Citizenship, Secularism and Religion: A ‘Triangle’ in Permanent Tension

Maurice Blanc

We say that God has made man in his own image, but man has returned the compliment.
—Voltaire

The origin of the word religion is a matter of continuing debate among specialists: it can mean ‘to bond’ but also ‘to read again’ (Hatzfeld 1993). I consider here that these two meanings are complementary: those who share the same religion constitute a community and this creates bonds and solidarities (Blanc 2012). At the same time, a religion offers a vision or a ‘reading’ of the world: it provides the faithful with a certain number of replies to their questions concerning their origin and destiny as well as how to live well. It is thus a ‘reservoir of meaning’. It assigns, following the celebrated passage at the beginning of Genesis, the proper place for nature, society and human beings. In traditional religions, men and
women occupy distinct and hierarchical social positions; in spite of the modernising efforts of Pope Francis, the place of women in the Catholic Church remains retrograde.

The word citizenship has also a double meaning. Legally, citizenship is a status with rights and duties granted to the individual citizen. In the New Testament, the man who was to become Saint Paul used his Roman citizenship to ensure a more respectful treatment by the Roman authorities: the citizen is already someone of note. This citizenship does not coincide entirely with nationality but it does overlap. The primary right of the citizen (exclusively male for a long time) is the right to vote. In certain countries, Belgium for example, this right is also a duty: participation in elections is compulsory. Elsewhere, if abstention is possible, it is nevertheless badly regarded. In the same way, the citizen (always male) is expected to defend the nation against a common enemy, except in cases where special dispensations may be allowed. This warrior vision of citizenship finds it difficult to accept as legitimate non-violence or conscientious objection, perceived as cowardice or treason.

Sociologically, citizenship is a social practice and therefore collective. I call it *active* citizenship\(^1\) to distinguish it from the passive *statutory* citizenship. The citizen is interested in public affairs understood as the common good and he/she contributes to the public debates through which decisions are taken concerning this common good (Blanc 2013a). Depending on the particular political cultures, citizens can participate more or less in the putting into practice of the decisions collectively adopted. This is more difficult in a country centralised like France fearful that the development of local initiatives might lead to inequalities between territories. It is easier in decentralised federal countries (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland etc.) where it is preferable to seek solutions at the local level rather than to push the problem to a higher level (Blanc 2013b).

In this chapter, although the legal sense remains present, active citizenship is privileged, the more so because one cannot discuss citizenship and

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\(^1\) When prime minister of the United Kingdom, Mrs. Thatcher, dismantled social services on the ground they transformed citizens into individuals depending upon state assistance (Espiet-Kilty 2016). She claimed that active citizenship should replace bureaucracy and thereby citizens should resolve themselves social problems.
religion in purely abstract and depersonalised terms as everything that needs to be said here is saturated in its own particular history: education received, experiences at different stages of life, biographical continuities and ruptures, and so on. To describe explicitly this journey allows for reflexive analysis, giving the opportunity to consider it at some distance. This is necessary in order to distinguish the singular from the more general, though not universal. This is why I begin with a number of autobiographical references to make it clear ‘from where I’m speaking’ with regard to a relationship to religion oscillating between attraction and repulsion.

I then offer an analysis of the visibility, or the place that religions effectively occupy in society, in order to discuss their legitimacy. To confine religions only to the private domain is abusive: they have the right to be present in the public domain, but without any particular privileging or favouring of one over the others, or indeed with regard to other systems of thought. I address the different levels of citizenship and forms of active citizenship which also overlap with the private sphere and which put the relations between citizenship and religion in a new light. Religions, which claim universality, find themselves in competition. Many religions attribute to themselves a superior moral authority from which they claim an a priori legitimacy for their truth over that of the others. One must resist the temptation of ‘theocratic imperialism’ always liable to surface. I conclude, in the public debate concerning our common good, that religions express a respectable but always a debatable point of view.

