Freedom of speech, dialogue and respect

May 2019 will mark the third birthday of Church, Communication and Culture. We are proud to be able to say, using the motto of a famous Scotch whiskey, 'Keep walking!'. Of course, we are still far from reaching the long – and successful – history of Johnny Walker, but we promise to keep walking.

Since the beginning, we have been motivated by the idea of promoting a cultural and fruitful debate in the academic environment, in which – we are convinced – religion plays a vital role. In our opinion, this debate should be framed by three concepts of particular importance: freedom of expression, dialogue and respect.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is a necessary condition for scholars of varying backgrounds and origins, to offer their contribution to the public conversation. Through them, our journal attempts to be a cultural mediator between religion and communication, putting the human person at the center of that crossroads, a view that goes beyond what is merely utilitarian or relativistic.

The concept of freedom of expression immediately brings to most people’s minds the idea of protecting what is sacred to them – religion, conscience, etc. The protection of the sacred as a universal value has been framed for centuries in the traditions of various cultures and legal systems in an uninterrupted way. History, literature and archeology offer undeniable evidence. From a juridical point of view, the idea of religious freedom defends the right to profess one’s religion and one’s own convictions, as well as the freedom to be an atheist. Freedom of expression turns out to be very close to religious freedom. However, the latter is often not guaranteed.

Professor Richard R. John, who initiated his long-academic career at Harvard, and is now a full professor of history of communications in the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, will open the issue, showing where the concept of freedom of speech in the public sphere comes from historically speaking. The interview with professor John D. Peters, from Yale, follows this up with an in-depth look into the philosophical roots and practical consequences of free speech.

Dialogue

Dialogue is possible when freedom of speech is accepted. However, real dialogue is not just a mere exchange of views. Besides openness to others, dialogue requires identity. We cannot talk, discuss or even dissent strongly, if we don’t really know who we are and what we stand for, if there is nothing beyond words to exchange.

Without mincing her words, the Australian professor Margaret Somerville questions the disvalues in the bioethical debate. Being very much aware of the values that she upholds, Somerville is not afraid to put them into discussion in the public conversation. Overcoming a ‘politically correct’ attitude, she gives an example of the perfect combination of freedom of speech, dialogue and respect.
Certainly, an intrinsic, indispensable quality for public dialogue is tolerance. Tolerance is a fundamental attribute of public life. According to the classical authors – Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, among others – tolerance leads us to live with an error, or an evil, without explicitly approving it. Three-hundred years ago, Voltaire and his followers reformulated the classic concept of tolerance. Based on skepticism and indifference, they erased from it any reference to truth and good. Since the enlightenment, everything must be tolerated at the same level, and relativism imposes itself as a moral paradigm. This conception of tolerance, a 'liberal civic tolerance', however, is really 'permissiveness', which undermines the principle of freedom of expression. On the one hand, it offers no compelling reasons to stop the intolerance of those who want to censor uncomfortable ideas; on the other, it has no arguments to limit expressions that do not lead to dialogue because they are real insults – racist, homophobic or anti-religious.

Conversely, real tolerance does not sustain itself on the void and does not admit everything. Tolerance has a reference to good and evil, and because of that, is a real manifestation of respect.

**Respect**

In the plural public space, where different opinions and ideologies sometimes clash, respect for human dignity must be guaranteed. It is crucial that society be governed by a conception of justice. And respect is a duty of justice. As the English poet Philip James Bailey said: ‘Respect is what we owe; love, what we give’. Freedom of expression, therefore, moves in the territory of justice.

The roots of the concept of respect are found in Roman law, Stoic philosophy and Christianity. This last has forged the concept of person and has placed the protection of human dignity as the ultimate reason for morality. Christians, in addition to nurturing a special respect for the human being, act with charity and give importance to the way in which they see and treat people. This is a respect that goes beyond utility.

Respecting the other means appreciating their dignity, but does not mean the automatic approval of their actions. Both are important, but they are on different levels: the ‘respect’ for the person is a moral absolute, an antecedent value: rejecting ideas does not mean repudiating people. The identification between human dignity and human opinions leads to a ‘false respect’. This ‘false respect’ fits into the modern fallacy according to which truth is relative, and subjectivity and emotion become the absolute parameters of evaluation.

