Rethinking Ties that Bind. Religion and the Rhetoric of Othering

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Abstract: Contemporary Europe is facing this challenge when redefining its own identity and socializing institutions. This paper focuses on how current discussions on the adequacy of a reference to Judeo-Christian heritage in the new European Constitution or on the teaching of religions at schools show the resilience of old-age notions and stereotypes with respect to cultural diversity. In order to explain this resilience, the paper explores how hierarchical perceptions of otherness (mainly of Muslims) are flourishing within a dichotomized system of representing otherness. This system is analyzed from the neo-Durkeimian perspective of cultural sociology and placed in connection with the spiritual leadership of fundamentalist conservatism after the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the old trend of Orientalism underlying pervading dominant Western discourses.

Multiculturality as an opportunity for redefining democracy

In the transition from the 20th to the 21st century a series of phenomena tied to economic globalization and population movements (Sassen, 1996) as well as the identity demands of very diverse (Castells, 1997) are opening a new horizon for citizenship. Among these phenomena, the growing multiculturality of resident populations in the same national territory is perhaps one of the elements which most clearly obliges us to reflect on the necessity of forging a new concept of citizenship capable of providing a new project of rights, participation and belonging to a civil society which is becoming increasingly more complex and heterogeneous. The main challenge posed by an ongoing multicultural population is to renew the experience of "togetherness".

KEY WORDS:

Religion, cultural diversity, intercultural education, cultural sociology.

The first step towards that aim concerns identity. Civil citizenship and togetherness are deeply related because there seems to be no doubt that citizenship implies some kind of collective identity, a certain type of feeling of belonging: it is difficult to think about active contribution to any kind of political project if one does not feel as a member of those who have the right to benefit from the same. The question is whether patriotism or ethnicism (very frequently tied to religion) that traditionally have served us as uniting link "with our own" is still a sufficient source to provide this identity or whether it is necessary to reformulate it more along the lines of the new multicultural horizon.

Contemporary authors as Will Kymlicka or Michel Walzer, for example, have sufficiently criticized the burden which the assumption of cultural homogeneity has had in the program of liberalism in modern politics. To their minds, this assumption has derived from an idealized model of polis understood as a union of ancestors, language, territory and very often religion (just consider the etymology of the term "com-munion") which has not been sufficiently able to recognize the true multicultural character of the majority of political communities. This traditionally modern way of building civil identity on the basis of national cultures seems to be at odds with the new phenomena of "postnationality" (Tambini, 2000), that is to say, with the new feelings of belonging emerging from current fluxes of populations. Nevertheless, its persistence accounts for multiculturality being perceived too often as a threat or a danger because it is supposed to undermine the grounds of a shared identity. In a context of ongoing cultural and ethical pluralism, many Europeans feel disoriented, anxious or troubled; and the more one's own self-identity blurs, the more difficult it is to accept others´ and to establish a rational dialogue to negotiate and redefine a new common identity (Allsayad and Casttels, 2002). In relation to this, Alain Touraine (1997) has talked about a "weak principle of integration". His point is that it is time to accept that sharing a common culture does not mean necessarily sharing the same values, not even sharing the same identity (which is not to be confused with a common identity). But how are we to do it? How can we live together and get organized without being similar and thinking the same? What do we have to share and what are we entitled not to share? These are the main questions multiculturality poses to the renewal of civic experience and the feeling of togetherness.

Although far from being a definite answer, it may help to pave the way of our search by keeping far enough away enough easy formulas such as those arising from the idea of incompatibility of cultures or such as those arising from the idea that difference is good in itself and always enriching. A recalcitrant xenophobia is just as bad company as a forced xenophilia. We begin, then, by being convinced that, beyond any metaphysics of difference, multiculturality must be considered from a realistic perspective independent from any previous assessment and to be considered as a simple question of fact. A problematic question, besides, because, given the monocultural and Eurocentric framework which has

characterized the institutional development of modernity, the living together of individuals with different vision of the world makes recognition and treatment of others difficult because it makes different conceptions of good and evil to coexist, and it forces us to reformulate the manner in which we define identity (who we are and who those like us are: our own).