1  ‘Where I’m Speaking From’

This was a fashionable expression after May 1968 when I started my sociological apprenticeship: every person wanting to take part in a debate, whatever he/she was, had to start by presenting her/himself by answering the question ‘where are you speaking from?’ This injunction had the advantage of underlining the link between the argument maintained and the social position of its author but with the very real risk of abusive simplifications: the necessarily just discourse of the ‘worker’ as against the
necessarily false discourse of the ‘bourgeois’! However, given that one can avoid such caricature, it is a worthwhile exercise.

1.1 My Roots

I was born during the Second World War in the south of France. I grew up in Toulouse, a town with a political and cultural ‘micro-climate’ which strongly influenced me well before I was aware of it: the claiming of an identity rooted in the memory (defence of the occitan language and culture) and the political defence of regional autonomy as against the centralism of Paris. The ‘good’ King Saint-Louis, although sanctified for having led crusades, does not here have the sweet odour of saintliness, not so much for his crusades into the Middle East but for the ‘crusade against the Albigensians’ (Albi is a small town near Toulouse). Introducing the Inquisition, this crusade strove to rid the territory of the large population of Cathares who were viewed as heretics; the memory of this remains very much alive in local popular memory. King Saint-Louis sought to subjugate or otherwise control the local aristocracy.²

Recent history has revived this tradition of autonomy. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) ended with the victory of General Franco over the Republicans (among them, many anarcho-unionists), who in massive numbers sought exile in South America and in the south of France. The Spanish republican government in exile initially was sited in Mexico but from 1946 was settled in Toulouse, an event that reinforced the local political culture of self-management and of hostility towards the central power (Jornet 2005).

1.2 My Childhood

My family was divided by the same religion: the Catholicism of my paternal grandmother as against that of my mother. The first was ritual and individualist: religious practice was limited to participation in the rites, particularly Sunday mass and those marking the main steps of life:

²[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croisade_des_Albigeois].
baptism, marriage, burial and so on. She was in her own way anticlerical: the job of priests was to state the church's principles but not to interfere in politics nor in the everyday lives of people: she would much have preferred a French Catholic Church independent of Rome and maintained by the State as practised in totalitarian countries (e.g. in Russia and China today).

On the other hand, my mother's religion was based on a social engagement of a somewhat paternalistic nature. In my childhood memory, when my grandmother offered me sweets, she added: 'These are for you and not for your little friends'. When my mother gave me sweets, she said the opposite: 'These are for sharing with others!' Things were simple when I was alone with one or the other (eating sweets alone was not disagreeable for me!), but everything was much more complicated when I was with them together: how was it possible to satisfy both of these opposing requirements at the same time? I think today that this experience played its part in my interest later on in social transaction.

My father was a fairly explosive mixture of tradition and modernity. An engineer, he believed in scientific progress and in the virtues of free enterprise and the market. He was at the same time authoritarian, irascible and often violent. He corresponded reasonably well with the model of the 'authoritarian personality' analysed by Theodor Adorno (2007 [1950]): submissive before superiors but tyrannical to inferiors. He thought politics was divisive and was therefore a taboo subject; impossible to discuss such matters within the family.

My mother was also an engineer but, as a practising Catholic, she very soon withdrew from employment to dedicate herself to the education of her five children. Politically she was a centrist and dreamed of a society founded on the Christian values of love of one's neighbours and solidarity with the poor, respectful of the social doctrine of the church (Catholic therefore supposedly universal). She submitted to her husband's violence, physical and especially psychological. Priests counselled her that 'the law of God being superior to the law of man' and that therefore she should not think of divorcing as a shelter from her problems. Her health quickly declined and she died prematurely, victim of her religion. Traces of such institutional blindness are evident today in failures to assist women at risk (Storrie 2015).
1.3 My Adolescence

As a teenager, I thought myself very unlucky in having such a father! Following the established pattern, I took my mother’s side and shared her religious certainties without realising that they led to a dead-end. I understood much later that the problem of family violence was widespread and structural. The doctrinal rigidity of religions that condemn divorce is a factor reinforcing the vulnerability of married women.