This situation leads to an unnecessary conflict between freedom and respect. If well understood, and maintained within the limits of public order and morality, freedom of expression is not an enemy of inclusion or equality, but becomes a safeguard to human dignity and the common good. It is the ‘false respect’ that leads to not-acting out of fear: fear of not saying what you think, fear of going against the current and of not being accepted if you do not adhere to the dominant social models.

The tendency of the politically correct is not to put anyone in difficulty, but at the same time imposes itself as a unique criterion. And that produces a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, there is an escalation of intolerance that leads to censoring ‘dangerous’ ideas or speakers in the name of a new orthodoxy; on the other hand, the most uncivilized offenses against symbols and religious people are tolerated. In the end, the exercise of freedom of expression is limited not only by dictatorial regimes, but by certain ‘elites’ of politically correct thought.
Religion

The problem here is that these three concepts of freedom of speech, dialogue and respect live in a common, neutral and public space. The ‘neutral state’ is based on the principle: ‘All men have the same right to respect for their human dignity’. But in fact, as Yale’s professor John D. Peters acknowledges, the liberal public sphere is based on a modern vision of the soul and a secular definition of reason, with a clear disfavor for religion in the public sphere. Other philosophers such as Habermas have also denounced this phenomenon.1

Distinguishing between the religious sphere and political sphere does not mean, as some people may think, canceling ethical references rooted in human beings. The distinction between faith and reason, which are not mutually exclusive and help each other, as well as the separation between Church and State, which may work together well, are very positive elements. Certainly, in some historical moments – even very long moments – this distinction and separation have been obscured. In modern times, by contrast, the ‘neutral state’ and the ‘secular state’ often get confused, meaning that religion gets confined to the private sphere. Nevertheless, faith belongs to the public domain as much as politics does.

For Peters, ‘true religion encourages a kind of openness to the wonder of the cosmos, a kindness and humility, and an attitude of deep scrutiny and inquiry, that are the deepest source of free speech’.

A good anecdote to finish: in December 2016, commenting how the Trump’s election showed a certain disconnection between the media and the people, the executive editor of The New York Times, Dean Baquet, recognized in an interview with NPR (national US public radio), ‘I think that the New York-based and Washington-based media power-houses don’t quite get religion. We don’t get the role of religion in people’s lives. And I think we can do much, much better’. Church, Communication and Culture is here to help.

Enriching and shedding light on understanding the religious phenomenon are the following three pieces: the Church Communication Highlights 2018 by religious veteran journalist as Mari-Paz López, Francisco Javier Pérez-Latre’s article focusing on Vatican communication from Benedict XVI to Pope Francis, and the case study of the television coverage of Pope Francis’ visit to Chile by Alejandro Reid.

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The upcoming issues of 2019 will also be rich in thoughtful content. Some things to look forward to:

(a) The second issue will offer the first instance of a new section entitled ‘Debate’. The section will feature a series of short essays published together as one piece, in the form of a back-and-forth conversation between two experts on a question of interest. Our first cultural debate will be dedicated to ‘scientific progress and human development’ through the insights of professor Steve Fuller, Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology at the University of Warwick (UK), and professor Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, Fellow of the International Society for Science and Religion (Cambridge) and professor of Theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome).

(b) As in previous years (see Dostoesvky in 2017 and Tourism, Religious Identity and Cultural Heritage in 2018), the third installment of the year, programed for October, will be a special issue. This year the special issue is dedicated to post-truth, under the guidance of the guest-editors Alberto Gil (Univeristaat Des Saarlands, Germany) and Rafael Jiménez Cataño (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross).
Wishing you all a fruitful reading, let us finish by asking your contribution to help us to serve you better. Please fill in our survey and let us know what topics you look forward to following in the future pages of Church, Communication and Culture!

Notes

1. Habermas, J. 2006. “Religion in the Public Sphere.” European Journal of Philosophy, 14 (1), 1–25; https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x

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