

## POLITICS, ETHICS, AND RELIGION

## Abstract

In this essay, I argue that religion is centrally important in the future of liberal democracy in the Western sense of the word. Without the values of religion, we may have to face the emergence of authoritarian and totalitarian forms of political existence. My starting point is the experience of the so-called post-Communist countries. The essence of this experience is that liberal democracy as a political form may lack genuine content if the society, in which it exists, is devoid of the fundamental human attitudes essential for sustaining such a democracy. This experience can be complemented by the experience we have in the European Union or in the United States today, because even in these organizations we witness clear signs of the loss of common values, which endangers the proper functioning of stable democratic systems. However, some form of religion – traditional or renewed – may help to revitalize the values and their subjective basis, the proper human attitudes to encounter the danger of the decline of contemporary liberal democracies.

*Keywords:* religion, ethics, politics, democracy, conservatism.

## Introduction

While the title of my essay seems to be very general, the bulk of what I want to say is simple. The point I emphasize is that without religion there is not only no survival for the liberal democracy in the Western sense of the word, but even worse, without some form of religion fundamental human values can get completely lost. Without such values the future of Western liberal democracy seems to be dim, that is to say we may expect to go through again a long process of authoritarian and totalitarian forms of political existence.

My starting point is the experience we have in our post-Communist situation. The essence of this experience, to make a long story short, is this that liberal democracy as a political

form may lack genuine content if the society, in which it exists, is deficient in the fundamental human attitudes essential for sustaining a liberal democracy. This experience can be complemented with the experience we have in the European Union today, or in the United States of America in its third period of trial, to use Robert Bellah's expression referring to 'the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order' (Bellah, 1967, p. 18). Especially after the popular decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union and after the surprising victory of a POTUS whom appears to differ from his predecessors in important ways, we may be able to say that neither the European Union nor the United States used the power of religion in a way which may have helped to strengthen some of the fundamental attitudes

contributing to a balanced understanding of the politics of self-identity.

In the present context, I consider religion not as a historical institution of some denomination, but rather as the most important and effective way of forming, sustaining, and improving basic human attitudes. By 'basic human attitudes' I mean the realization of humane ideals indispensable for individual and communal life under our present biological and psychological conditions. Such ideals are for instance the love of our neighbors, even our enemies, the respect for ourselves and for other people, the value of doing good rather than evil, or again the value of cooperation and common work to better human life. The reality of such ideals, that is their form in psychologically based and socially sustained attitudes, cannot be abolished without endangering our individual, social, and political existence.

It is certainly not beyond question that religion is the most important and the most effective way of determining basic human attitudes. It can be argued that religion, in many of its historical forms, has led to fanaticism, nationalism, cruel wars, or even to the total destruction of whole groups of people.<sup>1</sup> While one cannot doubt that there are such forms of historical religion, still I think that it can be successfully argued that such forms are peripheral to religion in its most important historical forms. Without attempting to give new definitions of religion, so much may be said here that religions fundamentally teach and realize a good number of the humane ideals I mentioned above. Just think of the principle of compassion in Buddhism, the awareness of law in Judaism, the imperative of

charity in Christianity, or the communal piety in Islam. It belongs to religion that it creates basic human attitudes in accordance with such ideals, that is to say attitudes deeply ingrained in individuals, social groups, or even in whole societies for a long period of time. It suffices to mention that the ideal of human rights, based on the dignity of human persons, cannot be conceived of without the basic teachings and practices of Christianity as they have been present in Western societies throughout the centuries.

It must be added, nevertheless, that there are forms of religiousness which are detrimental to a balanced and enlightened political existence. It seems that such forms are due to sectarian and peripheral groupings which attempt to enforce their limited views on their wider religious and non-religious communities. Fundamentalism and even terrorism, which sometimes refer to a religious background, are to be seen as the effect of such sectarian trends in religion and they are opposed to the historically evolved forms in which they appear. They are rather like radical political ideologies parasitizing more balanced philosophies. Radical efforts to destroy communities are due to these parasitizing tendencies and they do not belong to the core features of a given religious form.