Nevertheless, this is a difficulty which if conveniently dealt with and managed can provide an important source of renovation to civic learning. To consider multiculturality as a difficulty does not mean, then, seeing it as a threat or as civic gangrene; rather, instead, as a challenge, that is, as a situation which offers the possibility to rethink the ties that unite us in this form of civil solidarity which must be kept alive in a strongly democratic society.

But rethinking ties that bond us to different people supposes a need to analyze the way we represent them. This is why we have to first address the logic underlying how we tend to perceive and represent what cultural difference is; that is, how we tend to classify other people.

The inner organization of symbolic representation systems

This section outlines the theoretical frame within which comments on religion in the next sections are to be settled. This frame is gained from a current trend in sociological analysis which is known as the "strong program" of cultural sociology. This program can be contextualized within "the cultural" turn in sociological theory (Nash, 2001). Its aim is to react to Sociology's traditional insensibility to meaning trying to bring the study of symbolic phenomena into sociological research without reducing them to the narrow-minded perspective of the theory of ideology.

The program can be described as neo-Durkheimian because it shares with Durkheim´s perspective on symbolic production the idea that cultural processes have a relative autonomy and work in their own; that the model of these processes can be found in religious representations; and, last but not least, that the causal importance of symbolic classification underlying religious representation of the world relies on the symbolic division between sacred and profane (Alexander, 1988). This perspective has striking parallels with Sausage's emphasis on the "institutional character of language", the autonomous organization of linguistic signs and the binary code underlying the deep grammar of that organization. But deeper and more substantial echoes of it are to be found in Lévy-Strauss' and Mary Douglas' anthropology. Although Lévy-Strauss did not generalize from religious to secular or civic activity, he claimed indeed that societies must be studied in terms of their symbolic systems of classification and that these systems were organized as binary oppositions. Douglas in her turn was closer to Durkheimian perspective when analyzing the classifying function of symbolic systems. In fact, her theory of pollution as a form of social control that societies use to mark deviant or dangerous ac-

tivities can be seen as an expansion of the notion of profanation Durkheim developed in his later work. After all, Durkheim's study of the elementary forms of religion was planned to show how the production of social life is impossible to separate from this deep form of classification.

For our purposes here, we stress as a basic assumption of this program that social action is always embedded in social sentiments condensed in symbols. ("Without symbols, social sentiments could only have a precarious existence", said Durkheim 1912/1965). Any social action takes always place within a preexisting frame of meanings organized along a system of analogies and antinomies defining who/what is similar or congruent with us or with the things we value, and what is dissimilar or incompatible with us or with the things we dismissed. The former are attached to "we-ness"; the later are related to otherness. And this classifies what and we are to trust and distrust. In other words, the main purpose of this program of research is to seek the latent or deep structures underlying the way we categorize our social world. An accurate appraisal of social life cannot be gained without recognizing that the inner organization of our system of symbolic representation brings us reality as a system of positions; that is, as a classified world.

Has this theoretical frame something to say on the representation of cultural diversity in civil society discourses? One of the main fields of research in cultural sociology is the study of civil society discourses (Alexander, 1998). And considering civil society as an object of research, the strong program of cultural sociology focuses on the production of solidarity as the emotional and moral cement of social life.

As far as religion can be considered as a leading symbolic marker of cultural diversity, it is worthy to note how the production of solidarity in civic society discourse is subject to that polarized structure just described. In a former paper (Terrén, 2002) I have explored how civil society reacts to a phenomenon of racial conflict (namely the riots at El Ejido in February 2000). I researched there on the cultural basis of racism for, as the Ford Report (the first in tackling with racism a global European level) states, it is in the sphere of culture where the images that later can constitute the basis of success of the propaganda and the attitudes of the declared racism are elaborated and re-elaborated. The paper claims that different narratives arising from civil society share a common semiotic code structured on a dichotomized classification representing inclusion and exclusion at the same time. This binary code is taken as the deep symbolic structure of the civil society discourse. How does it work when dealing with "cultural others"?