My adolescence was also marked by the war in Algeria. If it was impossible to speak of this in the family, it was a major preoccupation among my schoolfellows. Most of us saw no problem with colonisation: while we objected to its excesses, it was generally viewed as a vehicle of progress for the colonies. I was personally horrified with what was done in the name of defending Christian civilisation: torturing, assassinations and so on. For my generation the burning question was ‘Accept doing military service in Algeria with the intention of promoting change from the inside, or desert?’ The end of the Algerian war, in 1963, spared me this choice. I retained a high level of distrust with regard to the state. I listened in secret to the Swiss Romandie radio in the attempt to detect what the official French radio was keeping from us with regard to the situation in Algeria. I learned early on to compare and contrast different news sources.

1.4 Discovery of the United States

When I was 17, I went to the East Coast of the United States where I spent a year living with an American family and attending the local school. My father was much in favour of this for he saw it a good preparation for future study at the Harvard Business School. He never realised that I mainly wanted to put an ocean between him and me! This was 1960/1961. I was there during the election of President John F. Kennedy. I bought into the myths of the ‘New Frontier’ and the ‘Peace Corps’ before falling back to earth with the pitiful attempt to invade Cuba (the Bay of Pigs operation). That opened my eyes to the need for a critical analysis of political discourse. During my stay, I made several discoveries
the importance of which I did not realise at the time, but which subsequently strongly influenced my orientation towards sociology.

I found the school very agreeable, contacts with the teachers friendly and easy but always with the feeling of wasting my time, not learning enough. It was only a long time afterwards that I understood that, in a country of immigration, which welcomes populations from many diverse cultural horizons, the priority of schooling is to be the melting pot for the formation of the local and national community. The aim of the school is learning to live together. The precocious selection of elites, based on school examination results, is a French particularity. Such a selection does also take place in the United States, but in a less scholarly fashion and later.

I also discovered an individualistic and puritan Protestantism in the French contemporary sense (rigid in moral principles) and not in the historical sense as explained by Tom Storrie (in Chap. 2). There is much forbidden and at the same time much tolerance of transgressions, which shocked me as very hypocritical. I was to understand later that this accusation of hypocrisy is reversible. Protestants have good reasons to hold the Catholic rite of confession as hypocritical: to receive pardon, it is sufficient to declare the list of sins to a priest who is then held to keep them secret! Protestant tolerance is based in respect for the individual: each person reads and interprets the Bible in his/her own way which shows respect for the other in her/his otherness. However, this tolerance is not always practised, especially where Protestantism expresses a majority view.

J.-F. Kennedy was the first Catholic US president and I was surprised to see how important religion was politically. Specialists analysed the influence of the religious factor (Catholic, Jewish, etc.) on the vote and also the importance of ethnic origins (Italy, Ireland, Russia, etc.). In this way, I came to a sociological approach from considerations of religion which I later realised was mechanistic and simplistic by virtue of overmuch confidence in statistics, the limits of which were then insufficiently analysed.
1.5 My Time as a Student

My return to France was tough. As I was not willing to follow the career plan mapped out for me by my father, he threw me out of the house. I was able to pursue my studies thanks to the financial support of progressive Catholic institutions. I was involved in socially concerned voluntary organisations, not necessarily religious, notably teaching gypsies (we did not yet call them Romans) to read and write in a Toulouse shantytown. This was the period of preparing for Vatican Council 2 (1962–1965) which raised great hopes of ‘mise à jour’ (aggiornamento) in the Catholic Church: was it going to open up to the world and make its message audible, having dialogue with other religions, denouncing social inequalities and corruption? There was indeed some progress but clearly insufficient in my eyes.

I became radicalised by frequenting Christian Marxist groups. Without going into too many details, the aim was to associate Marxist social thinking with a rereading of the gospel and emphasising ‘the preferential option of the poor’. The experience of worker-priests, who still continued their labours discreetly in spite of being banned in 1953 by the French Catholic hierarchy, was one reference as was especially the support for the liberation struggles in the third world, particularly in Latin America with notably Gustavo Gutiérrez ([1971] 1974).