By 'conservatism' I mean an understanding of liberal democracy which respects and sustains not only basic humane ideals in an abstract sense but also their attitude-like realization in individuals, social groups, and in whole societies for a long period of time. Conservatism is an understanding and practice of politics in its various ways, which aims at strengthening such ideals and their realization in attitudes. It is by conservatism in this sense that the tradition of liberal democracy as a political system is essentially guaranteed. In other words, conserva-

<sup>1</sup> I detail the relationship between the Holocaust and religiously colored ideologies in Mezei 2013, especially Ch. 1.

tism is based on an ethical understanding of politics, in which ‘ethics’ refers not only to a theory but also to a practice, a practice maintained by institutions such that the realization of these ideals may become possible. Conservatism relies on well-formed ethical systems as traditionally proven means of sustaining such ideals and effecting their realization. And since such ethical systems, in their most developed forms, are present in religion, thus conservatism in the present sense supports religion. This is not to say that conservatism cannot be conceived without religion; but it certainly cannot be conceived without a well-developed system of ethical ideas and without some institution of procedures of realizing such ideas. Conservatism of other kinds, such as ‘neo-conservatism’ still maintain the image of having a well formed ethical system with some links to religious ideas (see Kirk, 1957; Molnar, 1960; Kristol, 1995).

#### Evil and Human Attitudes

Let me start my argument with some points we find in John Kekes’s groundbreaking book *Facing Evil*.<sup>2</sup> Evil, in Kekes’s initial definition, is ‘undeserved harm.’ The secular problem of evil, in his understanding, is an approach to the problem of evil which does not accept the religious answer as relevant. The religious answer consists in that the scheme of things in the world is fundamentally good. According to Kekes’s understanding of the secular problem of evil, the religious answer cannot be rationally maintained. We need a properly secular way to solve the problem of evil, that is to say a rational-philosophical way. By philos-

ophy, we are able to develop individual and social morality against prevalent evil, in particular character morality that is a habit on the basis of which we are able to do what is good.<sup>3</sup>

Kekes distinguishes between two kinds of reaction to evil: soft and hard. The soft reaction to evil consists in a reluctance to allow evil actions to count as evidence for their agents’ being evil. The hard reaction to evil is that agents, even if their actions are unchosen, must be held responsible and seen as ‘evil’ in an appropriate sense. Kekes defends the hard reaction to evil and argues that the source of many evil acts is bad character. A bad character has developed a bad habit which compels its subjects to act badly. Human freedom has only a limited role here, because, as we can say, pathological liars do not freely choose their lies each time. There is a pathological character behind this phenomenon which must be psychosomatically cured. Similarly, in the background of a lot of evil actions there are bad characters that must be morally cured. The means of this cure is rational argument in individual and social forms.

When I refer to human attitudes, I refer to the typical contents of what Kekes calls a character. I think that a human character is made up of attitudes, good or bad, which are interrelated in a number of ways. Evil is not only a consequence of particular human actions, but a consequence of human attitudes which aim at causing undeserved harm in various situations. It is not merely the well-formed structure of attitudes that we find at the source of human actions, but also the concrete attitude itself. For instance, businesspersons who try to gain the highest possible profit for an otherwise base product are not only generally directed by their characters as to gain unde-

<sup>2</sup> Kekes expounded the problem in a different fashion in Kekes, 2005; however, from the philosophical point of view I find Kekes, 1990 more forceful.

<sup>3</sup> By using the expression ‘habit’ Kekes offers a version of the Aristotelian notion of ἔξῆς, habitus.

served profit, but also by their concrete attitudes by means of which they decide to proceed in a certain way in a given situation. While they have only a limited responsibility for the character they have – although still a good amount of responsibility – they have a more concrete responsibility for the concrete attitude in the framework of which they decide to proceed in a certain way.

The relevance of the subject matter of human attitudes for our present topic can easily be seen. The political realm is a well-formed structure of human actions and interactions, and if such actions are based on attitudes, and only more generally on characters, then the realm of the political is also based on relevant attitudes. Ethics aims at developing, changing, improving, or influencing characters, but this cannot be realized without developing, changing, improving, or influencing attitudes. On the other hand, actions as networks of certain kinds – private or public, individual or social, basic or more sophisticated – require concrete attitudes to be carried out. If we understand marriage as a unified network of concrete actions of various types, then we also recognize that such actions cannot be carried out without required attitudes, and marriage cannot be practiced in the proper way without the right attitude necessary for this kind of basic social behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Political ethics is about, most essentially, the right attitudes we need in our political coexistence. Political education, traditions, schooling are about the development, improvement, influ-

encing or changing such attitudes. If it is the restricting of individual or social evil that is at stake in shaping the right form of politics, then the corresponding attitudes must be obviously changed. If one wishes to introduce liberal democracy into a country which does not have a well-formed tradition of practicing liberal democracy, then one has to do everything possible to create or help to develop the attitudes required by liberal democracy. If one fails to do that, then the formal existence of liberal democracy, without relevant contents, can become something like a caricature.