Binarism in which the sacred is produced accounts for the narrative structure underlying the discourses analyzed. For this structure relies on dichotomized pairs constantly repeated in main interpretations of racial conflict: "from here / from outside", "civilization / barbarism", "friend / enemy". These are, too, the paired terms implicit in popular metaphors ("flood", "avalanche", "plague") stressing the dangers of crossing

frontiers and linking the people who cross them with "pollution" or "infection". My research showed, then, how, in effect, analysis of discourse production of civil society on a racial conflict constitutes a fertile empirical territory for observing the tense relation between classification and solidarity. It showed as well how that sphere of "idealized togetherness" arising from the code of the sacred works in discourse through narratives representing itself as an "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson), which is always built as a symbolic territory, that is, as a space with frontiers. The analysis of competing narratives claiming for the interpretation of those riots showed what I called the "irony of solidarity": the production of feelings and loyalties on which social solidarity is dependent cannot take place without a polarized classification of "we-ness" and "other-ness". This dichotomized representation provided then a deep grammar of polarized categories, which give shape to the discourse of civil society on racial conflict on the basis of pure/impure, sacred/profane distinction.

The sacred, then, is a focus of difference. But symbols sacralized by the code are not the benign face of a mere abstract polarization; they are a source of feelings, emotions and dispositions without with individuals cannot adopt a compromised attitude towards others, feelings and emotions without which the affiliative tie wherein rest the feeling of belonging and the experience of togetherness would not exist. Any representation of "we-ness" as sacred or pure implies the classification of what is perceived as polluting and, as a result, threatening. And from these representations, certain differential attitudes and dispositions to social action are to be expected, for the way we tend to treat people depends on the way we see (and classify) them.

Now the point is: can the current discussions on religion in contemporary Europe be understood within the same scheme?

The Cross and the Crescent: religious diversity as a cultural war

How to fit religions in the relationship between states and civil society is one of the challenges included in accommodating cultural diversity. Due to the traditional historical ties of European nation-states with Christian churches in their development of cultural homogeneity, religion and cultural diversity are historically tied. This fact accounts for the common association between West and Christianity on one side, and Orient and Islamism on the other. As is well known, the current *locus classicus* of this association is to be found in Samuel Huntington´s notion of "clash of civilization" (Huntington, 1993, 1996).

Redefining civic relationship with religion is one of the main tasks to be faced by the ongoing multicultural Europe. Debates on the place of religion at schools or at the European constitution are the evidence of a challenge which shows how the problem for contemporary Europe is not just being multicultural, but considering itself as such (AlSayyad and Castells, 2002).

After a long debate, the attempts at mentioning the Christian inheritance of Europe in its Constitution have not been successful, perhaps due to fear of a reaction from Moslems (already nowadays the second religion in Europe). But this should not be understood as a rejection of the religious in favor of a lay cultural identity. Almost half of the UE countries have state churches or concordats with the Catholic Church institutionalizing enormous privileges and a great power for them to negotiate. What has happened, then, is that, due to this tremendous capacity for pressure, the conservative elite have managed to substitute the debate revolving around identity and religion for the articulation of the state and churches. Their strategy has not had the symbolic success of the constitutional recognition of the Christian essence of Europe, but has succeed in obtaining the recognition of churches as representative bodies of civil society which ought to be taken into account with regards to the action of the states. But will every church be treated equally?1

As socialization embodies the way a society considers itself, the educational aspect of the question affecting many European countries during recent years seems especially relevant. In Italy, the debate on crucifixes which still hang in classrooms has served to make manifest the eternal power on Earth of a church accustomed -as in Spain- to be a decisive institutional element in the moral fiber of a citizenship imprisoned in a serious deficit of secularization. In France, where between five and six million Moslems reside, the matter of *hiyab* has been questioning for more than a decade the tradition of neutrality of a socializing state action inspired in republican laicity. That which fourteen years ago was seen as incompatible with official secularism and was left at the expense of creating regulations for the territory of each educational center (just as that which was agreed upon in the United Kingdom during the same period) is now an object of the law which prohibits the outward use of any religious symbol. Spain also, with its small number of some 600,000 Moslems, had its "*hiyab* case" two years ago. Moreover, due to the associations of Islamism with terrorism, many of these countries are working on plans to control and monitor the socialization practices developed in mosques and Islamic confessional schools.