During the same period, I became absorbed by the ‘theology of the death of God’ initiated by the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a Nazi prison before his death in 1945 in a concentration camp. A Dominican iconoclastic monk, Jean Cardonnel, introduced it to me in a book with the provocative and ambiguous title: God Died in Jesus-Christ (1968). This theology sweeps away the false gods to make way for the true god, which is in effect a very classical argument; it can also lead to atheism, the radicality of the gospel message being able to dispense with any divine justification.

May 1968 was an important step. In participating in the student movement in Toulouse, I engaged myself in politics but in my own way. I took part in the occupation of the university, taking care not to get myself locked in there and to avoid the students being cut off from the
rest of the population. Organising open-door days or lectures open to all seemed to me useful but not nearly enough. I was also very much aware of the international dimension of student protests and I took part in defending foreign students threatened by police. In the demonstrations of support for Dany Cohn-Bendit, a Franco-German bi-national and one of the Parisian student leaders threatened with expulsion by the Minister of the Interior, I very much approved of the slogan: ‘We are all German Jews’.

The coming-together of the student movement and working-class organisations was the protected fiefdom of extreme left political parties and groups. I was shocked to discover doctrinal quarrels and excommunications among Maoists, Trotskyists and so on. I have since remained allergic to any such tight political action. I sought without much success to experiment with new intervention methods with regard to workers and with the general street gatherings on marches or in public places in the town centre but especially in the suburbs. The outlines of my specialisation in urban sociology are apparent in this context.

The Franco-German Youth Office (Office franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse—OFAJ) was created in 1963 in order to encourage young French and Germans to understand each other better (see Storrie’s contribution in this book). I took part in its initial activities in the Toulouse region. My son and my daughters are both French and German and I may say that they are ‘OFAJ children’! This allowed me to discover Germany both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. I was able to see how a secular State can function which is not founded on the separation of Church and State, but rather on an institutionalisation of their cooperation (see below).

1.6 Entry into Professional Life

I started my professional career in the University of Nancy in 1970 as an urban sociologist. I investigated the renovation-demolition of shantytowns in the old neighbourhoods of the centre and the relocation of their residents in the new high-rise ensembles built on the periphery. I looked to do research that might enlighten the inhabitants and help them to organise and express themselves collectively. My interest in forms of
participative democracy, very much alive today, stems from these experiences. Worker-priests or communist intellectuals took their place in factories in order to share the conditions of life and work of the working class. In a similar way, I wanted to share the conditions of life of the people by living for many years in these high-rise residential social ensembles. At their creation, they were presented as ‘laboratories’ of tomorrow’s town (Blanc 2014).

2 Secularities (laïcités) and the Place of Religions in the Public Domain

2.1 Lay People Inside and Outside Churches

We need to distinguish two meanings of the word lay. It derives from the Greek laïos and designated the common people as distinguished from clerics and educated people who held power. In a church, the lay people are the faithful or the ‘base’ and they are held together by a minority of clerics. The place and the role of lay people in the church raise questions of citizenship and of democracy: they might be either submissive, docile, merely following routines or autonomous actors making decisions. The Catholic Church resists even the slightest move towards any internal democratisation with its overwhelming argument of the dogma of papal infallibility. The pervasive sexism aggravates the problem. Women are without a doubt more numerous than men in the Church, but their exclusion from power is blatant. There remains much to do with regard to these two levels and the problem is not confined to churches: it is present in the armed forces, schools, hospitals and all hierarchical institutions.

The second meaning of lay indicates those people, men and women, who are exterior to religion, whether indifferent or hostile. The question then becomes how to persuade those who believe and those who do not believe to accept living together. Before answering this question, we need to examine the status and the place of religion in society: should it be in the public or the private domain or both at the same time?
2.2 Religion, a Public or Private Matter?

