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The Ambivalent Roots of Charity and Their Consequences in a Secularized World A Survey Across the Three Monotheistic Religions of the Abrahamic Strain

Abstract

In this essay I address the meaning and functions of charity in contemporary secularized democracies against the background of its plural roots in the three monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The legacy of these different traditions seems to be ambivalent in itself, even more so when it is placed within the allegedly neutral political environment of secularized societies. This ambivalence is due to the double anthropological declination that charity can support depending on whether it is intended and practiced according to an in-group or an outer-group logic of inter-subjective recognition. Moving along one rather than the other of these two ideal and practical paths of charity produces different lines of compatibility/opposition between democracy and human rights, on one side, and charitable activities, on the other. Through a historical inter-religious reconstruction focusing on the inclusive sense of charity prescriptions in Abrahamic monotheisms, I propose an intercultural reading of the relationships between secular political neutrality and charitable attitudes to the recognition of Otherness.

Keywords: Charity, Human Rights, Recognition, Secularism, Intercultural.

1. The Ambivalence of Charity across Religious Texts and Traditions

Charity is often understood in a *strong way*. It is envisaged as a bridge between reciprocal Others. This is, however, only one possibility¹. There is another different and opposite way of interpreting charitable acts. It corresponds to philanthropy,² the caring directed towards supporting those who share our own vision of what is good. This is the communitarian, or infra-communitarian, side of charity. In other words, it could be defined as sympathy for our own fellows, brothers, or members of our own communities. In this version, charity certainly contains the need for social cohesion, belonging, and recognition of one's own identity.

The dividing line that runs between charity-towards-the-Other and charity-toward-the-Similar, has to do with the psychological perception of the totality. It is possible to envisage an inclusive totality, all-encompassing, open to the future, within which the Other, merely by representing himself

¹ See Ricca (2017). The arguments proposed here are to be considered as a sort of sequel of the essay I just cited.

² See Ilchman, Katz and Queen (1998).

to us, is already integrated in our horizon of events. Likewise, totality can be conceived in a conceptual way that is still indicative, communitarian, supporting the need for identity, or that is based on the coherence and internal solidity of a circuit of meanings and experience. In this case coherence and a self-fulfilling constitution are achieved at the price of distinction from the Other, from what is outside and must lie outside because it is dissonant, incongruous, chaotic.

From an anthropological and psycho-cognitive point of view, it can be said that the two sides of charity look like the social projection of the two moments that mark the process of knowing. Categorization and conceptualization, cognitive efforts and acquired knowledge, experience and form, learning processes and norms/order, are all pairs of opposites that articulate the movements of diastole and systole intrinsic to the human life process. The manifestation of thought and action unfolds through transformations and consolidations, progressions and setbacks, exposure and introspection, innovation and conservation, and so on. Similarly, charity—when observed in its anthropological sense—reproduces the rhythm of cognitive experience in the social dimension.

Both of its aspects, the inclusive and the communitarian, are present together along the historical paths of charity and its individual manifestations. From a descriptive point of view, they can both be traced within the texts and religious traditions of Abrahamic monotheisms. Looking at these religious traditions and their scriptures with an anthropological gaze it would seem possible to say, therefore, that both forms of charity receive citizenship and legitimacy within them. It is as if to say that focusing on one or the other direction of charity is subject to discretionary choice, in turn determined by contingencies. This is because, at first glance, it would seem impossible to find priority or hierarchy between the charity open to the Other and the philanthropy addressed exclusively to one's own fellow believers. A closer analysis of the sacred texts of the three monotheistic traditions seems to suggest, however, that things are not exactly so. In my view, this is evident as soon as one pushes just beyond a merely descriptive review of the contents of the Holy Scriptures and the sacred traditions of each of these faiths. At that level of analysis, it will easily emerge that the twofold and simultaneous recognition of both infra-communitarian and extra-communitarian charity does not share a dual foundation. Nevertheless, the root of the duty of charity remains always and primarily the impossibility and the inconceivability of a closure to the Other, as it contrasts with the assertion of all-encompassing totality embodied by the pervasive omnipresence of God, by his absolute Dasein.

I will try to bring out this character of inclusive universality intrinsic to monotheistic revelations through the passages that their respective texts devote to charity. For this purpose, I will start with the "youngest" among these religions, Islam, also because today it is considered to be the most inclined towards an identitarian defense of an exclusionary and rigid orthodoxy, with socio-political consequences that are nothing short of dreadful.

2. Charity in the Islamic Tradition

The first question concerns the recipients of charity. The answer that lies in the Qur'an in this regard is twofold, but unambiguous.

Quran, Surah II, 177: «It is not *Al-Birr* (piety, righteousness, and each and every act of obedience to Allah, etc.) that you turn your faces towards East and (or) West (in prayers); but *Al-Birr* is (the quality of) the one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, the Prophets and gives his wealth, in spite of love

for it, to the kinsfolk, to the orphans, and to *Al-Masakin* (the poor), and to the wayfarer, and to those who ask, and to set slaves free, performs *As-Salat* (*Iqamat-as-Salat*), and gives the *Zakat*, and who fulfills their covenant when they make it, and who are *As-Sabirin* (the patient ones, etc.) in extreme poverty and ailment (disease) and at the time of fighting (during the battles). Such are the people of the truth and they are *Al-Muttaqun* (pious - see V.2:2).

This verse contains both faces of charity but seems to leave little doubt about the meaning and, therefore, the real addressee of charitable giving. He who gives to others performs an act of love for Allah, and that act of love embodies, in practical terms, the fundamental act of faith in Allah, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book and the Prophets. It is faith in the Being who is Allah, and Allah who is the Being itself. Others form a part of that Being, for this reason it is mandatory that believers exercise charity for the benefit of Others. No one can love God without showing charity for the Other, without recognizing in him a part of Allah, in whom each human being shares. Moreover, the idea that in giving alms we do something first for Allah, and then for another human being, is icastically explained and confirmed in the following verses:

Surah LVII, 11: «Who is he that will lend to Allah a goodly loan? Then, (He) will increase it manifold to his credit (in repaying), and he will have (besides) a good reward.»

Surah LVII, 18: «Verily, those who give *Sadaqat* (i.e. *Zakat* and alms, etc.), men and women, and lend to Allah a goodly loan, it shall be increased manifold (to their credit), and theirs shall be an honorable good reward.»

In giving to the Other, and then recognizing in him the presence of Allah, every believer acquires real wealth and purifies himself and his goods of avarice. To purify ones assets is to admit that they do not belong to him in an absolute sense because they come from Allah. In giving to the Other, then, he is returning something to Allah.

Surah III, 180: «And let not those who covetously withhold of that which Allah has bestowed on them of His Bounty think that it is good for them (and so they do not pay the obligatory *Zakat*). Nay, it will be worse for them; the things which they covetously withheld shall be tied to their necks like a collar on the Day of Resurrection. And to Allah belongs the heritage of the heavens and the earth; and Allah is Well-Acquainted with all that you do.»

Having is nothing but a concession of Allah's Grace. To return to Allah through the Other, the needy, what is already His, is to enter into communion with Him, to understand the meaning of what has true value. Material possessions are thus re-established in their meaning, transmuting through action and understanding into eternal goods. The main purpose of charity is therefore this act of life-giving communion, which is genuinely significant. That is why a kind gesture to the benefit of those in need, those Others recognized by all believers as part of themselves, is worth more than the gift of material goods.

Surah II, 263: «Kind words and forgiving of faults are better than *Sadaqah* (charity) followed by injury. And Allah is Rich (Free of all wants) and He is Most-Forbearing.»