In what follows I would like to answer the following questions: What are the criteria of judging some human attitudes good, others bad, in the political realm? How can we influence the formation of such attitudes? Are ideologies the proper means of such formation? Does conservatism offer the right means? What is the role of religion in the formation of such attitudes?

### The Criteria of Attitudes

It would be the task of a general political theory to argue for the optimal political form of human beings.<sup>5</sup> Based on our knowledge of political realities of the past centuries, it seems beyond doubt that some form of democracy is what is reasonable to accept as the optimal political form. More particularly, liberal democracy, that is the democracy based on the rule of law, free elections and parliamentary procedures, on the recognition of human rights and fundamental freedoms, appears to be the most advantageous political system we presently have if and only if there is a formal and consen-

<sup>4</sup> For instance, marriage by definition involves – but may not entail – such practices as the sharing a common place of living, food and other physical resources, and certainly a form of sexual life with the possibility, although without the necessity, of procreation. Some of these practices may be actually missing from marriage but they cannot be missing in principle, sexuality included which can be properly realized only on the basis of the natural sexual difference.

<sup>5</sup> But see for instance the debate about authority in the essays edited by A. James McAdams, in McAdams 2007.

sual basis in such democracies. There is a good number of reasons for this view, reasons I cannot detail here; so much may be sufficient to mention that even in a democracy, as for instance Yves Simon has pointed out, some form of authority must be present, otherwise liberal democracy, or any kind of human cooperation, becomes practically impossible and dissolves in a chaos (Simon, 1980; Simon, 1993). The form of authority in a liberal democracy is prescribed by law and the results of parliamentary procedures; these however presuppose the existence of some form of authority, minimally the authority of the political as such, on the basis of which social coherence, cooperation, and the implementation of laws becomes possible.<sup>6</sup>

Authority is however not only external; external authority, such as the existence of some mechanism for the implementation of the results of the processes of political decision-making, is based on some fundamental features in human nature. These features are the attitudes I briefly discussed above, more particularly the attitude of accepting some form of authority in political coexistence. Authority is thus fundamentally internal, or attitude-based. Without the internal or atti-

tude-based authority, no form of external authority can be realized on the long run, as is shown by the perspicuous collapse of some rigidly authoritarian systems of recent history.<sup>7</sup>

The choice of the human attitude of accepting some form of authority, as opposed to an attitude of subverting any kind of authority, is already given in the fact that we coexist in political communities. Political communities, however, are to help the realization of good as opposed to evil in a number of ways, that is to say they are supposed to aim at what is traditionally termed the common good. The common good is basically an ethical conception in which the element of 'good' is not merely physical wellbeing or material satisfaction, but also moral wellbeing and moral satisfaction. Thus the very existence of a political community prescribes the general form of a moral pattern without which there is no properly functioning political coexistence (Simon, 1993).<sup>8</sup>

The criterion of human attitudes, in their general form, is then given in the very fact of political coexistence. There are certainly other conceptions of political coexistence, for instance the conception of a ruling person, class, race, or nation as opposed to the suppressed rest of a given society. On such a conception it may be argued that it is not the common good in the proper sense that is the aim of political coexistence, but rather the political power of the ruling group. History shows, however, that even in cases of political oppression it is some form of the common good – either ideologically or in reality – that serves as the cement of the politi-

<sup>6</sup> In Macarius Magnes' *Apocriticus* we find the famous passage suggesting that 'the Emperor Hadrian was a monarch, not because he existed alone, nor because he ruled over oxen and sheep (over which herdsmen or shepherds rule), but because he ruled over men who shared his race and possessed the same nature.' (IV, XX) Applying this approach to liberal democracy we may say that such a democracy may be maintained only in the community of human beings. Human beings are persons with characteristic mental and physical properties. If these properties are missing or deficient to a certain extent, democracy cannot be maintained. Democracy can be maintained only among human persons possessing the fundamental properties of human persons, that is to say if and only if they are willing to respect other persons and themselves, implement and follow laws, and obey authority in their everyday and professional lives. A democracy cannot be established and maintained among 'oxen and sheep' (Macarius, 1919, p. 143).

