

What is the Relationship of Religion and the Liberal Script?

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Both, religion and politics promise to save people from harm and allow them to flourish. Whether co-operation, competition, or contestation between political and religious approaches predominate in a concrete historical situation depends on changing power relations and dogmatic positions. Catholicism as the world's largest religious community, for instance, shows all variants of a relationship between religion and the liberal script, and a permanent renegotiation of its political positions.



The thesis that religion and the liberal script can get along well without each other is better supported theoretically than empirically. No real-life liberal script ever had to get along without religion.¹ Religions, on the other hand, are also compatible with authoritarian systems. This historical compatibility also gives rise to the suspicion that religion could be fundamentally opposed to the liberal script. In the European context of Catholicism, the liberal script was indeed often established against the alliance of throne and altar. Despite fundamental differences and enduring conflicts, Catholicism has since found its way into various arrangements and coalitions with liberalism. There are many variations to Alfred Stepan's twin toleration, "that is, the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions" (Stepan 2000: 37). Indeed, some argue that the papal revolution of 1075, when the pope insisted on the freedom of the Church from the

¹ The Böckenförde Dilemma, which states that the secular state, as a free standing-adventure, rests on pre-conditions which it cannot reproduce by itself, can be understood as an argument for the need of a cultural or communitarian foundation, not necessarily religious, save Christian or Catholic, of the liberal script. From this perspective, the social bond cannot be produced as we go along. See the debate of Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI (Habermas/Ratzinger: 2007).

monarchs' interference, laid the very ground for the idea of twin toleration (Rosenstock-Huessy 1987: 131-201; Winkler 2009: 52; Habermas 2019: 653).

As the question is not what *was* but what *is* the relation of religion and the liberal script, a historical sketch has to speak to the current situation of the contestation of the liberal script (Börzel/Zürn 2020). The main point of a historical consideration here is not a thick description of the past but the issue of variation of the liberal script and of Catholicism over time. That does not mean that normative foundations of both concepts or the distinction between religions and secular world views like liberalism are denied.

Concerning the normative issue, stressing the point that Catholicism and the liberal script are historically rooted concepts and thus face constant transformation does not mean that they are presented here as totally open discourses. Both share a high esteem for the individual person/soul's liberty, offer a rather dense universal program and a determined global outreach, and try to integrate transnational and national agencies within their agendas. The liberal script and the Catholic script overlap, however, only partly in substance. In the parlance of Rawls, an overlapping consensus for a liberal world order backed by Catholicism is possible. It depends on the willingness to stress this overlapping consensus on both sides and being careful with putting an emphasis on normative positions that the other side cannot accept.

Without denying the importance of the normative aspects of both sides, the focus here is more on power relations. If the liberal world order is strong enough to exist and expand on its own, it can develop the liberal script against all kinds of religious (or non-religious) contestations. If the liberal world order faces contestations so strong that its survival might be at risk, it could be wise to make compromises with some of the contestants in order to contain the others. After a close cooperation of Catholicism within the liberal world order during the turmoil of the Cold War, progressive proponents of the liberal script saw no need to continue to ally with papacy who in turn considered to roll back parts of the liberal script less in line with papal teaching. It is important to remember that transformation and clashes happened within the liberal script and Catholicism. More conservative liberals have a different idea of the liberal script than progressive ones and more progressive Catholics have a different understanding of Catholicism than more conservative ones. Catholics play a role in the definition of the

liberal script as citizens, and liberals might play a role in defining Catholicism due to their agency as members of the Catholic Church.

To put it bluntly, in terms of power, the question of the relations between the liberal script and Catholicism in the perspective of the resilience of the liberal world order is less about normative principles and more about politics and the question which camp sits in the White House and which on the Vatican hill. John Paul II had a close relationship with Ronald Reagan, Benedict XVI celebrated his birthday with George W. Bush in the White House, Francis spoke to both Houses of Parliament during the term of Barack Obama and had a problem with Donald Trump. The Catholic Joe Biden presented at the beginning of his term a picture of the pope on his White House desk and the pope protected the president from the excommunication the American bishops had threatened upon him due to his stance on abortion.