And since believers give to Allah, they cannot expect anything in return for their charity.

Surah II, 262: «Those who spend their wealth in the Cause of Allah, and do not follow up their gifts with reminders of their generosity or with injury, their reward is with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.»

The theme concerning the true wealth acquired through charity is central to the Qur'anic revelation, as if to say that the human being only has that which he gives as alms. The only true wealth is the contemplation of the face of Allah, the joining with Him achieved through the knowledge of being part of Allah himself. A corollary of this theme is Allah's perpetual awareness of acts of charity performed in secret. Allah always knows what people do for Others because He is always aware of what is done to Himself.

Surah II, 271: «If you disclose your *Sadaqat* (alms-giving), it is well, but if you conceal it, and give it to the poor, that is better for you. (Allah) will forgive you some of your sins. And Allah is Well-Acquainted with what you do.»

And it is precisely for this reason that there can be no gain if the believers, in their hearts, do not give anything to the Other, knowing well that in so doing they deny Allah what is already His.

Surah III, 92: «By no means shall you attain *Al-Birr* (piety, righteousness, etc., it means here Allah's Reward, unless you spend (in Allah's Cause) of that which you love; and whatever of good you spend, Allah knows it well.»

The ubiquitous presence of Allah, in the body and in the person of the Others in need, is thus the source of the all-encompassing identification of the recipients of charity.

Surah II, 215: «They ask you: what they should spend. Say: Whatever you spend of good must be for parents and kindred and orphans and *Al-Masakin* (the poor) and the wayfarers, and whatever you do of good deeds, truly, Allah knows it well.»

This verse seems to raise some important questions about the dual face of charity in the Islamic world. According to the letter of the Qur'an, as well as the Sharaitic tradition, obligatory charity consists of the *zakat*. Every believer must pay a percentage of their income towards the livelihood and the good of the community. The recipients of *zakat*, as well as the beneficiaries of charity from pious foundations (*waqf*), are generally Muslims. Nevertheless, all the commandments in the verses cited thus far apply to *zakat*, too.

In light of these indications, then, it would seem that the Quran does not know the figure of the Other as such, that is as a human being, as the recipient of charity. Although in the Islamic perspective all human beings are offspring of Allah, only the believers in need would trigger the duty to give charity, embodying the path to virtue. However, among the institutions of charity, there is a gap between their implementation procedures and the principles they encapsulate. And this is a gap, a non-coincidence, corroborated by the presence of another institutional manifestation of charity. Alongside the *zakat* and the establishment of the *waqf*, there is also the *sadaqa*, or voluntary charity/alms. This can be given to anyone, be he a believer, fellow citizen or a foreigner. Despite its omni-laterality, charity never ceases to represent a path to Allah through the Other. The principles of

conduct³ and meaning expressed by the Qur'an verses reported so far are also applied to the *sadaqa*. The strongest evidence of the extra-communitarian feature of Islamic charity, of its inclusive openness also to the radical Other, the foreigner, can be traced in the selfsame Qur'an.

Surah II, 272: «Not upon you is their guidance, but Allah guides whom He wills. And whatever you spend in good, it is for yourselves, when you spend not except seeking Allah's Countenance. And whatever you spend in good, it will be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged.»

This verse seems to express—as is confirmed by interpretations within the Islamic world—the idea of cosmic and all-embracing charity. It goes beyond the barriers of faith, even of religious infidelity. It also resists the apparently anti-communitarian implications deriving from the imperatives of freedom of faith and religious difference. It is up to Allah, not humans, to make the decision to lay bare the path to faith and open its doors. The task of the believer is to join Allah, follow the right way to Him. A path that passes through the Other, through the gift to the Other, no matter who he is. What believers will have given will be to their advantage in the sight of Allah, and will be returned. They will suffer neither loss nor grievance.

Beginning with verse II, 272, the re-generative force of charity, its ability to produce sense and, therefore, to reveal and to shape the world, seems to radiate throughout. Its vivifying and regenerative capacity is metaphorically and lyrically confirmed by the following two verses:

Surah II, 261: «The likeness of those who spend their wealth in the Way of Allah, is as the likeness of a grain (of corn); it grows seven ears, and each ear has a hundred grains. Allah gives manifold increase to whom He pleases. And Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knower.»

Surah II, 265: «And the likeness of those who spend their wealth seeking Allah's Pleasure while they in their own selves are sure and certain that Allah will reward them (for their spending in His Cause), is the likeness of a garden on a height; heavy rain falls on it and it doubles its yield of harvest. And if it does not receive heavy rain, light rain suffices it. And Allah is All-Seer of (knows well) what you do.»

Which, in turn, are supported in an antithetical style by vv. 264 and 266:

Surah II, 264: «O you who believe! Do not render in vain your *Sadaqah* (charity) by reminders of your generosity or by injury, like him who spends his wealth to be seen of men, and he does not believe in Allah, nor in the Last Day. His likeness is the likeness of a smooth rock on which is a little dust; on it falls heavy rain which leaves it bare. They are not able to do anything with what they have earned. And Allah does not guide the disbelieving people.»

Surah II, 266: «Would any of you wish to have a garden with date-palms and vines, with rivers flowing underneath, and all kinds of fruits for him therein, while he is stricken with old age, and his children are weak (not able to look after themselves), then it is struck with a fiery whirlwind, so that it is burnt? Thus does Allah make clear His *Ayat* (proofs, evidences, verses) to you that you may give thought.»

The two pairs of verses listed above seem to draw a double chiasma. It culminates in the proclamation

³ ...one might even say moral theology: but only in metaphorical terms, since it is an expression rooted in the Christian tradition.

of the basic aspects of the anthropology of the gift: its innovativeness, its ability to create new meaning, new levels of inter-subjectivity and, through these, a renewed awareness of subjectivity. All together, they outline the principle by which the gift doesn't so much create the obligation for its return—a danger that, today, much philosophical-anthropological theory tends to emphasize—but rather inspires new standards of living, new avenues for human self-awareness, new manifestations of subjectivity. Along this journey, each must give of his best self to the Other, thus celebrating the Grace of God and the consciousness of what one has received in Grace.

Surah II, 267: «O you who believe! Spend of the good things which you have (legally) earned, and of that which We have produced from the earth for you, and do not aim at that which is bad to spend from it, (though) you would not accept it save if you close your eyes and tolerate therein. And know that Allah is Rich (Free of all wants), and Worthy of all praise.»

Of course, this reciprocal setting forth towards the highest levels of existence and Being may be perverted, triggering a race, a challenge (as allegedly occurred in the frequently studied but perhaps—at least in its foundations—not always understood *potlatch*). Such a perversion is, however, banned in the Qur'anic texts. Everyone improves himself not in the eyes of the Other, but through the Other, and reaching out towards Allah. Towards “He Who does not need anything”. Therefore the gift, considered in the light of charity, cannot be transformed into an instrument of identity or psychosocial self-assertion because it would lose all of its substance; it would not generate sense, but would rather degrade the meaning of things, meaning they could otherwise acquire through the edifying action of genuine, heartfelt charity. The gift would then constitute the petrification of Being, it would be a sign of a charity turned to the past, to the reaffirmation of what has already been acquired and its antagonistic use against the Other rather than for their benefit; so, absurdly and sinfully, also against Allah and eventually themselves.

