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RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN THE LATE MODERNITY: CONFLICT OR RECONCILIATION?

1. INTRODUCTION

In the end of January 2005 (27-30/1/05) the Conference: *«Cultural and Religious Mosaic of South and Southeastern Asia, Conflict and Consensus Through The Ages»* took place in New Delhi. This Conference was organized by the South and Southeastern Asian Association for the Study of Religion (SSEASR), co-hosted by the International Association for the History of Religions (JAHR), under the auspices of UNESCO. The purpose of this Conference was to examine the historic, social and cultural course of the different religions that appear in this geographical era.

The region of South and Southeastern Asia contains a multiplicity of cultures and religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Lamaism, Sikhism, as well as a large number of folk and tribal cultures and religions. The history of these religions in terms of their origin, growth and expansion is complicated, Hinduism being the oldest and Sikhism being the latest. The folk and tribal religions are, of course, ageless as far as our knowledge goes. The cultures, which developed around these religions, were not always monolithic. Therefore we have a mosaic of Indo-Islamic culture, Hindu-Buddhist culture, and the like. There have been conflicts, sometimes very violent, between religious groups.

Nonetheless, the co-existence of the people of different religions across time and space also led to the phenomenon called "consensus". We see Hindu deities existing within Buddhist complexes in the South and Southeastern Asia, which developed during the seventh century onwards. The history of coexistence of Christians and Hinduists during the twenty centuries is also an interesting case. I refer to

the syro-orthodox Christians of Malabar who despite the fact that they lived in a hinduist environment retained their Christian identity and heritage. Sharing a common space, one cannot remain in conflict forever even if tensions may surface here and there. The conference prominently highlights the cultural and religious dynamics pertaining to conflict as well as to consensus.

Participants from almost every continent presented papers at the Conference, which reflect upon both the past and present situations. The overall framework of the Conference they dealt with the heritage of the region in wide varieties of terms including art and architecture, iconography, performing arts, social formations, state and society, religion and civilizations, ideals and practices, and the like. Moreover, analyses of the intangible forms of the region's rich heritage as reflected through its oral traditions, oral history, folk literature would, hopefully, lead to a better understanding of the prevailing socio-cultural and religio-political scenario in the region.

In a special scission, on the first day of the Conference the theme of the relation between Science and Religion was discussed. During the next three days many topics, which covered the entire religious and cultural mosaic of this area, were discussed as well. Some subthemes of the Conference were: The dialogue between civilizations with the problems and the prospects that it entails; discussion about religious and ethnic identities; the past and the present of religious conflict; sacred places, sacred waters, sacred mountains and the role of pilgrimage; syncretism in art, iconography and architecture; religion and politics; state formation and the role models of Indian state in the Southeastern Asia; syncretism in languages and literature; epics and Sanscrit-based literature in Southeastern Asia; elite and folk elements in religion and culture; gender and religion; orality and sacrality in the South and Southeastern Asia; performing arts; medicine and health systems of the region; Economics and the role of religion; Philosophy of life and value systems of religions; Religion in relation to Tradition and Modernity; Religion, Human Rights and the Law; Emerging socio-cultural trends and visions for the mid-twenty first century.

The article that follows "Religious identities in the late modernity: conflict or reconciliation?" was presented during the Conference.

2. THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The question of identities and particularly religious identities has clearly been posed, especially over the last few years. The current procedure of late modernity, with globalization as its main vehicle, has refuted the stability of identities and has eventually had to doubt their meaning. This situation has created extreme and often combative reactions in the field of religious identities, which, in the form of fundamentalism, appear as the only possible way out. In this article, firstly, we shall expound the meaning of identity and particularly that of religious identity in the late modernity. We will then proceed to answer a two fold-question: Are religious identities nowadays a factor of conflict or of reconciliation? When do they function as a factor of conflict and when as a factor of reconciliation? It is obvious that the answers are never conclusive, but work their way towards hypotheses that require some research.

Religion as an individual or collective dimension functions as an identitive element of peoples. The special characteristics of the religious identity are expressed by the religious faith, dogma and ritual practices. The religious identity meets different needs than the national, ethnic or class identities, although it functions equally effectively regarding the constitution and cohesion of a specific group. Whereas the class identities f.e. come from the sphere of economic production and exchange and the national identities from the sphere of the arrangement of space, the religious identities come from the sphere of communication and social integration. They are based on cultural elements, such as values, symbols, myths and traditions, which are converted into rituals.

For this reason, all those who share the same symbolic codes, systems of values and traditions of faith and rituals tend to unite into a community. What these people share contains the experience of a transcendal reality and at the same time strong elements of organization and hierarchy[1]. The strong organization and the symbolic discourse on the hands of a strong hierarchy play, many times, an important role in the interiorisation and consciousness of religious identity. The interiorisation via the repetitive traditional rituals marks the individual conscience and creates a strong relationship among the members of the group.