The foundation of religious liberty is the private choice of each person to practise the religion of her/his choice or to practise none. Secularity (laïcité) is based on the neutrality of the state with respect to religions, but there remains an ambiguity with regard to their place in civil society.

There are two aspects to this neutrality as it refers to institutions and to individuals. With regard to institutions, secularity puts all religions on an equal footing: no religion should have priority over the others. Religions are also on the same footing as philosophies and various other lines of thinking. From the point of view of individuals, participation in any social activity (employment, sport, etc.) cannot depend on membership of a particular religion: that would in France amount to illegal discrimination, which does not however mean that it has disappeared, as for instance with regard to Islam.

However, this principle of neutrality remains vague and interpreted in multiple divergent and sometimes opposing ways. Insofar as religion limits itself to a number of precepts and rites which can be contained in the private sphere, secularism accepts them without difficulty. Difficulties arise when a religion demands its room in the public domain.

In the 1970s, when teaching immigrant workers to read and write, I discovered an Islam practised in cellars and garages, deliberately discreet, not seeking to leave the private sphere. Most of these Muslims then believed that their stay in France would be short (Sayad 1999). Things changed in the 1980s when their children wanted to share in French public life and no longer keep themselves to one side, claiming among other things a visibility for Islam equal to that of other religions. It was the passing ‘from the time of the fathers to the time of the sons’ (Hammouche 2015: 73).

Symmetrically, I discovered at the same time, and with deep feelings of uneasiness, the intolerance of ‘the religion of secularity’ (Baubérot 2006). Two dangerous slippages occurred: first, neutrality with regard to every religion gave way to ignorance and rejection; then, religion became a purely private matter and all religions were not considered appropriate for the public domain. In fact a selection process was operating whereby
some religions were ‘more acceptable than others’; what is more worrying is that this selection was unconscious. For example, the compromise between the French State and the Catholic Church on the issue of public holidays has shocked the Jews for a long time and more recently some Muslims, but not many others: the origin has been forgotten and its legitimacy now relies on its well-establishedness. By contrast, to introduce a Muslim or Jewish public holiday would be seen as an offence against secularism!

Those claiming to be secular are divided on whether or not religions should be visible in the public domain. In the opinion of the antireligious secularists (Baubérot 2015), the Catholic mass is an enactment of the truth that ‘religion is the opium of the people’, and in order therefore to protect the people, one must combat the unhealthy influence of churches by excluding them from the public sphere. However, religions do carry a vision of the world and they have a message, which they wish legitimately to make known and, if possible, share. They wish to contribute to the public debate and enrich it. The recent inter-religious movement in support of the struggle against global warming is a good example of this.

The problem for secularism is to reconcile the right of churches to advertise themselves in the primary sense of making the public aware of them, while at the same time preventing sectarian manipulations and deviations. Baubérot (2015) identifies seven forms of secularism and underlines the opposition between rejectionist and separatist secularism, which to varying degrees recognise that religions do have a place in the public domain. I find this analysis useful, drawing a distinction between open and closed secularisms.

### 2.3 Open Secularism

Religions are positively admitted and recognised: they are a form of a collective work of art and, as sketched out by André Malraux (1957) just before he became Minister of Culture in France, religions belong to the intangible heritage of humanity. The risk here is to consider them no
more than vestiges of the past, as museum pieces, as one today might criticise UNESCO policies in this regard. For an open secularism, this religious inheritance is alive and able to adapt and respond to the questions of today.

Minority voices today underline that the struggle against jihadism cannot be limited only to policing issues: it has two other essential battle-grounds, integration into society and the religious development of an authentic Islam. Be it waged in a reputedly Muslim country or elsewhere, the ‘holy war’ is a ‘struggle for recognition’ against the society which scorns them (Honneth 2000, 2006). The de-radicalisation of jihadists has economic, social and cultural dimensions, including the struggle against both poverty and racism. It includes also, interior to Islam, a theological effort to counteract the grotesque amalgamation—and how efficacious!—between Islam and barbarity (Bouzar 2014). Two approaches, embracing both the religious and citizenship dimensions, are associated in an entirely novel cooperation between civil society, the State and religions. I find my place in the separatist and inclusive secularism, where the religions are separated from the State but included in civil society (Baubérot 2015).