<sup>7</sup> For the notion of authority based on natural law, see Simon, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> The origin of the notion of the common good is Aristotelian: 'The common good is greater and more divine than the private good.' See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b; 'ἀγαπητὸν μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐνὶ μόνῳ, κάλλιον δὲ καὶ θεϊότερον ἔθνη καὶ πόλειςιν'.

cal community. The common good is based on the structure of attitudes of the participants of the community, that is on character the formation and sustaining of which is the vital interest of the community.

There is thus a distinction between attitudes that are favorable, and attitudes that are not, in a political community. And it is always the given form of the common good that serves as the criterion of good and bad attitudes, more generally of good and bad characters. The given form of common good of liberal democracy is undoubtedly the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, and the authoritative results of the processes of the political decision-making. More particularly, the criterion of human attitudes in liberal democracy is the contribution to the common good in question, that is to the material and moral wellbeing of the members of the political community and of the community itself.

### The Formation of Attitudes

Facing the prevalent moral evil in human nature, the suggestions is often made that the optimal network of attitudes of the members of a political community can be guaranteed in a number of ways, but most fundamentally by forming such attitudes from early childhood. We can distinguish between the attitudes as ideal objectives in such a political community on the one hand, and the means of such a formation on the other hand. Ideal objectives are rarely realized in their full extent, still they must be defined and demonstrated in a number of ways, such as in a basic law, tacitly or explicitly accepted moral rules, and in many other cultural forms. The means of developing the right attitudes is not only the existence of a recognizable moral pattern

in social behavior, but also the process of formation in institutional education and spontaneous self-development.

Surely, the means of self-development is very important, yet it is far from being sufficient. Institutional educational systems are the very means by which children learn the right attitudes. On the other hand, educational institutions are far from being perfect, and the ideals they declare are often insufficiently realized. Moreover, in a liberal democracy there is the freedom of education, that is to say educational institutions may differ significantly in their understandings of the content of character formation. Parents who want to secure good education for their children often choose institutions, the explicit moral purposes they share, in order to reach the structure of attitudes they consider the most desirable. We would call parents irresponsible that leave the formation of their children to institution they do not know sufficiently, or to general society in which a variety of understandings prevail without a recognizable pattern of values.

In making the choice of the parents, however, traditions are very important; normally, parents would like to have in their children the attitudes they have inherited and consider reliable. The existence of traditions of attitudes signals the fact that there are factors in the formation of attitudes which go deeper than the existing institutions of a given society. Psychologically, the role of the parents in attitude formation is often decisive; the example of the father and the mother are typically crucial, consciously or unconsciously, for the children. The reason of this situation is not only that the human psyche is such that parents possess a certain authority in the eyes of their children, but also the fact that human nature is in need of a formation of attitudes deeper or more fundamental than what the social and polit-



ical institutions of a community can offer. Parents do not value their traditions just because these are their traditions, but because they are typically convinced that their traditions are expressions of a system of values vitally relevant for individual and political existence. They consider their attitudes as corresponding to values, that is to say to morally correct propositions concerning human existence. A given pattern of such morally correct propositions is considered a tradition; such a tradition has authority, not because of individual preference, but because of its value-character.

### The Role of Religion

The most effective ways to realize patterns of morally correct propositions have been, at least in known history, religions. I do not say that to be a religion is merely to be able to realize morally correct propositions. To say that would be reducing religion to an ethical machine. Such an understanding of religion would open the way to an interpretation according to which, as for instance Ninian Smart believes, Maoism can count to be a religion. It is not my task here to attempt to give a definition of religion; so much may be said nevertheless that the essence of religion is far from being just a pattern of morally correct propositions. Christianity, to take the most obvious example, is not only a morality, but also a doctrine, and not only a doctrine, but also a cult, and not only a cult, but a model of individual and collective salvation. While there are religions which do not possess an explicit doctrine of a personal God, as for instance Theravada Buddhism, still there is no religion which does not offer an explicit way of individual salvation. In political ideologies, such as Marxism-Leninism or Maoism, the in-

dividual is dissolved in the collective, and even if there is a notion of final fulfillment, an eschatological dimension in such ideologies, there is only a communal or collective fulfillment in history. Religions, at least in those that are called post-axial by Karl Jaspers (Jaspers, 1949), individual redemption or salvation have been the crucial point.