What has Islam made, throughout its history, of this historical heritage of theological and anthropological potentialities? For now, mine shall be a non-answer. Islam has managed the two faces of charity in a kind of vacillation. In so doing, it has conducted itself similarly to the other religions of the Abrahamic tradition, considered in their different articulations. Depending on the moments, contingencies, internal schisms, and schools of thought, each of the three monotheistic religions has opened or closed the doors of charity to the Other, in the latter case focusing on intra-communitarian and/or infra-religious solidarity. There are no definitive judgments to enact, nor absolute condemnations. The success of an effort to tap into the deepest roots of the charity principle depends upon who inquires into the sacred texts and, ultimately, the human being himself. Making it so that what I have called “charity in the strict sense” steers history, absorbs also the infra-communitarian (and so, defusing) antagonisms, requires a conscious effort. Charity is there, in the revealed word, and waiting. It is ever waiting to be questioned, as an extraordinary resource available to human beings and communities.

The considerations proposed thus far increase in importance insofar as the other monotheistic religions seem to share the principles expressed by Islam with regard to the concept of charity. These profiles of continuity and similarity emerge as soon as we trace back the history of the faiths to the origins of Christianity.

3. Charity in the Christian/Catholic Tradition

As in the case of Islam, the history of Christianity is too detailed and complex to be recounted here with all its ramifications related to the principle of charity. In general, and in spite of Christian dualism⁴, Christian churches, with the Catholic Church in the lead, follow both tracks of charity. When the Christian religion, in its many manifestations, has allied with public temporal power to the extent that the two have conflated, the intra-communitarian side of charity has surfaced; in those circumstances, public interest and religious interest have coincided. This finding, in many ways, is even more salient in the case of Islam, since in the Qur'an there is no theological axis for the distinction between political power and religion. On the contrary, among Muslims the dualism between political authority and religious authority is only—if and where it occurs—an organizational distinction. In terms of sources of legitimacy, there is a kind of necessary continuity within the two authorities. Instead, in the history of Christianity, even when the foundation of the secular power was rooted in the will of God and in accordance with His will, theocracy has always had to confront the separation between the Kingdom of God and the World (or Caesar), between the spiritual/transcendent and the temporal dimensions.

The realization of the inclusive potentialities of the principle of Christian charity have been predominantly inhibited by the defense of orthodoxy. The Catholic Church, followed by the Protestant churches (leaving aside for now Orthodox and Eastern Christianity), have often identified Otherness to be excluded from their communities. Persecutions, accusations of heresy, various stigmas of complicity with the Devil, and so on, have punctuated a sort of counter-history to charity. And yet, despite this, historical Christianity has at the same time maintained open access to the Other - notwithstanding and even alongside the Crusades and colonialism. What can be traced in some textual passages of Qur'anic revelation, namely a charitable and inclusive opening also towards non-believers, actually works as a kind of theological cornerstone of the entire history and ideal path of the Christian faith.

Once again, textual analysis can render a more cognitively fruitful perspective on the ambivalent universe of charity. Space constraints compel me, however, to restrict the range of discussion. For this reason, in my examination of the Christian approach to charity, I will focus on the social doctrine of the Catholic Church—warning that distinctions and different nuances of this topic are present in other Christian traditions, most of all, Calvinism. Numerous indications and historical retrospectives on the sacred texts and theological traditions can nevertheless be found in the “*Compendium of the Social Doctrine*.” However, it should be said that the Catholic Church has been selected not for ideological and fideistic preferences, certainly, but rather as a result of the degree of organization and representativeness of its apparatuses of doctrinal elaboration.

A distinctive feature of Christianity is its focus on ecumenism. From the very beginning, a key concept imposed by St. Paul on the preaching of the Gospel is that of being open to all people and sharing the Incarnation of God. This shared belonging to God, beyond race, ethnicity, and political affiliations, is reflected in the centrality of the principle of charity and the universal destination of all goods. Paragraphs 171-172 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine* tell us:

⁴ Prodi (2000).

§ 171. *Among the numerous implications of the common good, immediate significance is taken on by the principle of the universal destination of goods:* “God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.” This principle is based on the fact that, “The original source of all that is good is the very act of God, who created both the earth and man, and who gave the earth to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits.” (Gen 1:28-29) God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone. This is *the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods*. The earth, by reason of its fruitfulness and its capacity to satisfy human needs, is God's first gift for the sustenance of human life.” The human person cannot do without the material goods that correspond to his primary needs and constitute the basic conditions for his existence; these goods are absolutely indispensable if he is to feed himself, grow, communicate, associate with others, and attain the highest purposes to which he is called.

§ 172. *The universal right to use the goods of the earth is based on the principle of the universal destination of goods.* Each person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development. The right to the common use of goods is the “first principle of the whole ethical and social order” and “the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine”. For this reason the Church feels bound in duty to specify the nature and characteristics of this principle. It is first of all a *natural* right, inscribed in human nature and not merely a positive right connected with changing historical circumstances; moreover it is an “inherent” right. It is innate in individual persons, in every person, and has *priority* with regard to any human intervention concerning goods, to any legal system concerning the same, to any economic or social system or method: “All other rights, whatever they are, including property rights and the right of free trade must be subordinated to this norm [the universal destination of goods]; they must not hinder it, but must rather expedite its application. It must be considered a serious and urgent social obligation to refer these rights to their original purpose.”

As in Islamic faith, a complementary aspect of the principle of universal destination is the idea that all goods belong to God. Hence, it follows that the selfish, antagonistic and privative use of those assets, consumed in an indifference for other human beings, is censured.

§ 175. *The universal destination of goods requires a common effort to obtain for every person and for all peoples the conditions necessary for integral development, so that everyone can contribute to making a more humane world,* “in which each individual can give and receive, and in which the progress of some will no longer be an obstacle to the development of others, nor a pretext for their enslavement”. This principle corresponds to the call made unceasingly by the Gospel to people and societies of all times, tempted as they always are by the desire to possess, temptations which the Lord Jesus chose to undergo (cf. Mk 1:12-13; Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13) in order to teach us how to overcome them with his grace.

§ 177. *Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute and untouchable:* “On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone.” The principle of the universal destination of goods is an affirmation both of God's full and perennial lordship over every reality and of the requirement that the goods of creation remain ever destined to the development of the whole person and of all humanity. This principle is not opposed to the right to private property but indicates the need to regulate it. *Private property, in fact, regardless of the concrete forms of the regulations and juridical norms relative to it, is in its essence only an instrument for respecting the principle of the universal destination of goods; in the final analysis, therefore, it is not an end but a means.*

In an accelerating sequence of indications, once again a deep symmetry can be found between Islam and Christianity with regard to the duty to succor the poor. In the Other-poor, the way to God begins. Giving to him is giving to God himself, returning what is already His. Charity towards the Other is, in short, an act of primary recognition of God's presence in Creation as a whole; a presence coextensive with the universal destination of goods and the whole earth for the benefit of all human beings. In the Other and through giving to the Other, Creation itself revives, gains a new objectivity, based on the shared communion of all with God, the source of Being.

§ 182. *The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force. "This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods. Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future."*

§ 183. *Human misery is a clear sign of man's natural condition of frailty and of his need for salvation. Christ the Saviour showed compassion in this regard, identifying himself with the "least" among men (cf. Mt 25:40,45). "It is by what they have done for the poor that Jesus Christ will recognize his chosen ones. When 'the poor have the good news preached to them' (Mt 11:5), it is a sign of Christ's presence."*

Jesus says: "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (Mt 26:11; cf. Mk 14:7; Jn 12:8). He makes this statement not to contrast the attention due to him with service of the poor. Christian realism, while appreciating on the one hand the praiseworthy efforts being made to defeat poverty, is cautious on the other hand regarding ideological positions and Messianistic beliefs that sustain the illusion that it is possible to eliminate the problem of poverty completely from this world. This will happen only upon Christ's return, when he will be with us once more, for ever. In the meantime, *the poor remain entrusted to us and it is this responsibility upon which we shall be judged at the end of time* (cf. Mt 25:31-46): "Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren."