Arguing that the relation of religion and the liberal script can best be studied by concentrating on concrete relations does not mean that abstract terms have to be abandoned. Instead, my starting point for clarifying the relationship is a full acceptance of the contested term “religion”. I follow the argument of Martin Riesebrodt who defended the concept of religion against discontents by defining religion as “a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible” (Riesebrodt 2009: 75). Obviously, the liberal script is not based on the “existence of superhuman powers”. However, it does not necessarily deny them. Indeed, the liberal script is only recently associated with agnosticism or atheism. Historically, liberal scripts were deeply entangled with religious ideas like deism. The United States Declaration of Independence most famously states: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The religious idea of a creator and men as created were foundational to construct human rights as natural rights.

When Pope Benedict XVI addressed the German Bundestag, he joked that today natural law is considered Catholic doctrine (Benedict XVI 2011). In fact, natural law has also been developed by Catholic thinkers as a common basis for conversation with non-Catholics. However, the Enlightenment developed it further precisely in the struggle against Catholic doctrine. The

abandonment of natural law in human rights is a development of the last decades. Forty years ago, Jack Donnelly could rebuff Charles R. Beitz's argument to distinguish natural rights from human rights and base them on social justice by opening his argument with the statement: "The term *human rights* is generally taken to mean what Locke and his successors meant by *natural rights*" (Donnelly 1982: 391). The foundational entanglements of human and superhuman powers to create or construct a regime of rights varied significantly within the liberal script of the last couple of decades. What can be understood as a religion-based contestation of the current human rights regime that followed rather Beitz's than Donnelly's argument can also be understood as debates within the liberal scripts (George 2001).

Possible entanglements of religion and the liberal script can be better understood when we look at the purpose of Riesebrodt's religious interventionism. His basic argument is that the practice to interact with superhuman powers has an aim. It promises salvation. Salvation does not only concern the afterlife alone but comes in various forms, predominantly this-worldly concerns of preventing harm to the fragile human body. Looking from the perspective of that definition at the liberal script, or indeed at any political project, the close relationship of religion and politics comes to the fore: both, religion and politics, God and Caesar, to frame it in Roman terms, promise to save people from harm and allow them to flourish. Cooperation, competition and contestation between political and religious approaches are thus unavoidable as both have the same end but arguably often different understandings of those aims.

To clarify this point, Riesebrodt has to be supplemented with more substantial approaches to religion that pay more attention to teaching and doctrine. It makes a difference if one can approach a superhuman power for any wish and need or if that has to be done within a doctrinal realm of dos and don'ts. The idea of revelation limits the transformative power of the popes in contrast to liberal sovereign who rests only on the deliberation of their citizens. However, within a liberal script, the people are not free to do make majoritarian decisions on any issue. The *invocatio dei* in some liberal constitutions, like the German Basic Law, stress the point that there are limits to change. But which ones? Obviously, a constructivist perspective stresses that historically liberalism and Catholicism are to a certain extent empty signifiers whose fillings change overtime. Michael See-wald, the dogmatic professor at the University of Munster who now holds

the chair Joseph Ratzinger once held, stressed in a celebrated book (Seewald 2018) that no dogmatic position is safe from change overtime. Obviously, Joseph Ratzinger has a different view on that. To elaborate on the transformative relations of the liberal script and Catholicism, two examples seem to be illustrative: religious freedom (more extensively) and reproductive rights/family values (briefly).