In Germany, secularity does not depend upon the separation of Church and State. Although fragile, the majority party today is the Christian-Democratic Union. At the federal, regional and local level, the State can cooperate with religious organisations and delegate to them the management of public services in the social and cultural domains. I have observed this in the Soziale Stadt programme (‘Social City’ equivalent to the politique de la ville in France) for the Quartier-Management (a form of urban and social development programme): the main partners are Caritas (Catholic), Diakonie (Protestant) and Arbeiterwohlfahrt, (Workers’ Wellbeing, the origins of which are in the secular trade unionism). The partner is selected locally in terms of expertise and relevance to the needs of all those in the area designated and not simply for a particular religious community. Renewal of contract is subject to evaluation (Blanc 2013b). The presence of religion in the public domain is thus recognised and France could usefully consider this concordat approach (laïcité concordataire, in Baubérot 2015).
2.4 Closed Secularism

This form is much more suspicious of churches, explained by a reading of recent history. In a ‘golden age’—which I am very happy not to have known!—churches held absolute power, religious, political, scientific, military and so on. Churches resented the secularisation process, which is far from being completed, of the separation of powers which they saw as an unacceptable loss to them (e.g. the condemnation of Galileo in the scientific field). In the nineteenth century in France, the Catholic Church was particularly reactionary in the proper sense of the term: hostile to any change, adamant in the defence of the status-quo and refusing all concession. A showdown was therefore inevitable; neutrality with regard to religions also became the neutralisation of the religious hegemony.

In spite of this drama, the French law of 1905 regulating the separation of Church and State is a ‘pact’, an informal and paradoxical transaction (Baubérot 2006): religious property was transferred to the State at the level of the commune (the parish council) which henceforth was responsible for their material upkeep but made them freely available for religious practices. In other words, all inhabitants of the commune paid with their taxes for the upkeep of the church property, which was in fact only used by a fraction of them. This is not illegitimate: these locations have also a touristic and/or a patrimonial function (see below). Today, the Catholic authorities have no desire to return to the past! The real question now is why does this measure only apply to religions recognised in 1905 (Catholic, Protestant and Jewish) and not expanded to include mosques. The legal objections concerning the non-retroactivity of laws seem to me fallacious: here again, we are confronted with the legitimacy of the old and the illegitimacy of the new (Elias and Scotson 1997).
3 Citizenship, Public and Private

3.1 Levels of Citizenship Action

Citizenship action is practised at different levels and in variable forms. As indicated in the introduction, it first appeared in towns and was anchored in the local dimension. It was a question of deciding together how to nurture the common good, a debate evidently much easier at this local level than at a higher level.

With the French Revolution, citizenship slipped from the local to the national level as the first obvious need was to defend the Patrie (mother-land!) in danger: a citizens’ army was more reliable than an army of mercenaries, offering themselves for sale to the highest bidder. However, the rhetoric of ‘army, school and citizenship’ is suspect for two reasons: it takes for granted that the national community would come together against a common enemy. The national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, is a warrior song and even a call for genocide. It is equally false to believe that military service encourages social mixing and the reduction of inequalities. Having done my military service in privileged conditions (English teacher in a military school) I unwillingly benefited of this unequal treatment.

At the national level, citizenship action necessarily takes place through formal and informal voluntary organisations. The field of activity is vast: human rights (notably today those of migrants, *Romas* and refugees), solidarity with the most deprived, climate and the environment and so on. The most frequent form is that of motivated citizens who meet to analyse a problem, make public opinion aware of it, call upon the powers-that-be to account for their failures and even suggest to them proposals for remedial action. More rarely, there can be citizens’ initiatives, which even institute solutions to the problem. In France, the *Restos du coeur* (restaurants open and free to all in need) created in 1985, on the initiative of the comedian and actor Coluche, is a good example of this.