§ 184. *The Church's love for the poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor. This love concerns material poverty and also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty. The Church, "...since her origin and in spite of the failing of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere." Prompted by the Gospel injunction, "You have received without paying, give without pay," (Mt 10:8) the Church teaches that one should assist one's fellow man in his various needs and fills the human community with countless works of corporal and spiritual mercy. "Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God," even if the practice of charity is not limited to alms-giving but implies addressing the social and political dimensions of the problem of poverty. In her teaching the Church constantly returns to this relationship between charity and justice: "When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice." The Council Fathers strongly recommended that this duty be fulfilled correctly, remembering that, "What is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity." Love for the poor is certainly "incompatible with immoderate love of riches or their selfish use." (cf. Jas 5:1-6)*

Giving to the Other in need, that is, the act of charity, is therefore a duty. And it is so because such a

giving is equivalent to returning what already belongs to him, in the name of the principle of the universal destination of goods. Charity comprises an act of justice. However, “charity” is not just “doing charity,” that is, giving alms. Charity is more than retributive justice. It is not the mere execution of a predetermined rule. Instead, it is based on the relationship of recognition of the Self in the Other, and through the Other, in God. For this very reason—just like in the Qur'an: Sura II, 263—even more important than almsgiving is the social construction and stabilization of the recognized relationship (cfr. section 184 just cited). From the recognition and the sharing of earthly goods comes the re-establishment of their meaning, the creation of an ever renewed sense of them, a semiotic openness toward human subjectivity and God, all mediated by the relationship with the world and with the Other.

The regenerative tension inherent in charity and the complementary—even if opposite—tendency to fold inward on philanthropy for the Same-as-the-Self, for community members, are both clearly featured in the distinction made between solidarity and charity by the social doctrine.

§ 193.3 *Solidarity is also an authentic moral virtue, not a “feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” Solidarity rises to the rank of fundamental social virtue since it places itself in the sphere of justice. It is a virtue directed par excellence to the common good, and is found in “a commitment to the good of one's neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage.” (cf. Mt 10:40-42, 20:25; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22:25-27)*

§ 194. *The message of the Church's social doctrine regarding solidarity clearly shows that there exists an intimate bond between solidarity and the common good, between solidarity and the universal destination of goods, between solidarity and equality among men and peoples, between solidarity and peace in the world. The term “solidarity,” widely used by the Magisterium, expresses in summary fashion the need to recognize in the composite ties that unite men and social groups among themselves, the space given to human freedom for common growth in which all share and in which they participate. The commitment to this goal is translated into the positive contribution of seeing that nothing is lacking in the common cause and also of seeking points of possible agreement where attitudes of separation and fragmentation prevail. It translates into the willingness to give oneself for the good of one's neighbor, beyond any individual or particular interest.*

§ 204. *Among the virtues in their entirety, and in particular between virtues, social values and love, there exists a deep bond that must be ever more fully recognized. Love, often restricted to relationships of physical closeness or limited to merely subjective aspects of action on behalf of others, must be reconsidered in its authentic value as the highest and universal criterion of the whole of social ethics. Among all paths, even those sought and taken in order to respond to the ever new forms of current social questions, the “more excellent way” (cf. 1 Cor 12:31) is that marked out by love.*

So, if solidarity integrates acts of justice, thereby reconsidering the principle of the universal destination of goods within the social relations of each community, then charity transcends both. It is the wellspring of the possibility, which is also a duty, to cross every communitarian enclosure, until the seemingly absurd frontier of love for our enemies, love for radical Otherness. From the commandment to love our enemies stems the attitude of charity not only to implement justice but to renew its contents, reconstructing again and again the vocabulary of human relations, the understanding of subjectivity, and of God.

§ 206. *Love presupposes and transcends justice*, which “must find its fulfillment in charity.” If justice is “in itself suitable for ‘arbitration’ between people concerning the reciprocal distribution of objective goods in an equitable manner, love and only love (including that kindly love that we call ‘mercy’) is capable of restoring man to himself.” *Human relationships cannot be governed solely by the measure of justice*: “The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that justice alone is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself ... It has been precisely historical experience that, among other things, has led to the formulation of the saying: *summum ius, summa iniuria*.” In fact, “...in every sphere of interpersonal relationships justice must, so to speak, be ‘corrected’ to a considerable extent by that love which, as St. Paul proclaims, ‘is patient and kind’ or, in other words, possesses the characteristics of that *merciful love* which is so much of the essence of the Gospel and Christianity.”

This discourse culminates in the juxtaposition of the two aspects of charity, both intra-communitarian and extra-communitarian, and points to the transcendence of such a dualism towards a renewed and re-signified vision of the relations between human beings on a global scale.

§ 208. *Social and political charity is not exhausted in relationships between individuals but spreads into the network formed by these relationships, which is precisely the social and political community; it intervenes in this context seeking the greatest good for the community in its entirety*. In so many aspects the neighbor to be loved is found “in society,” such that to love him concretely, assist him in his needs or in his indigence may mean something different than it means on the mere level of relationships between individuals. *To love him on the social level means, depending on the situations, to make use of social mediations to improve his life or to remove social factors that cause his indigence*. It is undoubtedly an act of love, the work of mercy by which one responds *here and now* to a real and impelling need of one's neighbor, but it is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to *organize and structure society* so that one's neighbor will not find himself in poverty, above all when this becomes a situation within which an immense number of people and entire populations must struggle, and when it takes on the proportions of a true *worldwide social issue*.

Little if anything remains to be added to the words of the ecclesial magisterium to corroborate the idea of the primacy of an inclusive understanding of charity over its communitarian and/or exclusive version. Again, however, I must ask the question: what has the Catholic Church done, and with it all of Christianity, to actualize charity throughout history? Of the two faces of charity, which has it respected? Again, however, an unequivocal judgment would make little sense. Throughout history, Christianity has engendered both kinds of charitable deeds, floundering in countless contradictions, advancements and setbacks. Charity, however, remains. It waits. It is a duty, an ought-to-be, not a success already achieved. To follow one of its possible paths instead of the other is a cognitive act, a progression in the knowledge of another human being and, simultaneously, of God; it is an advancement in the understanding of the very meaning of the dogmas of faith, even if never definitively ascertained, given the mysterious nature of revelation.

An analogous problem arises with the Jewish religion. In the tradition of Judaism, indeed, the issue of the dual face of charity is further emphasized as a result of the troubled history of Jewish communities. The constant confrontation with other religious communities, the inexorable condition of living ‘among others’ as a recurring trope for Jews, the need for differentiation from other groups often placed in a dominant position—all have left deep marks on the experience and practice of charity in Judaism. In some respects, it could be said that the original potentialities of inclusive charity, recognizable even in the oldest of the three monotheistic religions studied here, were severely challenged by the vicissitudes of the Jewish people. Furthermore, this is reflected even within some of

its sacred texts, first and foremost the Talmud.

