. In a real sense, much as parliamentary rule developed to put limits on the power of monarchs, liberalism and liberal democracy were developed as a way to keep religion out of politics, to take God, as much as possible, out of human conflict.

The presumption was always that the state should be a neutral space, fair to all citizen believers. Freedom of worship is meant to protect nearly every odd form of belief, but it does not allow believers to impose their faith on others. Yet historically, even those who were agnostic, argues Ivan Krastev, chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies, came from religious backgrounds and asked religious questions. “But today, agnostics come from secular households,” he said, with little conception of what religious belief means or entails.

Charles Moore, a British author who has written deeply about religion and about his own conversion to Catholicism, thinks there is a confusion in liberal democracy between keeping religion out of politics, preferred by many religious people, and “pretending that religion doesn’t matter and doesn’t exist.”

In his view, “secularists have greatly underestimated what happens to a culture if you take God out of it.” Liberal societies require “a lot of shared values in order to be free,” Mr. Moore said, to hold together in the swirl of diversity.

Without a belief in God, he said, “it’s more likely that your ultimate belief will become meaningless.” Further, “you don’t know what religious people are talking about, you don’t understand the springs of their behavior — the importance of scripture or the symbolism of blasphemy.”

Worse, he said, is a growing ahistoricism. “If a secular person is taught that these things are merely private matters, they won’t understand how they affect world history.”

The rise of such secular ahistoricism also makes liberal democracies more vulnerable to, and puzzled by, a religion like Islam, which never had a Reformation and does not separate the political from the religious in any meaningful doctrinal way. For many Muslim women, for example, as for many Orthodox Jewish women (and many nuns), covering their hair is not simply a fashion but a religious tenet.

Many see the renewed debate over Islam in the West as a function of decolonization, its second wave. First the colonizers returned home, and now the colonized and their descendants are migrating to the former colonial powers of Europe, which don’t really know yet how to cope with such an influx of migrants and refugees with a very different set of religious beliefs and expectations.

European liberal democracy has a kind of apotheosis in the European Union, but as borders disappear, and nations share sovereignty, there is a deep sense of loss among many — that their identities, including their national and religious identities, are being dissolved in the global stew.

At the heart of the European populist movement (and the American one) is the same feeling of loss — of traditional concepts of what it is to be French, British, German, American, which in most cases meant white, Christian and heterosexual. And the need and effort to retain identity can lead to conflict.

Secular and liberal democracy tolerates so much diversity and creates enough confusion that those who need more clarity and certainty flee back to religion, Mr. Krastev suggests.

“Because we’ve made the borders between everything so easy to cross,” Mr. Krastev said, “religious people and fanatics of all kinds are bringing back the barricades in order to create identity.”

The loss of norms — and of God — have left a significant number of citizens of liberal democracies morally and emotionally at sea.

Similarly, the former chief rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, argues that the return of religion to the secular space is a result of the general crisis of meaning in the Western world.

Rabbi Sacks, much like the Vatican, believes that materialism and secularism in liberal democracies have prompted selfishness, promoted human arrogance and undermined family values. He even argues that Europe’s population is in decline “because nonbelievers lack shared values of family and community that religion has.”

Never before in human history have people had so much choice, but many lack the means or the capacity to choose, and secular society provides few instructions. Those who search for answers and guidance often find solace, and meaning, in religious extremes, or in embracing religions like Orthodox Judaism or even radical, Salafist Islam, which provide detailed rules about how to live one’s life.

The separation of church and state was a revolutionary idea but has proven hard to put into practice, even in the United States. Americans no longer hang Quakers on Boston Common, but abortion and the death penalty remain hot topics, and fundamentally religious ones. And issues of school prayer, same-sex marriage and religious displays in courthouses and assemblies — let alone Christmas crèches in public buildings — still preoccupy politicians and the courts.

“Across the Western world, people have tried different ways of dealing with religion, from its prominent role in the United States to French *laissez-faire* to British ‘let’s pretend it doesn’t exist,’” even in a kingdom with a state religion and a queen anointed by God, said Anand Menon, professor of European politics at Kings College London. “But none of them seem to be working very well at the moment.”

Europe is “importing problems, not just refugees but via the internet, because borders are porous to ideas that are infecting people,” he said. Given various difficulties with jobs and poverty among newcomers or those left behind, there is an intermingling of ethnicity and religion, which are not identities made by choice. “Expatriate identity plus religion reinforce themselves in foreign countries,” Mr. Menon said, whether you’re an Iraqi or Pakistani Muslim or an Irish Catholic in Boston.

And that can create problems for a secular, post-God liberal democracy. Secularism is poorly equipped to deal with religious passion, Mr. Moore argues, especially with radical Islam, which believes that spreading Islam is a commandment from Allah.

At its most extreme, of course, there are the attacks by the Islamic State on Christians, like the murder of the Rev. Jacques Hamel, a Catholic priest conducting a service in a French church this summer. The Islamic State, in the latest issue of its English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, has a cover story called “Break the Cross.” It appears to target Christians, calling them “pagans,” giving them the choice of conversion or death and urging followers to “kill the disbelievers.”

That is a major break from the usual practice and tradition of Islam, which is one of tolerance toward Jews and Christians as “people of the book,” antecedents to the prophet Muhammad.

For that kind of extremism, even liberal democracies must have a response — the force of the law. But there must also be a better effort to promote traditional Islam, encourage ordinary Muslims and educate the young in less radical interpretations — even in a country that does not provide religious education in state schools, like France.

Treating the problems around radical Islam as simply questions of counterterrorism or social inequality is as misguided as ignoring them. States should create “safety barriers” between religion and politics, Mr. Moore said, “but you can’t really separate them.”

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