Citizenship action does not stop at national frontiers. ‘Citizen of the world’ is a beautiful but vague expression. There are problems of corruption, trafficking of all kinds or climate change, impacting at the
continental level (‘regional’ in the vocabulary of international institutions) or at the global level. Many citizens and humanitarian organisations seek to operate at these levels. Non-governmental international organisations (ONG), religious or not, become involved in multiple difficulties: intercultural misunderstandings, relations of domination of the North upon the South and so on.

3.2 The Aims of Citizenship Action

Citizenship action seeks the realisation of a common good in a specific situation. One should distance oneself from a current view of a disembodied citizenship (Schnapper 1994): acting as a citizen does not imply abstracting oneself from personal interests. These need to be borne in mind but relativising and integrating them within a collective project. There are two non-dissociable aspects to citizenship action: defining the specific common good and putting into operation activities towards this end, a form of ‘communicational action’ (Habermas 1981) but with the proviso that it does not depend on consensus: debate is conflictual and the public domain is ‘oppositional’ (Negt 2007). The source of a citizenship action is often the private initiative of a few individuals and it moves into the public sphere when it begins to achieve success, develops and receives the interest of a wider world. The distinction between public and private is necessary but without seeing them as oppositional. The important feminist intuition is relevant here: ‘The Personal is Political’ (Hanisch 1970). The frontiers between the public and the private are not fixed and it is a matter of public debate as to what legitimately should be located in the private sphere. For example, intra-familial violence was for a long time considered a private affair, of no concern to neighbours. It is good that this is now a public problem, the concern of a larger grouping of public and private actors of variable geometry depending on circumstances.

These are new forms of public/private citizenship partnerships and religions can take part in two ways: by bringing their proactive contribution for the resolution of a public problem and by accepting exterior help in resolving their internal malfunctioning. Turning again to the example
of familial violence, churches could be encouraged to purify their message and their practice in order to eliminate all traces of that which might allow one to believe that such violence is religiously acceptable. They could also be called to account with regard to sexual abuse and paedophilic affairs, corruption and/or sectarian practices within religious institutions. In religion, as elsewhere, these practices are not purely internal matters depending solely on a complacent internal justice; these issues require public debate.

3.3 Universal Religions and Social Transactions

Contrary to religious discourse, which considers its sources divine and therefore immutable, messages are always relative and ambiguous: either for a biblical or koranic expert, it is child’s play to find passages giving opposing responses to the same question. For example, how to treat the unfaithful: by tolerance and respect for their convictions, or by requiring their forced conversion to the ‘true’ God? Both responses can be found in the Old and the New Testaments and in the Koran as well. It is a matter of context and subjective appreciation of the situation.

Churches are human groups and, as human groups, they are riddled with internal conflicts. An important line of division, within families and professions as well as within religions, puts those faithful to tradition on one side and those open to modernity on the other. Holding on to both these opposing perspectives together, each one of which contains a part of the truth, depends upon transactional compromises. It is a matter of distinguishing what is optional, tied to a given context and liable to evolve, from what is essential (or the ‘central kernel’), on which then one can accept a compromise. Wearing a veil is very useful as a protection for the face in a sand storm but is it as necessary in a modern town? Is religious conviction to be measured by the wearing of a garment? Popular wisdom counsels otherwise: ‘the habit doesn’t make the monk!’

Transaction consists here in defining the point of equilibrium between

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3 It might become so with the corona virus!
conservation and adaptation; there may be external pressures but this is a dynamic internal to each religion.