The emphasis on the individual, in Christianity on the dignity of human persons, is the most important trait of religion in matters of forming and developing human attitudes. The human person has an incomparable dignity, a doctrine without which the development of the modern and contemporary Western understanding of human rights, sovereignty, and freedom is unconceivable. Human persons, however, must be trained, formed, changed in order to be able to reach the optimal form of their human dignity. The process of formation cannot start with any particular process of schooling or learning, but with an *a priori* act, the act of baptism that makes the human person be actually able to realize his or her dignity. By recognizing the importance of such an act, Christianity points out that the process of formation of attitudes has its own *a priori* condition. Human nature is implicitly good, but explicitly bad, and to change this we need preemptive action.

The process of formation of attitudes is not merely a social or political process; it is not even merely psychological. It must touch upon the very core of human persons in accordance with the results to be reached. The objective is not only a properly functioning moral machine, but a genuine, fully developed human person. The attitudes a human person needs in order to function successfully in a political community are not ultimate elements of his or her personhood, but rather consequences of his or her be-

ing a dynamically developing human person. The success of religion in developing the attitudes a human person needs in political behavior is based on its understanding that human persons have a transcendent origin and a transcendent vocation. The right attitudes are based on the transcendent values of religion, not on historical circumstances; they are derivative of the transcendently based dignity of human persons.

### The Failure of Ideologies

Marxism-Leninism and similar ideologies have committed two principal mistakes in matters of the formation of human individuals. First, there is no real place in such ideologies for the individual as opposed to the collective. Marxism-Leninism and related ideologies may even be characterized as anti-individualist or collectivist, which in fact means that they attempted to shatter the really existing individual with all his or her dignity, morality, and genuine personality. Those who lived under Communist rule can easily confirm that one of the main purposes of such systems was indeed the destruction of human personhood in its genuine and ultimate individuality. Such ideologies can be considered successful to some extent, but the prize they paid for their success was enormous: they lost the very material they wanted to rule, they lost the human individuals with their moral attitudes deprived of which there is no functioning political community.

The other principal mistake is the flawed hope of these ideologies that it is possible to develop the necessary attitudes in human individuals just by schooling and ideological formation. In some cases, such ways of formation may have been effective to some extent. They

may have been effective in that they were able to produce individuals with no moral character whatsoever yet with a readiness to serve the political party in any possible way; they were able to produce individuals that have reinvented a vulgar pragmatism of the worst kind in order to reach their own material aims by any means after the authority of the Marxist-Leninist party collapsed. We meet a good number of such individuals in the political and economic forefront of the so-called post-Communist countries.

As a matter of fact, the formation and development of the right attitudes of human individuals cannot be based merely on the objective of creating such attitudes. Human persons are integral beings, that is to say they need a holistic view of themselves and the world in order to be able to function efficiently in particular ways under the umbrella of that world-view. Even more so, they do not only need any kind of a world-view but rather a genuine one which is not only a view of reality but, as it were, offer reality itself. Religion indeed proposes reality inasmuch as religion considers itself not merely a *view* of reality but reality *itself*. Political ideologies have attempted to imitate this specific feature of religion inasmuch as they declared themselves not merely world-views but, at the same time, the expressions of reality itself. This happens in Marxism-Leninism in which the ideology is seen as an expression of the most fundamental processes of reality understood in terms of historical economic development. But there is a difference between declaring something to be the case on the one hand, and to be indeed the case on the other hand. Religion declares something to be the case because – from the point of view of religion – this is in fact the case. Ideologies de-



clare something to be the case because they wish it to be the case by all possible means. In particular, Marxism-Leninism understands itself as an ideology, that is to say as doctrinal stratagem by which certain political aims can be reached. This understanding nevertheless excludes any interpretation that would consider such an ideology *true* in the proper sense of the word.<sup>9</sup>

### The Importance of Conservatism

I do not consider conservatism an ideology. Ideologies are collections of abstract ideas assembled in view of practical, mainly political, purposes; conservatism however is not such a scheme but, to use an Oakeshottian expression, a ‘disposition.’ Conservatism as a disposition is living in a tradition in which the attitudes are given by means of ‘intimation.’ Conservatism, according to Oakeshott, is ‘a flow of sympathy,’ and not a fixed and inflexible way of doing things. Conservatism, on this view, is not even an abstract moral scheme the principles of which must be known by heart and translated into practice by a series of separate actions of the will. On the contrary, conservatism is like our mother tongue that we do not learn by memorizing a list of words and grammatical rules. We grow into the actual capacity of speaking our native tongue in a way which is too complicated, and too much

organic, to learn in a linear process. We are able to become conscious of the grammar of our native tongue; but in speaking my mother tongue I do not care the rules; I just speak the language (Oakeshott, 1991).