1. Anthony Smith, *National Identity*, Greek Translation by Eva Peppa, Odysseas, Athens 2000 p. 20.

Religion together with nation, language, customs, practices and traditions constitute the cultural system of a people. Therefore, the religious identity becomes a part of the cultural identity. Especially, the relationship between religious and national identity is so close that they remain inseparable in the conscience of individuals or peoples. Because of this, it functions as the main expression of the collective cultural conscience. Even in the case of ecumenical religions, which aim to surpass and abolish the ethnic borders, most religious identities coincide with specific ethnic groups. The two types of identities often overlap and reinforce each other. Together or each one alone have the ability to put communities into action and help to maintain strong relationships among their members[2].

3. RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN THE LATE MODERNITY

In the late modernity, the question of cultural identity is posed in different ways. Over the last years, our societies undergo a procedure of transformation, which poses the question if modernity itself is transformed[3]. The main point in this procedure is connected with the phenomenon of globalization. As globalization we can define, first, the basic role that internationalized economy and free transfer of capital, things and people play; second, the developments in communication, the formation of global nets and the continual growth of interstate relations[4].

Of course, globalization is a complicated phenomenon that influences all sectors of social life. It is a set of procedures and changes, with economic, political, social and cultural dimensions; procedures that function on a universal level and go beyond national borders,

2. Anthony Smith, *o. c.*, p. 22-23
3. Stuart Hall, David Held, Anthony McGrew, *Modernity and its Futures*, Greek translation by Thanasis Tsakiris & Victor Tsakiris, Savalas, Athens 2003, p. 403.
4. Regarding globalization, see Ulrich Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus -Antworten auf Globalisierung*, Greek translation by Giorgos Paulopoulos, Kastanioti, Athens 1999, John Gray, *False Dawn, The Delusions of Global Capitalism*, Greek translation by Thanos Chatzopoulos, Polis 1999, Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the olive tree*, Greek translation by Errikos Bartzinopoulos, Occeanida, Athens 2000, David Held & Anthony MacGrew, *Globalization /Anti-Globalization*, Greek translation by Katerina Kitidi, Polytropon, Athens 2004.

incorporating communities and organizations in new combinations of space and time[5]. In this way universal transactions become faster and we have the sense that the world is smaller and the distances shorter. These new realizations of condensed space and time are considered to be among the most important characteristics of globalization that influence the cultural identities[6].

The impact of globalization regarding cultural identities is expressed by two tendencies: the first produces a global postmodern civilization, which causes a cultural interdependence as a result of the contact and the communication between different cultures. In this tendency there is always the risk of homogenization and uniformity. The second tendency favors cultural particularities and different cultural identities. In a globalized world people acquire a conscience of their own and become more and more attached to the idea of their particularity as a means of self-assurance. The tendency towards global homogenization is then combined with a reinforcement of the cultural identity, which many times is expressed in a violent or illogical way. In the name of defense of cultural identities diverse reactions are created, such as revival of nationalism, xenophobia, racism or sexism[7].

The religious identity as part of cultural identity faces similar problems. The result of this situation is double and contradictional: a) the spread of standard, homogenized forms of religion across the globe and b) the assertion of local religious identities as a reaction to such globalization[8]. The religious identities, which played a central role in the past, are nowadays disorganized. The beginning of this pheno-

5. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Greek translation by G. Mertikas, Kritiki, Athens 2001, p. 64

6. Stuart Hall, David Held, Anthony McGrew, *o.c*, p. 439

7. For a general analysis of the globalization concerning the cultural identities, See Ioannis Petrou, *Κοινωνική θεωρία και σύγχρονος κόσμος*, Vanias, Thessaloniki 2005, pp. 180-190, Konstantinos Vrizas, *Παγκόσμια Επικοινωνία, Πολιτιστικές Ταυτότητες*, Gutenberg, Athens 1997, See also, Gregorius Paschalidis, «Η πολιτισμική ταυτότητα ως δικαίωμα και ως απειλή. Η διαλεκτική της ταυτότητας και η αμφιθυμία της κριτικής», in Chr. Konstantopoulou - L. Maratou-Alimbrandi (and others), *«Εμείς» και οι «άλλοι», Αναφορά στις τάσεις και τα σύμβολα*, EKKE, Athens 1999, pp. 73-83, See also, Laura Maratou-Alimbrandi, Paraskevi Glinou, «Πολιτισμικές ταυτότητες: Από το τοπικό στο παγκόσμιο», *o.c*, pp. 109-120

8. David Lehmann, «Religion and globalization» in *Religions in the Modern World*, Edited by Linda Woodhead (and others), Routledge, London-New York 2002, p. 299.

menon originates in the appearance of modernity and secularization but the procedure of globalization creates a new dynamic. Together with the racism in the social field and the nationalism in the national field, fundamentalism in the religious field appears as a reaction to the threat of cultural assimilation[9].