4. Charity in the Jewish Tradition

In order to analyze the treatment of charity in the Jewish world, we turn first to its ascription to the fundamental duties (*mitzvot*) of the believer. Charity–*zedakà*–is a *mitzvah*. An authoritative discussion of the duties of charity in the Jewish universe may be found in the Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. In addition to a long list of the ways in which to give alms (see below), there is a powerful cosmological conceptualization of *zedakà*. With reference to the Talmud (*Talmud, Bava Batra 10a*), where the *zedakà* is defined as a force endowed with immense power, Maimonides states that it is a fundamental duty for every Jew and, moreover, that it is a symbolic representation of Abraham himself and the entire Jewish tradition. The charitable gesture embodies and summarizes all the fundamental duties of the faithful, and precisely for this reason leads to a condition of communion or proximity to the presence of God (*Talmud, Bava Batra, 9a, 10a*).

Bava Batra 9a: «R. Assi further said: Charity is equivalent to all the other religious precepts combined; as it says, 'Also we made ordinances': it is not written, 'an ordinance', but 'ordinances.'»

Bava Batra 10a: «It has been taught: R. Judah says: Great is charity, in that it brings the redemption nearer, as it says, Thus saith the Lord, Keep ye judgment and do righteousness [*zedakah*], for my salvation is near to come and my righteousness to be revealed. He also used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world. The rock is hard, but the iron cleaves it. The iron is hard, but the fire softens it. The fire is hard, but the water quenches it. The water is strong, but the clouds bear it. The clouds are strong, but the wind scatters them. The wind is strong, but the body bears it. The body is strong, but fright crushes it. Fright is strong, but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it off. Death is stronger than all, and charity saves from death, as it is written, Righteousness [*zedakah*] delivereth from death.»

Bava Batra 10a: «It has been taught: R. Eliezer son of R. Jose said: All the charity and deeds of kindness which Israel perform in this world [help to promote] peace and good understanding between them and their Father in heaven, as it says, *Thus saith the Lord, Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament, neither bemoan them, for I have taken away my peace from this people ... even lovingkindness and tender mercies*, [where] 'lovingkindness' refers to acts of kindness, and 'tender mercies' to charity.»

Bava Batra 10a: «R. Dosthai son of R. Jannai preached [as follows]: Observe that the ways of God are not like the ways of flesh and blood. How does flesh and blood act? If a man brings a present to a king, it may be accepted or it may not be accepted; and even if it is accepted, it is still doubtful whether he will be admitted to the presence of the king or not. Not so God. If a man gives but a farthing to a beggar, he is deemed worthy to receive the Divine Presence, as It is written, I shall behold thy face in righteousness [*zedakah*], I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness. R. Eleazar used to give a coin to a poor man and straightway say a prayer, because, he said, it is written, I in righteousness shall behold thy face. What is the meaning of the words, I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness? R. Nahman b. Isaac said: This refers to the students of the Torah who banish sleep from their eyes in this world, and whom the Holy One, blessed be He, feasts with the resplendence of the Divine presence in the future world.»

In Judaism, the *zedakà* encapsulates a collective and even cosmic redeeming power. He who performs acts of charity does a good deed on behalf of the whole community, an action of salvation that endures over time as the footprint of contribution supplied by the charitable believer in the making

of world. Through the act of *zedakà*, in short, the human being becomes eternal because he participates in the same deeds as God, and so redeems himself. In this sense, charity saves him from death (Talmud, Bava Batra 10a).

Bava Batra 10a: «R. Hiyya b. Abin said: R. Johanan pointed out that it is written, Riches profit not in the day of wrath, but righteousness [*zedakah*] delivereth from death, and it is also written, Treasures of wickedness profit nothing, but righteousness [*zedakah*] delivereth from death. Why this double mention of righteousness? – One that delivers him from an unnatural death and one that delivers him from the punishment of Gehinnom. Which is the one that delivers him from the punishment of Gehinnom? The one in connection with which the word 'wrath' is used, as it is written, A day of wrath is that day. What kind of charity is that which delivers a man from an unnatural death?»

Also in Judaism, the dutiful character of charity, its definition as an act of justice, derives from the statement that everything belongs to God. The psalm of David, 24: 1 reads:

«The earth and all its fullness belong to the Lord: the whole world and all that dwells in it.»

The act of charity is therefore an act of restitution. So, too, indicates the Mishnah, Evot 3: 7:

«Rabbi Elazar of Bartuta says: Give Him what is His, for you and yours are His. And so says David, "For all things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee" (I Chronicles 29:14)».

The concept of restitution to God through charity given to the Other indicates that the way to the Lord passes through one's relations with the world. That direction, coextensive with the manifestation of charity, generates the world; it is a creative path. In following it, the things of the world are also transfigured, and on their path towards God, they rise up to new levels of objectivity. In the mirror of such approximation to God, the human being discovers and saves himself.

The process of regeneration and re-signification of the world through charity provides a cosmogenic reason for the existence of poverty. The existence of the poor is the source of charity. Charity, in turn, is a means to continue, throughout history, God's work. As captured in the words of Christ (Mt 26,11; cfr. Mk 14.7; Jn 12.8), Judaism also defines the human condition as destined to be perpetually accompanied by the presence of the poor and poverty. Deuteronomy 15: 7-11 states:

«15:7 If one of your brothers, who dwells within the gates of your city, in the land which the Lord your God will give to you, falls into poverty, you shall not harden your heart, nor tighten your hand.

15:8 Instead, you shall open your hand to the poor, and you shall lend to him whatever you perceive him to need.

15:9 Take care, lest perhaps an impious thought might creep within you, and you might say in your heart: 'The seventh year of remission approaches.' And so you might turn your eyes away from your poor brother, unwilling to lend to him what he has asked. If so, then he may cry out against you to the Lord, and it will be a sin for you.

15:10 Instead, you shall give to him. Neither shall you do anything craftily while assisting him in his needs, so that the Lord your God may bless you, at all times and in all things to which you will put your hand.

15:11 The poor will not be absent from the land of your habitation. For this reason, I instruct you to open your hand to your indigent and poor brother, who lives among you in the land.»

This passage from Deuteronomy raises the key issue of the identity of the Other, that is, the subjects

to whom it is dutiful to give the *zedakà*. Reading this passage in tandem with the verses just prior, what comes to the fore is precisely the recurring and ambivalent projection of charity:

Deuteronomy:

«15:1 In the seventh year, you shall perform a remission,

15:2: which shall be celebrated according to this order. Anyone to whom anything is owed, by his friend or neighbor or brother, will not be able to request its return, because it is the year of remission of the Lord.

15:3 From the sojourner and the new arrival, you may require its return. From your fellow countryman and neighbor, you will not have the power to request its return.

15:4 And there shall not be anyone indigent or begging among you, so that the Lord your God may bless you in the land which he will deliver to you as a possession.

15:5 But only if you heed the voice of the Lord your God, and keep to all that he has ordered, that which I am entrusting to you this day, will he bless you, just as he has promised.

15:6 You shall lend money to many nations, and you yourselves shall borrow in return from no one. You shall rule over very many nations, and no one shall rule over you.

15:7 If one of your brothers, who dwells within the gates of your city, in the land which the Lord your God will give to you, falls into poverty, you shall not harden your heart, nor tighten your hand.»

The passage is actually ambivalent. On the one hand, it seems to restrict the obligation of remission only to Jews; on the other hand, it points the way to a possible opening towards other nations. To understand the overall meaning of this ambivalence, its developments and its roots in the inclusive and cosmic aspects of the charity, one should refer to the figure of the ‘stranger’ in the Hebrew Bible.

In the Hebrew language, being strangers or not-Jews is declined in three forms. They correspond, respectively, to the words: *tsar*, *nokri*, and *ghev* or *toshav*. The first term, ‘*tsar*,’ corresponds to the ‘enemy’ (Isaiah 1: 7).