Conservatism is a way of intimating fundamental human attitudes which are essential in taking part in political coexistence. The very imperative of being benevolent to fellow human beings, or the imperative of helping the needy in some way, or the imperative of the general co-operation for some common good are imperatives of a conservative kind, that is to say they are not just abstract rules but follow organically from our basic human pattern. If one does not have such attitudes, then one is not able to function socially or politically, and one is not able to develop the character one needs in facing moral evil in individuals and communities. The most fundamental imperative of fighting evil and advancing good cannot be learned; it is given in our personal human pattern. We are indeed free to dismiss this basic disposition or pattern and we see examples of such actions especially in ideologies and in exceptionally evil persons; but conservatism consists in a conscious recognition of this pattern.

It is on the basis of conservatism that we might learn ideologies. Ideologies believe that human attitudes are results of conservatism *as* an ideology, and not conservatism as a disposition. Ideologies imitate what they believe conservatism does in that ideologies invent ideals and human attitudes and attempt to realize them. This is just the opposite of the way conservatism works; and ideologies do not notice that it is on the basis of the life-world of a basic conservatism that they can have their ideals. Just as we can learn other languages on the basis of our mother tongue, so we may learn too ideologies

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Plantinga famously argued that by accepting the theory of naturalistic evolution, which excludes the possibility of a neutral point of view, it becomes implausible to attribute truth-value to propositions describing the same process. In a similar way, on the basis of Marxist historicism, it becomes implausible to attribute truth-value to propositions about the subject matter of the Marxian theory. This paradoxical situation results from the fact that a truth-value of any proposition presupposes an independent or neutral observer, a subject in the proper sense, but in the aforementioned theories it is unlikely that there are such observers.

and tend to believe that every language is learned in the way we learn our new languages. We forget that we can learn other languages *on the basis of* our natural possession of a mother tongue. Similarly, being attracted by various ideologies we easily forget our mother tongue in this respect, that is in what I term the natural conservatism of our fundamental human pattern.

My point is that the formation of human attitudes takes place, on the social and political level, on the basis of our fundamentally conservative nature. What may be successful in ideologies to some extent is due to the conservative core an ideology contains in itself. In order to improve the catastrophic social and political situation, Deng Hsiao Ping rediscovered some of the most important attitudes given in the Chinese traditions; these attitudes saved Communist China from a collapse. Russian Marxism-Leninism was however much more arbitrary; its refusal of the natural conservative pattern of human persons and society led in fact to one of the most spectacular collapses a world empire in known history. What they lacked was not simply an effective economic plan – they had plenty of fantastic plans – or other great ideas concerning education and culture, but the willingness to give place for conservatism at least in the simplest things of individual and societal life.

### Religion and Conservatism

Oakeshott's understanding of conservatism has some obvious defects, the most important of which, from my present point of view, is the neglect of the full scope of being a human person. Human persons do not merely exist in a flow of sympathy that is in the context of a given tradition. Human persons are indeed individuals, inef-

fable in themselves, whose existence is not exhausted by their belonging to a flow of traditions, customs, or morals. I naturally speak my mother tongue, as do other human beings, but I have *my own* understanding of things and of myself. There is a sphere of individual subjectivity which cannot be reduced to any objectivity, and there is a realm of human persons which cannot be dissolved in any collective tradition or ideology. The dignity of human persons is based precisely on their irreducible personhood; and this dimension of human persons is expressed, emphasized, maintained, and strengthened only in what we call religion.<sup>10</sup>

In religion, a human person does not only face evil, but most importantly he or she faces God. For religion, there is no more important thing in the world than precisely this engagement. And since God is not just another empirical person, but the very foundation, source and final aim of human persons, thus human persons engage their personhood in an unparalleled manner in this fundamental relationship characteristic of religion. It is by facing God that we are uniquely individuals, unique human persons; it is by facing God that we have the source and the strength of our human dignity; it is by facing God that we have the basis of the most fundamental human attitudes without which there is no genuine individual and social life.