Churches are in competition with each other; history, ancient or recent, is marked by wars of religion leaving deep and durable traces. Religions claiming universality compete in terms of values. To cohabit successfully, they need to create transactional compromises of another sort. Except by denying their founding principles, churches cannot negotiate that their God may no longer be the only true god! Paradoxically, social transaction allowing a compromise of coexistence between religions would require putting theological questions between brackets and seeking in the human laws the foundation for their peaceful coexistence. However important it might be, such an inter-religious agreement would remain insufficient because even churches together do not have a monopoly on values and they must therefore seek a basis of agreement with other philosophic, humanist and scientific traditions and so on.

Churches may be nostalgic for the past when theocratic power was both political and religious. They were able to be totalitarian when hegemonic (e.g. the Inquisition). However, churches in a minority position have played a counterbalancing role against some dictators. In the recent past, this was notably the case in Spain under the dictatorship of Franco and in Portugal under the less brutal dictatorship of Salazar: the Catholic Church was the oppositional ‘lifebuoy’ in spite of the entrenched anticlericalism of certain opponents. In the same way, the Catholic Church in Poland and the protestant churches in the former East Germany contributed to releasing the grip of neo-Stalinism. These were important interventions into the political domain, even if they remained discreet.

To exclude churches from political debate, as the fundamentalist version of the religion of secularism would have it, is absurd: citizenship is open to all, believers and non-believers. Unless one thinks that religion should only be concerned with folklore rites, without any real importance in everyday life, it is impossible to corral religion only into the private sphere.
4 Conclusion: Taking Religion Seriously but Without Complacency

If churches are willing participants in public debates, they are not endowed with any moral authority putting them in a superior position to others. What a religion presents as God’s Law is one social production among others, adopted by those who share the same belief, but it cannot be legitimately imposed on others. Only the law of men and women can have any claim to universality and this has two major consequences: doing is more important than saying. Alliances are temporary and limited between public authorities, citizen’s groups and religious associations.

4.1 Saying Is Not Doing

Without denying the performative power of words (When saying is doing, John Austin’s well-known title, 1962), the actual act is more important than the justifications given for it. Affirmations of solidarity with others are only of value when translated into concrete acts. Saying does indeed have value but this is secondary when set against actions illustrating love of neighbour or solidarity with the working class.

Conversely, claiming the same religion does not imply any political agreement in terms of a vision for the future. The Catholic Church today is severely divided. On the one hand, the Pope is calling for an ‘ecological revolution’ and also for a careful rethinking of attitudes towards the family. On the other hand, the most conservative and traditionalist wing is strongly defensive of the idealised traditional family: the Napoleonic family code, negotiated with the church, tacitly admitted that the husband might have a mistress, provided the matter was kept discreet. In the ‘bourgeois’ family, economic matters, notably concerning inheritance, are more important than affective relations.

There are without doubt many common points between Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists concerning the subordinate status of women or in recourse to violence, more perhaps than between progressives and fundamentalists within their own respective churches. It would
be counterproductive to condemn en bloc religion as ‘the opium of the people’. On the contrary, one needs to work upon the internal tensions to marginalise the fundamentalists and to bring together the progressives, both in and beyond the churches.

### 4.2 Active Citizens and Religions

I can cooperate with Christians, Jews and Muslims in defending the rights of foreigners and in denouncing the immigration policies in Europe and in France of governments of both the right and the left. At the same time, I would firmly oppose the majority of them on the rights of men and women on matters of sexuality, marriage and abortion.

Citizenship action is rebel action. Sophocles presents this in the figure of Antigone who, in peril of her life, stood against her uncle who represented three forms of power: patriarchal, political and religious. Antigone is an example of resistance by one individual but this model needs to be completed by introducing the idea of resistance that is also collective, and by this means of exerting a more sustainable influence.

Today I am an atheist or non-believer; I know neither what is the difference between these two words nor which one is the more appropriate. My Catholic education has given me values to which I still adhere, although they are now secularised. It has also given me blinkers of which I have tried to rid myself. I have no more personal problems with my religion of origin and I wish a long life to all religions, if they support their congregations in living in a secular world. However, they permanently need to be goaded to do this and I will be in conflict with them if they lose sight of these objectives, although I am unable to be as bold as David was with Goliath!

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