

## **Religious creed and law: two worlds apart?**

*Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"*  
*Acts 5:29.*

**Summary: 1) Today's social context: an overview that takes into account philosophy. 2) Religion and society. 3) Secularity: a chimera?**

I gladly accepted the proposal made to me by Professor Gragnoli, whom I thank, to speak at this important conference organized by the renowned University of Parma on an extremely pressing and vital issue: "*Labour law and forms of manifestation of religious convictions*".

No one can deny the obvious fact that our Western society has, over time, been detached from a "religious" view of life, of the world and of history, a detachment that in the end lead to tensions fuelled by an (alleged) impossibility to reconcile religious convictions and freedom of the individual coexist whenever the latter is freely expressed, including also the labour market.

An impossibility to reconcile that, as we will see, is also strongly influenced by a heavy ideological baggage that hampers also discussions on the aforementioned problems. I am participating in this debate first and foremost as a Priest, but also as a jurist, aware that a common ground on which to work together to build the *civitas hominum* is possible.

My contribution will not encroach in the various legal cases, which, as authoritatively demonstrated by the other distinguished speakers, have highlighted tensions concerning the mingling of various interests.

I will try to tread on a path of reflection that could restore and foster a proper, fruitful relationship between the need for the state to be secular and the respect for individual and collective religious freedom.

### **1) Today's social context: an overview that takes into account philosophy.**

In this part of my reasoning I will make use of the reflections of a great Italian thinker of the 20th century, Augusto Del Noce, who, in my humble opinion, offered an admirable synthesis of the philosophical horizon that created the foundations of the social situation that we find ourselves to live in this "post-everything" 21st century, a social situation that is causing so many problems to the idea of Man we are promoting in the Western, First World countries<sup>1</sup>, but also on the concept of life that we are handing over to the new generations.

What characterizes our society today is

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<sup>1</sup> A. Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo*, [The problem of Atheism] Bologna. Il Mulino, 2010. I was particularly struck by this text as the Author goes so far as to demonstrate that the most striking feature of the modern First World, Western Society it is not atheism but *rather natural irreligion*.

"the diffusion of something entirely different from atheism, that is, the "natural irreligion" (the loss, the fading out of everything sacred, or whatever name we may give to it) <sup>2</sup>".

Since the concept of Truth and, consequently, that of so-called "*non-negotiable*" principles have disappeared from the collective heart and soul of society and even the concept of *natural law*<sup>3</sup> has also been strongly questioned, a new (very attractive) way of thinking has become popular. This way of thinking is basically empiricism, which assumes that only what can be verified (mostly by science) can be true.

By viewing the world through this (deforming) lens, followers of this way of thinking can structure knowledge, morals and politics without ever referring to transcendence. Starting therefore from a Gnostic point of view, empiricism basically postulates total irreconcilability with religion and even if empiricists have to admit that there are (supersensible) problems that cannot be dealt with by ordinary tools of knowledge, they very quickly add that these issues simply don't matter<sup>4</sup>,

"those who want to act in the world and to improve it in any technical, aesthetic, practical-social sense but do not want to look for a transcendence that may lead them to evade<sup>5</sup>".

"(. . . ) There is [in short] no reason to reflect on the problem of God because even affirming His existence is logically meaningless<sup>6</sup>. "

I believe that these statements, even if written more than fifty years ago, are definitely relevant and topical today and provide us with a key to reading the choices made by Lawmakers or judicial bodies, with serious repercussions on the social fabric. This, at the very least, is the humble opinion of those who still try to with their eyes turned to the sky.

All this, however, is nothing but the fruit of a centuries-old work that has eroded the moral conscience of the individual, making it, in fact, very vulnerable, even if all this has been presented and perceived as a "conquest of freedom" and a "liberation from conditioning ", which, in an evolved society, no longer have any reason to exist.

At this point we should open a discussion on the concept of freedom proposed by Marxism but that would be a digression that would lead us astray from the main path<sup>7</sup>.

Today we regard democracy as a fully secular institution and anyone who wishes to make democracy raise its eyes from the ground and look at the Heavens above is accused of integralism, of "medievalism" (a highly misused word in Italy, especially in the political scene) and to expose the social fabric to of forms of intolerance that resemble the liberticied regimes, which, thank God, are now only pages in history.

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<sup>2</sup>A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 293-294.

<sup>3</sup> For the concepts of Truth, non-negotiable principles and natural law please refer to the Encyclical of John Paul II "Evangelium Vitae" of 25/03/1995 in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html) And also to the Encyclical of Benedict XVI "Caritas in Veritate" of 29/06/2009 in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html)

<sup>4</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 295.