1:7: «Your land is desolate. Your cities have been set ablaze. Foreigners devour your countryside in your sight, and it will become desolate, as if devastated by enemies.»

However, compared to a purely negative connotation equivalent to enmity, as Israeli history progresses, the hostile implications of the word seem to gradually dilute (Isaiah 42: 6-7 and 49: 6).

42:6 «I, the Lord, have called you in justice, and I have taken your hand and preserved you. And I have presented you as a covenant of the people, as a light to the Gentiles»,

42:7 «so that you may open the eyes of the blind, and lead out the prisoner from confinement and those sitting in darkness from the house of incarceration.»

49:6 «and so he has said: “It is a small thing that you should be my servant so as to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and so as to convert the dregs of Israel. Behold, I have offered you as a light for the Gentiles, so that you may be my salvation, even to the furthest regions of the earth.”

The second expression, ‘*nokri*’, refers to travelers, those who traverse the land of Others or stop there to carry out their business. With respect to *nokri* the attitude, although somewhat different, is open to charity. Thus, for example, in Deuteronomy, 14:21:

«But whatever has died of itself, you shall not eat from it. Give it to the sojourner, who is within your gates, so that he may eat, or sell it to him. For you are the holy people of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a young goat in the milk of his mother.»

As we can see, charity and hospitality tend to overlap, the latter becoming a projection of the former. This fact becomes even more evident when we consider the word ‘ger,’ or ‘toshav’. Around this last term, the convergence of hospitality and charity is clearly defined, and especially the elucidation of charity as an inclusive and cosmic process of approximation to God, a loving and dynamic partaking of Being. It is sufficient in this regard to recall two well-known, extraordinarily salient passages of the Torah.

Exodus, 22:20: «You shall not harass the newcomer, nor shall you afflict him. For you yourselves were once newcomers in the land of Egypt.»

Deuteronomy, 10:18: «He accomplishes judgment for the orphan and the widow. He loves the sojourner, and he gives him food as well as clothing.»

10:19 «Therefore, you also should love sojourners, for you also were new arrivals in the land of Egypt.»

The foreign Other is portrayed as identical to the Jew. The relationship of recognition is here grafted onto the same memory of the Jewish people. The duty of charity lies in the knowledge of the Other, a knowledge that cannot be denied, because the condition of foreignness, of Otherness, is part and parcel of the identity and memory of each Jew.

Even if the experience of being Other lives in the remembered past of people, it is not only retrospective. On the contrary, this experience is projected towards the future, towards each new Otherness, to be singled out as a sign of the presence of God. As the Lord accomplishes justice for the orphan and the widow, the very definition of “the needy,” so too must the person of faith love the stranger and rescue him when he is in need. By loving the stranger, by being charitable with the Other, the faithful Jew acts like God and so approaches Him, because he is giving something to Himself. Beyond borders, beyond ethnic, religious or cultural fences, charity once again shows itself to be a means of generating worlds, a cognitive key of an objectivity that exceeds and ought to exceed relationships of solidarity that are merely inter-personal, affective, or philanthropic.

As in Islam and Christianity, along this backward journey to the historical source of the Abrahamic monotheisms, in Judaism, too, it is possible to find an almost exalted obligation to avoid using charity as a tool of extortion, as a source of undue burden. Indeed, giving transcends the Other, addressing through him God himself as its recipient. This tension regarding the transcendence of the inter-subjective relationship and its possible distortions is so urgent that in Maimonides it is even possible to find a meticulously graduated listing of the ways of giving charity. It seems entirely centered on the necessity and preferred absence of any direct relationship between those who give and those who receive. However, this is perfectly in line with the idea that charity, in itself, gives meaning to the world objectively and re-generates it. As already mentioned, in the *Mishneh Torah*, the section titled *Hilkhot intilotata Matanot Aniyim* (laws about offers to the poor), chapter 10: 7-14, we find the following very detailed categorization/graded list of charity acts.

1. Giving an interest-free loan to a person in need; forming a partnership with a person in need; giving a grant to a person in need; finding a job for a person in need; so long as that loan, grant, partnership, or job results in the person no longer living by relying upon others.
2. Giving *tzedakah* anonymously to an unknown recipient via a person (or public fund) which is

trustworthy, wise, and can perform acts of *tzedakah* with your money in a most impeccable fashion.

3. Giving *tzedakah* anonymously to a known recipient.
4. Giving *tzedakah* publicly to an unknown recipient.
5. Giving *tzedakah* before being asked.
6. Giving adequately after being asked.
7. Giving willingly, but inadequately.
8. Giving "in sadness" (giving out of pity): It is thought that Maimonides was referring to giving because of the sad feelings one might have in seeing people in need (as opposed to giving because it is a religious obligation). Other translations say, "Giving unwillingly."

I bring my excursion through the historical texts and traditions of Islamic, Christian and Jewish monotheism to an end here. I do so, however, with an ellipsis, intended as a tacit reiteration of the observations made above about a possible future for charity, namely, a focus on the inclusive potentialities it expresses and ultimately preserves in its very foundation. This silence and my intentional omission of the question "what will become of Jewish charity?" nevertheless serve to make room for one of the key issues of this essay. I wish to evaluate the dialectic relationship between charity and human rights, between acts of charity and secular universalism. This dialectic is as steadily asserted and made the subject of analysis as it is articulated on nearly unexamined assumptions. The first of these consists in the idea that religion, and therefore religious charity, can only produce thoughtless instruments of division and exclusion. This idea, or rather conviction, is often wielded using as evidence the alleged univocity, precisely in this sense, provided by historical experience.

5. The Impossible Cultural Neutrality of the State and the Religious Traditions' Missed Opportunity to Reciprocally Learn

Admittedly, the question posed at the end of the previous paragraph would seem to receive a sharp refutation given the wars waged in the name of religion and fought in both past and present. Precisely for this reason, the generally accepted view among Westerners (both scholars and non) is that secularization has represented a moment of elevation in the civilizing process. It has unchained human beings from the yoke of religion and its tragic divisive implications. Those who now struggle in the name of religion, therefore, would belong to a world that is still retrograde, under-developed, and steeped in morally narrow-minded superstitions and visions. On the other hand, it is also to be observed that wars have been and are also currently being fought by secular states for non-ideological purposes. Alongside religious attitudes, something else seems to exist inside the "ethological structure of humanity" that spurs conflicts.

In these remarks there is simultaneously much truth as well as much error. This observation, deliberately oxymoronic, is prompted by two considerations. First, historical research has done very little investigation, so far, into the flow of contaminations and mutual learning that the three monotheistic religions have produced over the course of their history. It is a vast field of inquiry, although much less striking than the history of religious wars, persecutions, conquests and slaughters perpetrated in the name of one or another faith. Walking along these silent tracks drawn by the

history of religions and interreligious/intercultural relationships could perhaps show how the inclusive side of charity has produced at different times far more concrete achievements than the great frescoes of historiography have demonstrated. This is a history in many cases composed of tiny stories, diffusively and noiselessly disseminated from a humanity out of the limelight, through the ant-like daily work of actors who have remained, for the most part, anonymous. The contributions from other scholars, it seems to me, must regain some awareness of this silent side of history; it is undoubtedly an element of great importance.