Although fundamentalism originates in the beginning of the 20* century, it has become more combative in combination with globalization. They became so closely related that the former appears as the other side of the latter[10]. In the name of God peoples turn against each other, religious minorities are persecuted, the freedom of worship is violated, even terrorism is used to defend particular religious identities[11]. For some researchers the war between various cultures and religions could even be the main problem of postmodern society[12]. Unfortunately, the religious conflicts are considered "as one of the most dangerous ideas for the future"[13].

4. CONFLICT OR RECONCILIATION?

Can religious identities divide or unite, provoke conflict or lead to tolerance and reconciliation? The meaning of identity is ambiguous on its own. On the one hand, it means the absolute similarity or equality among individuals, groups, ideas or symbols, which are identified

9. Fundamentalism is the tendancy to return to the fundamental values of the past and the Holy Scriptures that are interpreted in a literal way. Its target is the domination of the authentic expression of belief. Despite the fact that fundamentalism originates in Christianity, it is a phenomenon that appears in all religions. See Basileios Gioultsis, *Κοινωνιολογία της Θρησκείας*, P. Pournara, Thessaloniki ⁴2002, p. 419, Concerning fundamentalism see also, M. Marty - S. Appleby (ed.), *Fundamentalism Observed,* Vol. 1, Chicago 1991, M. Marty - S. Appleby (ed.), *Fundamentalism and Society,* Vol. 2, Chicago 1993, M. Marty - S. Appleby (ed.), *Fundamentalism and the State,* Vol. 3, Chicago 1993, M. Marty - S. Appleby (ed.), Accounting for Fundamentalism, Vol 4, Chicago 1994, M. Marty - S. Appleby (ed.), *Fundamentalism Comprehended,* Vol. 5, 1995.

10. Benjamin Burber, *Jihad vs Mac World,* Greek translation by Angelos Philippatos, Kastanioti, Athens 1998.

11. Henri Tincq, « Le chaos religieux du monde», in *Le Monde,* « Dieu de retour, pour le meilleure et le pire », Dossiers et Documents, nol, Septembre 2002, p. 8.

12. Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order,* Simon and Schuster, New York 1996.

13. See a relative article, Marianna Tolia (ed.), «Η πιο επικίνδυνη ιδέα για το μέλλον», *Kathimerini,* 7-9-2004, p. 5.

with each other. On the other hand, it is the set of characteristics, which differentiates someone or something from someone or something else[14]. It creates classifications between "we" and "they", thus connecting or dividing people. This distinction does not always mean conflicts. The identity is a matter of relationships. It is created and recreated through the elaboration of particular relationships. The problem is the articulation of these relationships[15]. Only the distinction between "we" and "you" is not enough to create conflicts. It is true that the religious identity as any other identity can function either in a reconciliating or in a conflicting way.

If we see the matter of religious identity as a matter of articulation of relationships, then it is easier to find out when it works in a conflicting way. In most cases religion does not function as a system of faith and worship but as a set of symbolic values, which confer identity and mark social, ethnic and other boundaries. In this case religion is involved in a game of power and is used as a means of legitimation. Dominance needs power and more specifically symbolic power, which religion can offer. That much is evident from the history of all the great empires of the past. Since conquerors have no legal-rational grounds for legitimizing their power, religious / symbolic methods which confer authority on their persons independently of a set of principles, are a useful resource for the imposition of their power[16].

Religion as a source of conflict is nowadays more intense because of globalization. Everybody is interested in participating in this procedure because of the financial and technological benefits that it offers, but at the same time everybody reacts not on a financial but on a symbolic level of differentiation. Religion as a particular symbolic system is easier to use in order to legitimate the power, political or not, in many ways. It is easier to promote principles and values in the

14. Konstantinos Vrizas, o.c, p. 169, Chrysoula Konstantopoulou, «Εισαγωγή: Αναφορά στην Έννοια και στις Όψεις των Σύγχρονων Αποκλεισμών», in Chr. Konstanto-poulou - L. Maratou-Alimbrandi (and others), o.c, pp. 12-13. For another considera-tion of the cultural identities, See also, Jacques Prunendy, «Πολιτισμική ταυτότητα. Μεταξύ μύθου και πραγματικότητας», o.c, p.p. 49-60.

15. About the dynamic of identity, see Denys Cuche, *La notion de culture dans les sciences sociales*, Greek Translation by Fotis Siatitsas, Typothito - Giorgos Dardanos, Athens 2001.