The current debate on the formal or curricular accommodation of religious diversity at schools is pervading most European systems of education. Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that the subject has specific implications in those new immigration countries with still limited experience in the reception of immigrant families, such as Italy or Spain. Concerning the latter, from where most of the empirical evidence underlying our reflection comes from, the lack of laicity in its public life, rooted in the confessional regime hold by Franco's dictatorship for forty years (1939-1975), is also to be kept in mind. The concept of laicity is still looked down upon here or even unknown although some critical movements are trying to make people aware that it carries the principle of tolerance and peaceful co-habitation of people from different cultures, traditions and religions, which corresponds to the European situation in

21st Century. Due to their communist past new EU countries have perhaps a different difficulty in accommodating religious diversity.

But even a country with a religious pluralism of the United States, where confessional schools abound, fundamentalist Christians lobby for the exclusion of the theory of evolution from teaching in schools, extending the reactionary shadow which had already begun with the attempts of Ronald Reagan and the New Right to introduce obligatory daily prayer in schools. As it happens, in June of this year the Supreme Court rejected the plea of the father of a nine-year-old girl which asked for the deletion of the expression "one nation under God" which has been included in the Pledge of Allegiance for fifty years and is recited daily by millions of United States schoolchildren.

Therefore, even if our concern is related to the new immigration countries of Europe, the subject has to be presented from a global perspective. In the global arena, the spiritual leadership that advocates a reaction of cultural closure with regards to uncertainties of the social change is lead by neo-conservative North Americans and their argument revolving around threatened Western values. Nevertheless, on this side of the Atlantic, cultural fundamentalism of this type has found followers, for example, in many who want Christianity included as a symbol of identity in the European Constitution, extending with this the idea that –as the Spanish historian Josep Fontana has pointed out- the historical construction of a European identity was always created vis-à-vis third parties ("barbarians" or "infidels"). But the wake of this neo-conservative leadership can also be seen in political leaders or in opinions which can scarcely hide the consideration of the presence of non-Europeans in Europe as an uncomfortable necessity which can only be accepted as a labor market demand or as an object of charity; but, in any case, as can be seen clearly in the recent books by Oriana Fallaci, always with the excluding and frightened attitude of those that feeling as members of a higher civilization and counting on "the power of reason" (i.e. the sacred), they complain that immigration has become an "invasion" (i.e., a source of pollution).

Artifacts of language such as the depiction of Sadam as the new "Great Satan" or the "crusade" metaphor initially used by Bush Administration to legitimize the second Gulf War are evidence of the discursive resources expressing this trend. This belligerent use of religious images makes religion an arena of cultural war and helps to produce dialogue about it within a frame of fear and distrust. The spiritual leadership of Western conservatism speaks then for the ubiquity of dominant discourses which provide the frame within which most public discussions on cultural diversity take place in civil society. This is why most of them are related to a defensive and polarized discourse promoting a simplified, undesirable and threatening of the other, instead of addressing the need of redefining identity itself. At bottom, this is a response to the operation which Norbert Elias (1997) considers typical of the discourse of "the established": the identification of superiority with merit and both with their self-image.

The thesis here is that religion is part of the classificatory and asymmetrical character of this sacred self-image. The clearest example is perhaps the implicit definition which is being put forth of Muslims, because, as Hentsch (1992: 1) states: "Muslim is Europe's Other par excellence". In fact, before his last attack on the alleged Hispanic menace to Northamerican culture, Huntington (1993) also said that since the fall of the communist regime, Muslims were reemerging as the chief enemy. The representation of Islam underlying this definition of the dangers threatening the Western sacred self-image is a stick figure now based on the fear of terrorism under Islamic flag. But this is a representation which does not do justice to the tremendous diversity of Islam2 (same as it would not be fair to identify Christianity with the massacre of two hundred civilians undertaken in Uganda by God's Liberation Army or with the defense of creationism as a pedagogical model for biology classes claimed by North American Christian fundamentalists). But the fact is that the potential for religion to act as identity marker (both as praising the "we" or sacred and as the differentiation of the outsider or profane) speaks for its use in dealing with attitudes concerning cultural diversity.

The "other" is always kind of mysterious being. It is strange because it is hard to define; because, as Shanen (1984) has shown, its image is always built on myths and thematic clusters (ancient traditions, political and economic underdevelopment, exoticism, violence, barbarism) hard to reduced to a single and reliable image and invoking simultaneous and often contradictory feelings inviting fear, distrust and even prurient indulgence, but always at a distance. Difference tends to be more feared than appreciated at bottom, and this accounts for a great part of the debates on the accommodation of religion at schools or the European constitution, as far as they have been the arena where old stereotypes related with Islam have again been circulating under the framework of binary and asymmetrical representation I described above as the basic inner structure of our representation system.