The second observation has to do with the self-fulfilling tendency of cultural conceptualizations and stereotyping. The idea that religion is coextensive with the struggle for identity and the exclusion of the Other has by now become commonplace. Religion evokes (also) conflict, the struggle for truth against error, and so on. However, the more such a portrait of the historical phenomenology of religion spreads, the more likely it is, and perhaps the more predictable, that the inclusive side of charity ends up appearing less active. The identification of religion and charity with the exclusion of the Other—identification unquestionably founded on abundant historical events—functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy because people believe it to be absolutely reliable as a premise. That history corroborates that identification is not, however, a conclusive argument in favor of its absolute plausibility and correctness. This is because history is not religion itself. That something (in this case religion) has been lived and used in a particular way, even one so wicked and perverse, does not mean that all the potential inherent in it has been exhausted forever. When we argue in this way, probably there is probably not an object or idea in the world not likely to be vetoed, prohibited, or condemned. Somehow, in so thinking, we could end up taking the worst of both charity and religion, integrating it, then, within secular experience. Indeed, this is a bizarre consequence that occurs, not surprisingly, throughout and within processes of secularization. On the other hand, the dramatic truth of this consideration can be demonstrated by examining the principle of religious/cultural neutrality of the State, taken as a co-essential feature of the pluralist political model.

The arbiter in the allocation of resources in support of pluralism should be the State. It also has the task of ascertaining a level playing field to access all opportunities to participate in the public sphere. Still, in this framework, the State reserves the power to assess what forms and expressions of difference are to be considered radically unconstitutional, contrary to human rights or illegal. All these evaluations should be conducted while maintaining a position of neutrality. One issue remains, however: it is simply impossible to judge without qualifying. To qualify something, some conceptual, axiological or cultural platform must be used. Otherwise, making a judgment would be impossible. So what, then, is the conceptual platform used for this purpose by secular states in different parts of the world?

The typical answer of modern Western thought is rationalism. However, imagining a “Reason” devoid of cultural connotations is simply nonsensical. On the other hand, it is equally implausible—and, actually, also rather hypocritical—to imagine a stock of culturally imbued tools that is not “contaminated” with the anthropological and connotative aspects of different religious traditions. Thus, for example, the assertion that the family model prevalent in the West has nothing to do with Christian culture is simply not true. And this is quite apart from the tensions currently extant between the Magisterium of the Catholic Church or other Christian churches and the discipline of family law (as regards divorce, abortion, gay marriage, etc.) in force in many Western states.

Religion and confessional institutions are not the same thing. The first has anthropological aspects ingrained in customs and endowed with long-term resilience. Conversely, the confessional entity (or denomination, but I don't much like this term) is more aligned with dogmatic and institutional structures, and it is only one aspect of religious culture. There are many people who claim to be totally secularized but follow ethical principles unquestionably (if unwittingly) derived from Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu traditions, and so on. After all, political-institutional secularization and cultural secularization are different beasts. If modern democracies have largely run and successfully carried out the processes of the secularization of political institutions (despite and beyond Schmitt's political theology – I argue), the same cannot be said with regard to the cultural aspects of quotidian legal experience or *legal theology*⁵. The harsh conflicts that accompany the problems of multicultural coexistence offer proof.

In different social contexts, the axiological-cultural paradigms used by State authorities to control pluralist dynamics are undeniably connected to the traces left behind by historically dominant religious traditions (in many cases, they also involve the institutional and legal vestiges of colonial rule). That a state self-proclaims itself as secular is not enough to erase that cultural continuity. Indeed, silencing these religious influences, disregarding their resilience, makes it so that the public loses the ability to articulate and evaluate traditional ethical habits in a critical way. Precisely because such resilient features remain underground, they function as habits rather than as explicit axiological assumptions and, from this position, can conspire to rigidify, especially when people have to face the materialization of cultural Otherness into social spaces. Moreover, cultural habits can affect political choices, ethical guidelines and relationships with Otherness unthinkingly, thereby transforming culture into “nature,” obviousness, in short, into an indisputable “normality.”

Unfortunately, when the national secularized states use the human rights standard to determine whether an aspect of pluralism is worthy of support, they tend to saturate these statements of rights (freedom, equality, dignity, autonomy) with categories belonging to their own cultural traditions. As noted above, the final result of the interpretive process is thus inevitably discriminatory, because identity is passed off as universality.

At the same time, State/Church debates, so characteristic of the secular political experience of the modern West, tend to move from institutional conflicts towards ideological confrontations. So, in an attempt to ethically differentiate themselves from the secularized state and maintain their own autonomy and alterity, religious institutions emphasize their spiritual and moral diversity from the secular public sphere. The struggle for power and social control then feeds the intensification of axiological conflicts for antagonistic-identitarian purposes. All this, as a ripple effect, generates dogmatic rigidity and fuels a trend to exclude the Other, that, in turn, also taints relations with other religious traditions.

This situation is further complicated because of the essentially mono-cultural character of the legal language used in various national legal systems. When I refer to a mono-cultural perspective, however, I intend more than just the “hot issues,” widely recognized as the object of confrontation and cultural clash: family issues, abortion, religious symbols, gender issues, feasts, clothing restrictions, gay marriage, etc. The cultural imprint is most present, perhaps, and unquestionably

⁵ See Ricca (2008), Comaroff (2009).

powerful, exactly where the common discourse does not see it: from legal contracts to rules of succession, from evaluative standards concerning legal behavior (good faith, equity, diligence, and so on) to associative structures, from legal capacity to forms of crime, and beyond. There is no aspect of public life and the laws that regulate it that is not "contaminated" by cultural factors; there are also innumerable profiles associated with cultural and ethical landscapes drawn from religious traditions that are incomprehensible if not read within their appropriate contexts. Just to give an example: good faith (*bona fides*) for Chinese people and its mode of manifestation are quite different from that intended by Western people. However, it would be impossible to understand and to strive to translate (via intercultural exchanges) these differences without taking into account the respective and retrospective connections with Confucianism and Christianity. Moreover, while people may not be at all aware of these cultural/religious roots, nevertheless in their quotidian conduct they embody them steadfastly. When those same people find themselves faced with different systems of meaning, especially if these are encapsulated in a public language that represents itself as universal, secular, and neutral—as happens in multicultural and multi-religious societies—conflicts inevitably arise. Many people, at that point, will feel themselves discriminated against, because from their position as members of cultural or religious minority groups, they are very quick to recognize in the public language the unmistakable features of the majority culture and religious tradition. In the eyes of an American or Frenchman, the normative language of their country, for example in contractual or inheritance matters, can even appear as culturally neutral, rational and "normal." To a Confucian Chinese or an Arab Muslim—even when these subjects are fully secularized—that same public language is suffused with Christian ethics. The same could be said of the political and regulatory systems of China or Japan, despite all the processes of so-called "modernization" and the Westernization of their political and legal systems undergone therein. Indeed, often these "advancements" are implemented by importing legal schemes of Western origin and as such are promptly subjected, especially in their practical application, to a significant re-tooling of their sense schemes in order to fit them to local ethical standards.

The perception of a cultural and anthropological-religious coloration of public and legal language in officially secular states leads people belonging to minorities to retreat into their own identities and traditions. Such an "insulation" often triggers a process emphasizing one's own belonging, and a radicalization of identity, even with fundamentalist traits. However, these are also reactions against an inability to open even the smallest crevice in the narrow wall of pseudo-neutral public language. Of course, once people begin to read their own identity in a separatist tenor, this will then be manifested in all possible directions. One such reaction, and not an insignificant one, is to stop all dialogue with others belonging to different faiths.

The lack of inter-religious dialogue determines the loss of a central feature of past ethical and legal experience. I refer specifically to the ability of these traditions to differentiate themselves, sometimes through mutual distinctions, and yet reach out to learn from each other⁶. The ability to combine the eternity of the sacred Word with historical contingencies has always been a salient and—I would say—idiomatic feature of ethical and legal-religious systems, including the three monotheisms

⁶ See Glenn (2010).

considered here.⁷ The ability to learn, no doubt, had as its operative interface the inclusive side of charity, captured in its cognitive function already highlighted above.