The historically most disputed issue between Catholicism and the liberal script was religious freedom. While enforced or pressured baptism happened, this practice was never backed by Catholic doctrine but rather part of the political aim of ruling over a homogenous population which was assisted by the Church. The doctrinal problem with religious freedom got prominence when non-Catholic state building projects wanted to prevent Catholics from practicing their religion altogether, or at least in public, or when Catholic dominated states were pushed to abandon the hegemony of Catholicism by insisting on equal rights for other religions. While the Church insisted on religious freedom for Catholics elsewhere, the popes were initially not ready to grant full religious freedom to other faiths when Catholics had the power to prevent that. Obviously, such an approach is at odds with the fundamental principle of equal treatment within the liberal script. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the liberal script is ready to promote its creed elsewhere while being suspicious towards the promotion of non-liberal point of views in liberal state. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church seems to have performed a U-turn in this respect. In 1965, Paul VI promulgated the declaration of religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*. Full religious freedom is demanded for every faith, with no exceptions for non-Catholic creeds in Catholic dominated countries.

This development is usually understood as change of doctrine, by some as an appeasement to liberalism², for others as a return to the original gospel. Certainly, it paved the way for better relations of Catholicism and the liberal script. John Paul II spearheaded a human rights discourse in which religious freedom figured centre stage. This agenda strengthened the close cooperation between the Roman pontiff and the major powers, first and foremost but not only the US, upholding the liberal script against communism, which finally collapsed (Gaddis 2006: 195-197; Wanner 2020). However,

² The traditionalist fraternity Society of Saint Pius X did not accept this move and some others. The canonical status of this fraternity within the Catholic Church is unresolved.

a durable cooperation in order to combat totalitarianism, first Nazism and later communism, developed already during the pontificate of Pius XII, before both declarations. During the Cold War, liberal powers were not shy on cooperating with religious forces to defend the liberal script and the liberal world order against the communist challenge (Kirby 2002).

In addition, and maybe even more important than the improvement of the direct relations of the liberal script and Catholicism, was an indirect rearrangement. The declaration on religious freedom and *Nostra aetate*, the declaration on the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions, allowed Catholic engagement in interreligious dialogue. This option provided Catholicism with a powerful instrument to form alliances with other religious communities. Such interreligious co-operations have an impact on the liberal world order. The interreligious partners can decide if and in what form they are ready to back the liberal script or criticize it.

A recent mile stone in this respect was the declaration on Human Fraternity signed in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019 by Pope Francis and Sheik Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed El-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar.³ It was supported by a network of Christian, Muslim, mainly Sunni, and Jewish leaders and scholars who formed the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity in order to network and promote the declaration. The declaration offers interreligious support of the liberal script by calling for peace among the nations, toleration, and compassion. It denounces all kinds of religious terrorism. Programmatically it states: “Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action.” (Human Fraternity 2019). On this foundation, the declaration is keen to set standards for world society and international relations. World leaders and influencers are called “to rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere.” (Human Fraternity 2019).

Early on, the signing parties and their Higher Committee of Human Fraternity advocated at the UN to declare the 4th of February as the UN World Day of Human Fraternity. On 21 December 2020, the UN General Assembly

3 The internal Catholic critique on that declaration due to doctrinal reasons overlooks the genuine political aspect of the undertaking. The papacy is not only a religious but a hybrid actor (McLarren/Stahl 2020).

adopted the resolution 75/200 and established the 4th of February as the UN World Day of Human Fraternity. In 2021, it had been celebrated by granting UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, named after the founder of Abu Dhabi. Obviously, the Human Fraternity agenda promotes parts of the liberal script and supports the liberal world but not for free. The price is the acceptance of religious powers as part of the game.