<sup>5</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 297.

<sup>7</sup>Briefly: according to Marxism, freedom is absolute, free from any constraint whatsoever, and most of all free from any values-based constraint. The dangerous gender theory is based on this wrong concept of freedom, for example. S. Augustine, (and the whole Christian thought with him), claims that the only true freedom possible is the one that, supported by Grace, adheres to the Truth, to the Supreme Good.

We must not forget that, thanks to the father of psychoanalysis<sup>8</sup>, we often hear that

"man's liberation is liberation from his psychic imbalances; and the idea of God, born of the child's sense of fear of his real father, keeps man in an infantile state, in which he fails to keep the pace with his growth and with real problems<sup>9</sup>. "

All this will be overcome and relegated to oblivion, because progress will completely eradicate the religious need from man.

We cannot turn our head away from the fact that this *natural irreligion* is by now pervasive of all the social structure, and that the eclipse of God is to be found in the last stage of bourgeois society<sup>10</sup>.

Reconnecting to the founding affirmation of empiricism, we can say that the death of God announced by Nietzsche was not achieved by murder, but by the fact that man has radically changed his relationship with nature, and that religion, and the human functions it carried along has become simply an unverifiable and logically irrelevant myth<sup>11</sup>.

The final goal will be achieved when man has achieved complete dominion over nature thanks to technology.

A technology derived from a conception of physics that is no longer Aristotelian but rather Cartesian<sup>12</sup>.

We cannot help but remember those indelible words pronounced by the Adversary in Eden: "*eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum*" (Gen. 3:5).

In short, "we do not need God" is the message the dominant thought that rules society today keeps hammering into us with a persistent insistence.

We don't need Him to set up our personal and social life, we don't need Him to think about politics, and we don't even need the idea of God to think about what will happen to us after we die<sup>13</sup>.

This last point is being used as leverage by the pro-euthanasia culture that is permeating the debate on this issue in Italy.

All empiricist thinking is based on unconditional trust in technology, progress and science. Modern thought has went even beyond what Comte had imagined<sup>14</sup>: no space for transcendence, let alone for God. This whole approach had a very questionable consequence: absolutization of technologism became a consequence of the birth of the so-called *opulent society*<sup>15</sup>.

One of the first steps of the opulent society is the alienation of the subjects that compose it:

"by alienation we mean, in the most general sense, the reciprocal dehumanisation of the relationship of otherness; each subject feels the other as *alienus*, alien, separated,

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<sup>8</sup> S. Freud, *Totem e Tabù*, [Totem and Taboo] 4, 6, Boringhieri, Turin, 1969. In this work the author tries to explain the origin of religion deriving from a collective soul in which the intrapsychic processes of individuals reverberate. In essence, religion is the result of a sense of collective guilt for the killing of the Father. In fact, in the awareness of not being able to replace him, we turn him into a God.

<sup>9</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 297.

<sup>10</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 300.

<sup>12</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p) 309. Aristotle's physics conceived the world as an eternal harmony of forms that induced man to contemplation, whereas Descartes' physics was conceived as a tool to understand the functioning of the world in order to be able to use it.

<sup>13</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p) 302.

<sup>14</sup> Comte theorized a religious unification of humanity that would replace natural religions as well as progress, technology and science. Today this idea has been replaced with the total expulsion of any reference to a religious dimension.

<sup>15</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 314.

that is, not unified in devotion to a common (not strictly religious) value, and therefore also as *ob-iectum*, that is "placed in front" evaluated as a useful tool or as an obstacle. Society, strictly speaking, is no longer a society because the multiplicity is not unified: this society is a meaningless one without value, because the normative idea, and the utopian perspective, of the city of God has disappeared<sup>16</sup>.

"The tacit expressed refusal of the stated values means that the only value that matters is pure sensible efficiency; in the opulent society, men find themselves reduced to the simple economic dimension of the mere instruments of an activity that is not part of any order or structure. Hence the boredom that strikes Man in this society as soon as he leaves the workplace; the feeling of falling into the void, into the most complete irrationality, as well as the competitive spirit and activism that characterise this society: the other is reduced to a bundle of needs that must be met, or rather that must be artificially multiplied, in order for the subject to succeed; and this absence of communication in universal values means that the subject cannot feel himself or herself anywhere else but in the exasperated individual search for the superfluous<sup>17</sup>".