As we deal with civic socialization and, as is well known, not only schools educate, it worthy noting how this dichotomized structure is still alive in the way evil characters are presented with non-Western cultural or racial traits in cartoons or films. The markers of these cultural products still identify evil figures with phenotypic traits related to non-Westerness. Central to the construction of this association between evil and Muslim otherness is the long ethnocentric tradition of Western literature. The depiction of the "Saracen" or the "Black Moor" as dangerous and strange is rooted in classic texts of the classical Western canon (think of the jealous and violent black moor in Shakespeare's *Othello*, or of Muhamad's cast into the deepest nether extremities of the *Inferno* by Dante's *Divine Comedy*).

The point now is to confirm if there is a connection between this belligerent use of religion in marking cultural diversity and the dichotomized system of representation described above. In order to do so, it bears noting now how the current circulation of these stereotypes which have been long preserved in collective memory

(especially in countries with a significant history of relationships the Arab world, such as Spain) (Connerton, 1989) reproduces the othering cognitive practice embodied in what Edward Said (1978) called "Orientalism".

Keeping in mind a concept of the Orient which primarily referred to the Islamic world, Said (1978: 3) defined "Orientalism" as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -dealing with by making statements about it, authoring views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient". Said's main contribution was to show that Western discourses on the cultural others manipulate representations of the Orient to mean what defining forces wanted it to mean. This seems to fit with de "us-them" dichotomy described in section 2, insofar as what Alexanader calls "we-ness" is to be thought of as a main defining force. A connection between both perspectives can be established through Hall's theory of identity, for he suggests that the building of self-identity always generates discourses of difference and similarity (Hall, 1994). The other is always to be considered in a range of positions, that is, in a system of classification.

As long as the dominant discourses in the discussion of religious diversity continue to reproduce old cultural stereotypes in the framework of the friend/enemy dichotomy, the intercultural communication necessary for the forging of a new experience of togetherness will be thwarted.

Conclusion

Discussions on the adequacy of a reference to Judeo-Christian heritage in the new European Constitution or on the teaching of religions at schools show the challenge Europeans are facing when redefining its own identity and socializing institutions in a new multicultural context. Discussions also show the resilience of old-age notions and stereotypes with respect to cultural diversity. This paper has explored how hierarchical perceptions of otherness (mainly of Muslims) are flourishing in the current debates on the civil place of religion in contemporary Europe. I have placed these perceptions in connection with the spiritual leadership of fundamentalist conservatism pervading dominant Western discourses after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The use of belligerent images of religion helps the manipulation of otherness and the presentation of the rise of Islam as the new post-Cold War Other. The latent Orientalism of this trend is obviously linked to the dialectic of the power relations in the new post Cold War world, but this paper has focused on the basic structure of the representation system working in those discourses. Although contact with minorities and immigrants enables Europe to redefine its own identity and to forge a new feeling of belonging, the persistence of the dichotomized organization of our representation of togetherness sets important limits to our potential to rethink the ties bonding us to new incomers.

Notes:

1 For a quick view of the influence of lobbies on the Vatican and of Catholic organizations such as Opus Dei when recognizing the "religious inheritance" in the project of the European Constitution, see Terras, C., "Bajo la presión de las iglesias", ["Under pressure from the churches"] in *Le monde diplomatique*, (Spanish versión) January 2004. It is possible to gain access to the campaign of the *Fédération Humaniste Européenne* (Free University of Brussels) against article 51 of the new bill at *www.humanism.be*.

2 Different types of ethnical or cultural belonging give rise to no less diverse religious experiences, including the minimal 30% of those who claim not to practice their religion or those who without turning their back on Islam consider themselves to be members of lay society. With regards to this diversity of Islam, among which liberal versions that fight to mold to the European concept of citizenship stand out, see the works contained in AlSayyad, N., y Castells, M. (2002). See the website of the international movement of moslem gays and lesbians (www.al-fatiha.net) or the references made to the moslem women's movement in www.webislam.com

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