What has been observed suggests that the rhetoric of secularization and the divisiveness of religions—as well as charitable institutions—are phenomena that go together, birds of a feather, so to speak. Contradictions and paradoxes endemically present in the relationship between universalism and pluralism are to be understood as mere consequences of this co-dependency. In other words, this means that there is an urgent need to recognize the presence of religion—intended as an anthropological and cultural factor—within public secular political discourse⁸. Until this task is not at least partially accomplished, it will be impossible to escape the grip of an antagonist pluralism exclusively devoted to regulating the apportionment of common resources rather than the creation of a common language for the peaceful coexistence of difference⁹.

It seems necessary to emancipate monotheistic religions and charity from strictly antagonistic and conflicting labels (this discourse, I repeat, can also be extended with appropriate differentiation to many other faiths). We can do this by relying upon the potential expressed by each religious tradition through their own statements regarding the principle of charity. At the same time, it seems appropriate to assume a more critical disposition and historical awareness with regard to the allegedly inclusive attitude attributed *a priori* to “rational” secular universalism. The importance of this effort is immediately evident when we consider an apparently paradoxical circumstance regarding intercultural relationships within the state.

Many countries of the Protestant tradition, especially those belonging to the Northern-European area, are today experiencing significant political and psycho-social problems integrating cultural and religious differences. This circumstance is even more striking when one considers that the alignment of policies and institutional rhetoric to the criteria of secularism in those countries is much more stringent and consistent when compared to that of the traditionally Catholic countries of Europe (Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal). Moreover, the multiculturalist model can be said to be a hallmark of northwestern Europe, alongside the US, Canada and Australia. On the one hand, we have a neutral public language, punctuated by a few universal values expressed in a rationalist-secular way, on the other hand, we have a balanced equidistance from cultural and religious differences, endowed with the autonomy of maximum self-organization: this, in a nutshell, is the recipe for multiculturalism. The same recipe that, in these times, seems to incite cultural radicalism, identity-based social conflicts and religious fundamentalism.

Conversely, in the countries of the European Mediterranean strongly marked by the Catholic presence in the public sphere (with the exception of France, despite its Catholic history, because of its militant secularism of Jacobin provenance), the frequency of conflict is lower, the degree of psycho-social inclusiveness higher, the shadow of fundamentalism less present on the landscape of social relationships. Why? Personally, I do not want to venture further than to propose some provisional answers. There is one circumstance, however, that deserves to be underlined.

In Mediterranean countries, the relationship between ethics and religion is not a taboo. People are aware of this link and have access to the presence and cultural resilience of ethical and

⁷ Ricca (2013), and thereon for further bibliography.

⁸ See Lilla (2007).

⁹ Sullivan (2005).

anthropological religious traditions in symbolic, discursive and, therefore, arguable terms. Secularization in these countries—which is readily evident, even within the quotidian choices of individual Catholic citizens—has not shut the door on religious traditions and their ethical foundations. This condition is probably due to the intimately (and not only speculative, as in Protestantism) dualist connotation of Catholic Christianity. God's justice and human justice are kept separate, also from a psychological point of view. And what serves to demarcate the divide are precisely the confession and the Eucharist. The possibility of God's forgiveness through repentance and communion keep the plan for salvation separate from that of legality and/or moral customs; so too they divide the view of this life from that of the afterlife. In many ways, this vision can lead to a devaluation of daily moral life, to a weakened perception—so to speak—of institutional secular legality, which is not perceived as the ultimate horizon of individual destiny and valuation. This divide, originating in Catholic theology, has been transfigured—in the contemporary context, marked by the spread of a secularized mentality—into a sharp distinction between moral and institutional/citizenship duties.

The tendency to separate moral duties and legal ones is—admittedly—one of the most embarrassing and damaging outcomes of this ethical/theological approach. The pervading presence of corruption and economic/institutional inefficiency in the countries of the European Mediterranean is unfortunately attributable, at least in part, also to this idiomatic and historically rooted popular mentality.¹⁰ And yet, it holds at least one advantage: it produces no slippage of the duty to abide by the expectations of God within common life and its standard of public ethics and/or legality. This means, if placed into a dimension of multicultural and multi-religious coexistence, the Other is not perceived as radically alien solely because his quotidian behaviors do not correspond to a model of public subjectivity. On the other hand, if the ultimate “home” for all human beings is elsewhere, namely in transcendence (Heaven), any differences in this earthly dimension appears to be less decisive and, therefore, negotiable. This means a greater inclination to tolerance rather than a propensity for intransigence. This is quite the opposite of what occurs in the countries of Protestant traditions, despite all the proclamations regarding the pluralist and multicultural possibilities of their “liberal” secularism.

Before the advent of political secularization and, therefore, the camouflaging dissimulation of religious matrices inside public language, Protestant countries situated their moral theology—that is, the principles concerning the inter-subjective conduct of people of faith—within the discourse of public ethics, and then in the standards for political/institutional normativity¹¹. If and when, however, the horizon of salvation becomes that of common life, the tendency towards homologation, ethical homogenization, and the development of rigid standards of subjectivity is almost inevitable¹².

¹⁰ Sousa (2016).

¹¹ ... and this notwithstanding, until a few years ago many such countries were states with an established church or an official state church, and yet strongly secularized from a political and psycho-social point of view (see Sullivan, Yelle and Taussig-Rubbo 2011; Jensen 2011). Denmark, for example, still has a state church, although only less than 2% of church members attend weekly services. The same can be said of the Church of Sweden, until 2000 the state church.

¹² In his ‘Critic of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,’ Karl Marx icastically observed (about Protestant psychosocial inheritance) that Luther “removed the servitude of devotion by replacing it with the servitude of conviction. He destroyed faith in authority by restoring the authority of faith. He turned priests into laymen by turning laymen into priests. He liberated

Religious history, of course, cannot be considered to be the determining factor—in a Weberian fashion—of the cultural propensities of people or communities at their epochal crossroads. Neither, however, is it an aspect that can be neglected. The fact remains that the earnest coherence of secular standards and public morals that combine in those countries makes it virtually impossible to formulate a critical assessment of the resilience of religiously derived models within common ethical and institutional discourse. As previously discussed, the deeper the traces of that resilience are nestled within cultural habits rather than displayed through symbolic structures accessible to discourse, the more they will prompt cultural rigidity. This will ultimately result in a widespread unwillingness to renegotiate with the Other via reciprocal and symmetrical recognition through the coordinates of subjectivity, the same ones related to the grammar of quotidian life.

As it happens, in northern European countries (with Sweden and other Scandinavian countries in the lead), the high levels of state welfare induce public institutions to furnish significant assistance to foreigners and people from other cultures. At the same time, however, the public discourse seems to close the doors to genuine inclusion, based on a genuine intercultural recognition of the Other, and on the cooperative and renegotiated reinvention of subjectivity patterns. To be sure, what is at stake there are not just institutional attitudes, but also quotidian means of communication, reaching into the innermost moments of interpersonal relationships. It is the dark side of multiculturalism, I dare say, its lack of inclusive charity. Its malformed and unintended offspring are contemporary cultural and religious fundamentalism. These are, ironically, the same kinds of conflicts that secular thought has always imputed to religion and for which it has always presented itself as a remedy.

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man from exterior religiosity by making man's inner conscience religious. He emancipated the body from chains by enchaining the heart.”

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