If this is so, then conservatism is in need of

<sup>10</sup> Karol Wojtyła's understanding of the human person as a *dynamic unity* changes the traditional doctrine of hylemorphism in an important way. Instead of the human being as a compound of formal and material components, Wojtyła offers an understanding of a human being as an ultimate unity which 'may not be treated as only a means to an end, as an instrument, but must allow for the fact that he or she, too, has, or at least should have, distinct personal ends' (Wojtyła, 1998, p. 28). The origin of the concept of human persons can be found, in Wojtyła's analyses, in the phenomenological resources of our human experience.

religion as its own very foundation, source, cement, and fulfillment. Conservatism is related to ideology as our mother tongue is related to Esperanto. Religion, however, is related to conservatism as our own understanding of the words and sentences, indeed the very meaning of our mother tongue, is related to the fact that there are people that speak our mother tongue. Without a natural language, Ludwig Zamenhof would not have been able to develop the Esperanto language; without our own capacity of understanding of what is said in our mother tongue, there is no way to learn a mother tongue. This understanding may be called the language of the mind, the irreducible character of subjectivity or something of the same sort; we do have our own understanding as the very prerequisite of learning our mother tongue. We can learn our mother tongue, to put it differently, just because we are human persons.

Liberal democracy is a political system which is in need of conservatism; forces which strive to abolish conservatism in the sense I use it are abolishing the realm of attitudes essential for the survival of liberal democracy. With the abolishment of the required attitudes, the legitimacy of liberal democracy becomes unclear; and with the lack of clarity the lack of legitimacy may become a fact. As Richard Neuhaus points out, 'As the crisis of legitimacy deepens, it will lead – not next year, maybe not in twenty years, but all too soon – to totalitarianism or to insurrection' (Neuhaus, 1984, p. 259). That is why I emphasize the importance of religion for conservatism. Conservatism is vital for liberal democracy, and religion is vital for conservatism.

The most difficult question comes certainly at this point. What kind of religion can we think of? Which denomination? Shall we point out

the importance of civil religion of Rousseau or Robert Bellah? Or shall we follow the suggestions of present-day evangelical Christianity of the United States? The various proposals made, among others by José Casanova, Richard Neuhaus, or Robert Bellah, are signs that we have an important problem here. The reception of these proposals shows the difficulties of giving the proper answer. However, on the basis of conservatism religion cannot be an invention, an ideology, an *Ersatzreligion*. Religion has the dimensions of the past, the present, and the future, and these dimensions build a common structure. A religion in the conservative sense must have its verified roots in the past, its relevance in the present, and its openness to the future. Religion in his sense is indeed a dynamic flow which corresponds to the fundamental human pattern we find in conservatism too. Religion, thus, cannot be just rigid structure inherited from the past but a self-checking and self-renewing system of ideas, dispositions, a practices which is open to the surrounding world and to its future.<sup>11</sup>

In his encyclical letter, Pope Benedict XIV formulates the need of a religious renewal: 'A self-critique of modernity is needed in dialogue with Christianity and its concept of hope. In this dialogue Christians too, in the context of their knowledge and experience, must learn anew in what their hope truly consists, what they have to offer to the world and what they cannot offer. Flowing into this self-critique of the modern age there also has to be a self-critique of modern Christianity, which must constantly renew its self-understanding setting out from its roots' (*Spe salvi*, § 22). In our present context, the renewal of the self-understanding of Christianity

<sup>11</sup> As to the need of a renewal of Christian thinking, see Mezei, 2016.

offers us an exceptional case of a living religion, a religion which does not only automatically change throughout the ages but it becomes conscious of the need for a constant renewal. This feature of religion is indeed deeply consonant with the fundamentally integral meaning of conservatism; in this sense, an open conservatism – as I call this sort – appears to be the best way to form and maintain the basic human dispositions inevitable for the upholding and bettering our contemporary liberal democracies. However, such conservatism needs to be intrinsically based on religion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more detail on a balanced understanding of religion, see my 2013 work (Mezei, 2013). A more detailed account is delineated in Mezei, 2017.

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