16. David Lehman, o.c., p. 300-301.

name of God behind which hides the game of political and financial power.

This situation is obvious not only in the case of the islamic but also of the protestant-american fundamentalism[17]. The need of an ideological rival to the american authority created the islamic fundamentalism. The latter sustains the american fundamentalism. In both cases there are two sides: the religious and the political. The religious side means the return to the fundamental religious principles. The political means the defense of national and cultural values.

The islamic fundamentalism is a complicated phenomenon. Its causes are historic, economic, political and cultural. It appears when there is economic recess and it expands to the poor classes. It grows stronger with the failure of the national middle classes to provide satisfactory solutions to the big problems of development and democratization. It is also reinforced by the traumatic memory of colonization and it constitutes a way of assurance of the cultural identity of Arab Islamic populations against the western culture[18]. On the other hand, the American fundamentalism is created by the uncertainty and insecurity of the modern globalized world. The pollution of the environment, the nuclear weapons, the terrorism, the economic crisis "construct" an opponent in an attempt to find a way out.

Both cases constitute phenomena of connection between religion and politics, or even better the use of religious faith as an ideology for political reasons. When researchers pose the question about the fanatism or violence of God, they actually want answer about the relationship between religion and politics[19]. In this case, the religious identity functions as a closed identity, which is reinforced by the myth of the opponent. It is obvious that religion becomes a closed system where entrance to people with different identities is strictly forbidden.

On the contrary, when the religious identity functions in an open way that receives, accepts and does not reject, it becomes a means of acceptance and reconciliation. Besides, the ideal of all religions is

17. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God, Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Harper Collins Publishers 2000.

18. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad, expansion et déclin de l' islamisme,* Gallimard, Paris 2000.

19. Jean Daniel, *Dieu est-il fanatique?* Greek Translation by Angelos Philippatos, Kastanioti, Athens 1998.

intolerance and acceptance of all human beings, in the realm of their god. The vertical socialization[20], which most religions have developed, may approach the whole world. The strategy must not be a form of isolation but a dialectic form of communication, which should combine the respect to the religion of the «other» and the understanding of values of each religious tradition. The distinction between the public and private sphere or the distinction between religion and politics may help the religious communities to overcome difficulties and commitments of all kinds. The respect of this distinction facilitates the procedure of intolerance[21].

Religions have the opportunity to exploit the possibility of easier communication given by globalization. Their aim should be an intercultural and inter-religion dialogue and communication. In this way religions can put an end to differences, conflicts and wars. In addition, globalization provokes environmental problems, social inequality, poverty and social injustice[22]. People, independently of religion, have the same needs regarding life, health and happiness. So, it is easy for religions to find common ground for cooperation, especially in the humanistic and social fields. Head members of various religions have already come in touch in order to discuss common ways to face social or ecological problems[23].

The use of violence is not compatible with the principles of religions. When the fear, greediness and suspicion of the survival of the stronger constitute the values of a materialistic world, it is the ideals and especially the self-sacrifice of religions that impress and attract people. If religion loses these characteristics, its future is not sure. The brotherhood among human beings is the ideal of all religions and the peaceful intervention into the social, economic and political matters is a way to succeed it[24].

20. See, Basileios Gioultsis, *o.c,* p. 94.

21. Michael Walzer, *On toleration,* Greek translation by Katerina Mandelaki, Kastanioti, Athens 1998, p. 46.

22. Ioannis Petrou, *o.c,* p. 180.

23. I would like to mention here the initiatives taken by the Ecumenical Partiarchate of the Constantinople to face matters of peace or problems of environmental pollution through inter-religious dialogues and relative congresses, as well as the declaration of the Decade 2001-2010 as "Decade against Violence" by WCC.

24. Robert Crawford, *What is religion? Introducing the Study of Religion,* Greek translation by Marios Beletas, Savalas, Athens 2004, p. 295.

If the streets of market and commerce were once the place of meeting and exchange, the streets of faith - despite the fact that we live the era of homo economicus - may constitute the place of mutual contact and real communication[25]. In a globalised world, where the pluralism of beliefs and ideas is presented as a "cultural well", the communication between the believers of different religions may prove to be a crucial point for consensus and peace. As a famous bishop says "nobody has the right to use the holy oil of religion for lighting the fire of violent clashes. Religion is a present which softens the hearts, cures the wounds and brings people together in peace"[26]. In such condition, religious identities can function in an inclusive and reconciliating way without causing conflicts.

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25. Katerina Stenou, *Images de l'Autre*, Ed. UNESCO-Exantas 1998, p. 135.

26. Anastasios Giannoulatos, Archibishop of Tirana, Ἴχνη από την αναζήτηση του υπερβατικού, Συλλογή θρησκειολογικών μελετημάτων, Akritas, Athens 2004, p. 404.