From this observation, Del Noce defines the opulent society as the society of the "empty men<sup>18</sup>," dominated by instincts, by anarchy, and inserted into a "fideistic" horizon based on technique. I believe that this analysis of the social substratum is to be taken into due consideration to fully understand the difficult relationships between religious convictions and their protection in labour law.

## 2) Religion and society.

The social framework seems clear and obvious: the marginalisation of faith, or the persistent ideological attempt to eradicate it from the collective consciousness both inexorably advance in this overwhelming era of globalisation, and not only of the world of labour and economy.

However, much of politics does not take into due consideration what History has established as an indisputable principle: religion and society are and will always be intrinsically linked<sup>19</sup>.

Every attempt to separate them, carried out by the great totalitarian regimes has failed even if, the natural irreligion, if we want to use Del Noce's words, has permeated wide layers of the social fabric, shaping the consciences, especially those of the new generations, with the result of making "plausible" the illusion of the irrelevance and futility of any question about God.

Man always carries within himself questions about the meaning of life and therefore, no matter how bewildered, deluded and misguided man may be, he will never be able to suffocate that "religious" yearning which, like nostalgia, will always resound in the depths of his soul.

"Martin Buber in *Tales of the Hasidim*<sup>20</sup> discusses Rabbi Mendel of Kozk, who "astonished some learned men who were his guests with this question:

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<sup>16</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 314-315.

<sup>17</sup> A. Del Noce, op. cit. , p. 319.

<sup>18</sup> Del Noce shares this definition coined by F. Rodano, *Il processo di formazione della "società opulenta"* [The making of the "opulent society"], in *La Rivista Trimestrale*, 1962, n. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Migrants have always put their religious heritage and belief that at the base of their identity, and this needs to be stressed now in these definitely troubled times.

<sup>20</sup> M. Buber, *I racconti dei Chassidim*, [Tales of the Hasidim] Garzanti, Milano, 1983, p. 604-605.

"Where does God live?" Those men laughed at him: "What are you saying? The whole world is full of His glory!" But then the Rabbi answered his own question: "God lives where he is allowed to enter". And he is not allowed to enter where one assumes that "the facts of the world are everything" where the illusion that man is capable of self-salvation, of saving himself from the throes of the absurd is nourished".

We must also not forget, in fact, that

"religions - at least the great religions - are wide-breadth, long-term phenomena that constitute one of the primary forces that contribute to forge the basic structures of the social and cultural order, one of those matrices of sense that design the face of a civilization and imprint an indelible mark on the juridical-normative dimension<sup>21</sup>. "

Consequently, all the most attentive scholar cannot fail to see the secondary role of religious belief in the development of a social structure, nor can they deny that religion is also a drive for the world of labour and for the economy in general<sup>22</sup>.

In a nutshell: the requests, and the issues raised by the religions are a provocation to the Legislators to lead them to try to integrate, in a pluralist and truly democratic vision, all the sensitivity and the opinions/beliefs of all the members of a nation<sup>23</sup>, in the common commitment to the promotion of true social progress, one that pays attention to the weak and marginalized, of moral and spiritual growth in a climate of freedom made true in facts and not just claimed in words, which instead is what we unfortunately often see.

We risk giving in to the "culture of waste" as Pope Francis<sup>24</sup> called it, a culture that seriously risks permeating all interpersonal relationships, and not just the ones in the workplace.

I think that articles 3 and 19 of the Italian Constitution<sup>25</sup> are a true and mature synthesis and a solid reference to guide legislation in balancing the protection of religious freedom with the other demands that characterise the life of a State.

Religion and society have and will always have close ties, which, beyond the frictions and clashes that have been consumed over the centuries, are essential for the maintenance and growth of a state community.

The idea of relegating the religious sphere to the private dimension alone is an unreasonable and harmful one, but, sometimes, faced with so many tensions between the spiritual sphere and that of the rightful exercise of citizenship, which consists of duties but also of rights, we often are left bewildered the moment we bitterly become aware that much remains to be done.

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<sup>21</sup> S. Ferlito, Presentation to H. P. Glenn's book, *Tradizioni giuridiche del mondo. La sostenibilità della differenza*, [Legal Traditions of the World: Sustainable diversity in law] Italian version, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010, p. XVII.

<sup>22</sup> As regards the importance of the religious phenomenon and its implications for social development: M. C. Nussbaum, *Women and human development. The capabilities approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p) 205 and following.

<sup>23</sup> Provided, it goes without saying that they do not collide with the tenets of public order and morality.