For that reason, the promotion of religious freedom is seen by some critically as an instrument to support established religious authorities within the international sphere (Shakman Hurd 2007). For instance, the European Parliament or the German Bundestag take an increasingly ambivalent stance towards religious freedom when they stress that religious freedom advocacy is not an instrument to support religions but has to focus on individual rights including to be freed from religious interference.⁴

The reluctance of some proponents of the liberal script to support religious freedom hangs together with the struggle within the liberal script what to do with religious voices that resist a bundle of newer objectives that can be framed as reproductive rights or family values, including abortion, same sex marriage or the definition of the family. Camilla Reuterswärd has dealt with the crucial role of the Catholic Church within that struggle about “gender ideology” in SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 07. Thus, there is no need to elaborate on that in detail. However, in order to discuss the aspect of transformation and variation but also the foundational tension in the conflicts of Catholicism with the liberal script, one paragraph of her paper might be cited as it brings us back to the issue of transformation of human rights so important to the option of clash or overlapping consensus:

According to Catholicism, man is subject to natural law that ‘prescribes good and prohibits evil’ and not absolutely self-legislating [...]. For the Church, man is created by God and the purpose of human life is communion with God in time and eternity. The

⁴ The European Parliament adopted the Karski report on persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion in 2021 only with significant chances that watered down the original idea of supporting persecuted religious minorities, most of whom are worldwide Christians, stressed instead the need to free people from religious motivated restrictions, like abortion regulation. Now in Germany, under the new Scholz government, the Federal Government Commissioner for Religious Freedom Worldwide is called the Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief (Weltanschauungsfreiheit) in order to stress that the position is not in charge of supporting religion.

right use of freedom is thus to obey God and comply with his will [...]. The modern man also has the goal of self-realization by breaking free from nature and socio-political structures, but he does so by creating his own history through the various freedoms that liberal democratic states and societies offer. Such denial of God's authority is according to Catholic beliefs a perversion (Reuterswärd 2021: 7).

Concerning the Catholic problem with “gender ideology”, which it shares with many religious communities, papal doctrine relies obviously on its biblical and natural right tradition, which maintains that marriage is, starting from Adam and Eve, a union between woman and man due to the biological task of reproduction. Indeed, God's empowerment of human agency is, as the biblical book Genesis has it, based on the order to procreate and fill the earth: “And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen 1,28). When “self-realization” started with a denial of God's authority, the misery that followed multiplied “pain in childbearing” (Gen 3,16). However, God did not abandon his human creatures but became finally man through the Virgin Mary. When pregnant Mary met her also pregnant relative Elizabeth, Elisabeth's “babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth [...] exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’” (Luke 1,41-42). Together with the words of the Angel who asked Mary if she would be ready to become the Mother of God, this sentence is a central part of the Ave Mary, a prayer that Catholics pray next to the Holy Father, the most important prayer of Christianity. Thus, it is not only the commandment “You shall not kill” but narratives of a living tradition that centre around procreation. Women rights are important to Catholicism but the concept of mastery over one's own pregnant body is completely alien to the Catholic script. In contrast, older versions of the liberal script, like the traditional understanding of Art 16 of the UN Declaration of Human rights on marriage as based on consent of men and women and the protection of family understood as the offspring of marriage, aligned completely with the Catholic script. That does not mean that Catholicism cannot be turned upside down as in the case of religious freedom.⁵ However, the same could happen to the liberal script.

⁵ Most likely, a schism would occur that would be much deeper than the contestation of the Second Vatican Council on religious freedom by the Society of Pius X.

Concerning religious freedom or family values, an overlap of the liberal and the Catholic script is possible. However, fierce conflict is also an option. Pope Francis is ready to balance all kinds of developments in order to form coalitions and cooperation. However, as Camilla Reuterswärd has showed, even he is opposing the bundle of objectives that comes with “gender ideology”. If the liberal world order is increasingly based on these demands, the papacy might join the camp of the doomsayers. Currently, the Holy See understands its position still as supportive of globalization in general⁶, and of the UN as well as the European Union *in concreto*. Environmental concerns like those expressed in Francis’ *Laudato Si*, or the support of migrants (Barbato 2020) rank high on the common agenda of Catholicism and the liberal script.

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⁶ See Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti* but also Benedict XVI’s *Spe Salvi*.

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