<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis, Message sent to the participants in the VIII World Social Forum on Migrations, Mexico City 2-4 November 2018, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20181026\\_messaggio-foro-migrazioni.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20181026_messaggio-foro-migrazioni.html)

<sup>25</sup> Art. 3. All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove the obstacles of an economic and social nature, which, by limiting it in fact freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of any human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country.

Art. 19. Everyone has the right to freely profess his or her religious faith in any form, individual or associated, to make propaganda and to exercise the cult in private or in public, provided that these rites are not contrary to morality.

For this reason a strong appeal is being sent to politics (which I will take up later when I will develop the final issue of secularism) asking it to become once again the force that cares for the overall good of man, as the social doctrine of the Church teaches us.

Pope John XXIII, in the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, mentions the integral development of the person and the need not to neglect the spiritual dimension of man in founding "a solid and fruitful temporal order."<sup>26</sup>

The work of man too is aimed towards the goal we have just mentioned, and I would like to recall the definition that John Paul II gave in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens*:

"Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family. And work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself. Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the Earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on Earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature."<sup>27</sup>

I think this definition can also be shared by the secular world, since we cannot deny that work is at the roots of any social issue and

"human work [therefore] is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man's good. And if the solution-or rather the gradual solution-of the social question, which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of "making life more human" then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance."<sup>28</sup>

Not understanding that in work man gives and receives growth, even spiritual growth, means closing ourselves off in an ideological horizon that ends up exploiting the human being in the constitutive dimension of his dignity which is also the working dimension,<sup>29</sup>

Let me then just briefly mention the forms of precarious employment, the erosion of workers' rights, new forms of exploitation which, I believe, show us a true moral and spiritual crisis of society in the terms already mentioned above.

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<sup>26</sup> Pope John XXIII, encyclical *Mater et magistra*, 1961, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/johnxxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_15051961\\_mater.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/johnxxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html)

<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul II, encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html), introduction

<sup>28</sup> Pope John Paul II, op. cit. n. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Thus falling back into the culture of waste denounced by Pope Francis on several occasions in his Magisterium.

### 3) Secularity: a chimera?

I believe my reasoning highlighted how the ideological burden that weighs on the spiritual and transcendent dimension of man, and on everything that refers to them, is the main obstacle to overcome.

Let me sum it up: we live in a social cultural context which either openly refuses or at the very least trivialises and marginalises religious beliefs, in the name of an anthropocentric empiricism in a fideistic horizon centred on the predominance of technology, which has become a true divinity.

The origins of all this lie in the far past but, especially in these last centuries (XIX and XX),

"a process is in progress, though most failed to notice it, involving loss of inner concentration and elevated feelings, generalised dispersion and perhaps irremediable eclipse of the spiritual values.<sup>30</sup>"

"However, the radical, organic reason for this decline in culture is the fact that it has lost its strength by evaporating in secularisation. For many centuries the enlightened minds of humanity have been increasingly attracted by the conception of the "*anthropocentrism*, more dignifiedly called humanitarianism, that humanitarianism which in the twentieth century has led to abstract, sometimes totalitarian ideologies. In any case, the fact remains that a self-sufficient anthropocentrism is not able to provide answers to many essential questions that life presents us with, and its incapacity increase as one tries to go deeper in answering these questions. The spiritual component is eliminated from the whole set of representations and motivations of thought and human action. This has caused the distortion of the whole hierarchy of values, and the understanding of the essence of man and its ends has disappeared, while at the same time man has increasingly moved away from the rhythm, from the breath of Nature, of the Universe<sup>31</sup>. "

A second, summarising step will lead us to emphasize the intrinsic relationship between religion and society as an indispensable factor of growth and development.

I dare say that religion and society *simul stabunt vel simul cadent*, since they are so deeply and intrinsically connected.

Starting from this premise, let us now go back to the title of the paragraph:

"Secularity: a chimera?".

I wanted to stir a provocation because everywhere you turn you will hear about secularity, but it is its concrete and daily application in people's lives that leaves great perplexity. This is true also on the workplace.

Let me ask you one question: can there be true secularity without substantial (not just formal) respect for religious freedom?

It might seem like a question *pro domo mea*, but I think all the illustrious and authoritative colleagues attending this important conference will deeply feel its importance.

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<sup>30</sup> A. Solženitsyn, *Ritorno in Russia - Discorsi e conversazioni* (1994-2008), [Return to Russia - Discourses and conversations] edited by S. Rapetti, Marsilio, Venice, 2019, p. 79. In this speech at the Academy of Sciences pronounced in Moscow on September 24th 1997, the Russian dissident denounces in the first place a disintegration of culture in the name of utilitarian logic and of a unfettered, wild market that have led to an impoverishment of the human soul.

John Paul II placed religious freedom

"at the root of every other right and any other freedom<sup>32</sup>",

arguing, rightly, that it is the "cornerstone of all human rights<sup>33</sup>". A right so rooted and connected to the essence of man

"that exists in every person and always, even when it is not exercised or it is violated by the subjects to which it belongs<sup>34</sup>."

I considered it necessary to make this premise because a serious discourse on secularity and on what this implies would be a "solution" to reach an effective recognition of the religious needs, issues and questions that human beings carry with them everywhere, even in the working environment.

But first let us take a brief look at what this term means and what degenerations it has undergone over time.

"In order to understand the authentic meaning of the lay state and to explain how it is understood in our day, it is essential to keep in mind the historical development of this concept. In the Middle Ages, "secularity", a term coined to describe the condition of the ordinary lay Christian who belonged neither to the clerical nor to the religious state, inferred opposition between the civil powers and the ecclesiastical hierarchies; in modern times, it has come to mean the exclusion of religion and its symbols from public life by confining them to the private sphere and to the individual conscience. So it is that an ideological understanding has come to be attributed to the term "secularity", which is the opposite of its original meaning. Indeed, secularity is commonly perceived today as the exclusion of religion from social contexts and as the boundary of the individual conscience. Secularity would be expressed in the total separation between the State and the Church, since the latter is in no way entitled to intervene in areas that concern the life and conduct of citizens; secularity would even entail the exclusion of religious symbols from public places designated for the proper functions of the political community: offices, schools, courts, hospitals, prisons, etc. On the basis of these different ways of conceiving secularity, people today speak of secular thought, secular morals, secular knowledge and secular politics. Indeed, on the basis of such concepts, an a-religious vision of life, thought and morals exists: a vision in which there is no room for God, for a Mystery that transcends pure reason, for a moral law of absolute worth, in force in every time and every situation. Only if we realize this can we assess the consequences of the problems inherent in a term such as "secularity", which seems almost to have become the qualifying emblem of post-modernity and especially of modern democracy<sup>35</sup>."

I believe that the *vexata quaestio* lies in the possibility of being able to conceive or not a total autonomy of the mundane things at the expense of the place that God, the universal moral

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<sup>31</sup> A. Solženicyn, op. cit. , p. 82-83. It is interesting to note the convergence of the conclusions reached by both the Russian author and Del Noce.

<sup>32</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Speech to the participants in the IX International Romanist canonical Colloquium organized by the Pontifical Lateran University*, December 11, 1993, No. 3, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html)

<sup>33</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message for the celebration of the 24th World Day of Peace*, December 8, 1990, n. 5, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_08121990\\_xxiv-world-day-for-peace.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121990_xxiv-world-day-for-peace.html)

<sup>34</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address to the participants in the V International colloquium on juridical studies*, March 10, 1984, n. 5, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1984/march/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19840310\\_colloquio-giuridico.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1984/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19840310_colloquio-giuridico.html)

<sup>35</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the participants in the 56th National Study Congress organized by the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists* December 9, 2006, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20061209\\_giuristi-cattolici.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061209_giuristi-cattolici.html)



law, Christ and the Church should have in the life of beings human beings, both as individuals and as a social structure.

It is true that society and created things have their own laws and values, but abruptly separating God and material reality (trying to impose this perspective *ex lege*) would be a total falsification of reality.

If it is true that there must be a separation from the ecclesiastical reality, it is not true that this autonomy can be extended to the natural moral order.

This is why the Church indicates the path of "healthy" secularity, free from any ideological interference a path in which

"the State does not consider religion merely as an individual sentiment that may be confined to the private sphere alone. On the contrary, since religion is also organized in visible structures, as is the case with the Church, it should be recognized as a form of public community presence. This also implies that every religious denomination (provided it is neither in opposition to the moral order nor a threat to public order) be guaranteed the free exercise of the activities of worship - spiritual, cultural, educational and charitable - of the believing community. In the light of these considerations, this is certainly not an expression of secularity, but its degeneration into secularism, hostility to every important political and cultural form of religion; and especially to the presence of any religious symbol in public institutions. Likewise, to refuse the Christian community and its legitimate representatives the right to speak on the moral problems that challenge all human consciences today, and especially those of legislators and jurists, is not a sign of a healthy secularity. Thus, it is not a question of undue meddling by the Church in legislative activity that is proper and exclusive to the State but, rather, of the affirmation and defence of the important values that give meaning to the person's life and safeguard his or her dignity. These values are human before being Christian, such that they cannot leave the Church silent and indifferent. It is her duty to firmly proclaim the truth about man and his destiny<sup>36</sup>."

How could all of this happen, then? How could work turn from a place of building and promoting social cohesion and its growth into a place of exploitation, if not of real injustice?

The cases, even focussing on religious discrimination on the workplace alone, dealt with by the many authoritative speakers in this forum, clearly point out a profound distortion of the concept of work and its dynamics. I think the most appropriate interpretation is the loss of the primacy of man over things.

"This *consistent image*, in which the principle of the primacy of person over things is strictly preserved, was broken up in human thought, sometimes after a long period of incubation in practical living. And it was accomplished in such a way that the work was separated from capital and contrasted with capital, and the capital opposed to labor, almost like two anonymous forces, two factors of production put together in the same "economist" perspective. This way of stating the issue contained a fundamental error, what we can call the error of economism, that of considering human labour solely according to its economic purpose. This fundamental error of thought can and must be called an error of materialism, in that economism directly or indirectly includes a conviction of the primacy and superiority of the material,

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<sup>36</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *op. cit.*

and directly or indirectly places the spiritual and the personal (man's activity, moral values and such matters) in a position of subordination to material reality. This is still not *theoretical materialism* in the full sense of the term, but it is certainly *practical materialism*, a materialism judged capable of satisfying man's needs, not so much on the grounds of premises derived from materialist theory, as on the grounds of a particular way of evaluating things, and so on the grounds of a certain hierarchy of goods based on the greater immediate attractiveness of what is material<sup>37</sup>."

In light of all this let us ask ourselves if it is possible to stop this materialistic drift which is emptying the human being of every spiritual and transcendent yearning making him a slave of needs, in the illusory pursuit of false "liberation" ideals.

If a man cannot draw on his faith or moral convictions, what kind of man can he be in the workplace? A number or a person?

Likewise, if an employer fails to perceive the spiritual dimension as a factor in favouring and elevating the labour contribution of the workers, will he be able to do business correctly and fully or will he just put the economic profit alone at the base of his actions?

In my humble opinion, having lost the correct definition of man over the centuries, the whole system went into crisis causing the rise of egoism and of *homo homini lupus* as Hobbes put it.

The Legislators have given us immortal principles of true humanity, but nowadays they seem completely alien to politics, society and the labour world.

Can we get back on the right path? Yes, a Christian always remains deeply optimistic.

We have to reconstruct a healthy anthropology, rooted in the awareness that if we do not start from the postulate that man is a union of soul and body, our task will be extremely difficult.

It is the only possible way, even if we are aware that

"To be sure the disturbances which so frequently occur in the social order result in part from the natural tensions of economic, political and social forms. But at a deeper level they flow from man's pride and selfishness, which contaminate even the social sphere. When the structure of affairs is flawed by the consequences of sin, man, already born with a bent toward evil, finds there new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace<sup>38</sup>."

I am perfectly aware that this reading is not shared by most people, but I also think that it is not held in the esteem it deserves as it is fully capable of opening other, much more exhaustive horizons of understanding for the many tragedies that Man today faces and in which he very often succumbs, victim of other, mostly economics-based logics.

Saint Giovanni Bosco raised the boys in the Oratory of Valdocco in Turin, to be "good Christians and honest citizens": an all-encompassing definition that unites the beauty of man as a creature of God, and his consequent duty to build the *civitas hominum* by carrying out his duties as a citizen and worker.

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<sup>37</sup> Pope John Paul II, encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, n. 13. Speaking of "breaking the image", the Pontiff refers to the dual heritage: the resources nature gives and the wealth of technical knowledge that have developed increasingly perfect working tools.

<sup>38</sup> Pastoral Constitution "*Gaudium et Spes*", 1965, n. 25, in [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

Why does all this seem so strange today? So foreign, alien and out of place to be sometimes even considered harmful, to the point one cannot even talk about it?

*Gaudium et Spes*, which I have cited, has given us an absolutely rational and sound explanation, but we shall never forget that man shall play a complex part in this work of spiritual, moral and social reconstruction.

However, without the help from Above nothing will be possible, that is why believing in Him who "makes all things new" (Rev 21:5), will never be out of place, and surely not useless.

Thank you for your kind attention.