

IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM POSSIBLE?

By Gordana Živković

Gordana Živković, PhD, is a member of the Institute for European Studies in Belgrade, Serbia. She received her doctorate at the Law School of University of Belgrade. She founded and is the director of the Center for Christian Studies in Belgrade. Her writings deal with issues of church and state as well as culture and religion. She is the author of many essays on these topics and is a participant in numerous international conferences.

It is not strange at all that religious freedoms cause so much intellectual interest and spiritual attention, since they are an important unavoidable part of precious civilizational heritage, epitomized in human rights and freedoms. The problem of human freedom and human rights has become the dominant problem of our epoch. Are human freedom and human rights a part of modern social reality? Do they really guarantee man's full practice of religion? Or are these rights only jurisdictional and formal? Is there harmony or discord between "the formal" and "the real" in this field? These questions are being seriously analyzed at present.

This is why we should ask ourselves what faith is? Above all, faith is an ontological category, "a new mode of human existence", "a new quality of human life". Namely, it represents a life of constant "reunion and commuting with God", for the sake of fundamental transformation of the whole human being from "the old man" into "a new man" through purification and liberation, through inner renaissance. This transformation occurs through a "gratified restoration of the mind", involving the person's entire personality, i.e. all his mental, intellectual and scientific forces. With this transformation the person rehabilitates himself/herself, becoming an authentic being with "god-like capacities", thus, actually, becoming able to live a way of life which is in harmony with his true nature of a "god-like creature" – a creature that is in its essence free, creative and social.

But let us then ask ourselves what is freedom? In modern political and legal philosophy, freedom is considered to be separate from someone else's authority (most frequently, from state authority); that is why "human rights and freedoms" exist, lest they secure a kind of balance between authority and freedom. However, the nature of freedom and authority does not allow limitations, and any kind of relativity in fact questions their meaning. If this is so, can we then fully secure the freedom of human faith in the modern world by just declaring religious freedoms? In fact, religious freedom is not "liberation from someone" but "liberation for someone", the human being's "ecstatic stepping out" of her/his introversion and loneliness and a step towards loving someone else, 'practiced' through the so-called religious codices of behavior, in a life filled with love, forgiveness, repentance, mercy, cooperation, solidarity, mutual respect, and respect for other's needs as much as one's own. By RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 2 (April 2004) page 29.

following such specific norms the person openly obliges her/himself to “good will” towards others and to a high level of morality and conscience in all his/her actions.

But what is the correlation between these “religious models” of behavior and the dominant type of “absolutistic rationality”, which is the base of modern political community? In fact, what is the relationship between the principles of the modern world’s order and the basic principles of religious life? Are they in harmony or are they opposed? Today, the practice of freedom of faith depends somewhat on that. A partial answer to this question may come if we realize some basic facts about the spiritual situation of our time. First of all, whether we understand the relationship between the modern western European world that revolves around the human being and religion; second of all, whether we understand the relationship between rationality (*ratio*) as the very base of this civilization and faith; and finally, whether we understand the relationship between the Church and the state.

So, what is the relationship between the modern world and religion? Many facts of social reality undoubtedly indicate that the Mind – the base of western European civilization, the ‘God of modern age’ – is clearly not capable of substituting religion’s power of integration (which the Mind had, by the way, ignored while shaping the life of the human being, nations, and the social community, placing it entirely in the domain of ‘privacy’, and actually expelling it from the world). By not ‘taking truth into consideration’, the Mind irrecoverably degraded itself and became ‘rationality which is at the service of self-preservation and its rabid interests.’ In fact, in this way the rationality of the new century (which is considered to be an absolute truth and more advantageous than religion) completely renounced itself of recognition and became the supporter of power itself. That is what is being manifested in the science of the new century, entirely based on technology and on governments’ interests! For sure, here lies the powerful germ of the destructiveness of development and a possible catastrophe. Proof of this is the imminence of an ecological catastrophe, the planet’s slow death, and destruction of the world in which we live.

Obvious consequences of the downfall (destruction) of the substantial mind – epitomized in religion and metaphysics which are being pushed out in the modern age – are reflected in the ‘face’ of the modern world. This is a world of shattered unity and wholeness, in which the links between nature and human being have been torn, between an individual and society, and between the human and God. It is a godless, technological world, deprived of miracles and secrets. It is a world of cold rationalism and scientism. In one word, it is a world of the impersonal! What happens to the human in such a world? When s/he realizes that the world s/he lives in is only her/his ‘body’, the ‘matrix’ s/he cannot depart, then the consequences are very far fetched. The human being starts living in deep isolation and loneliness. His/her autonomy is diminished, s/he becomes unable to judge independently, s/his imagination atrophies. The human becomes the servant of the ever more powerful systems of manipulation, a supplement to technology. His/her destiny becomes cruel: his/her essence is ‘turned into a thing’, human relations become ‘impersonal and rational,’ without a place for faith, feelings, suffering, pain, and creation.

When we realize this we can understand the real condition of believers today. Namely, when the human being realizes that life in faith is his/her authentic and irreplaceable need, which s/he can never give up on, s/he must begin a 'spiritual war' with the whole world, based on principles and values completely opposite to basic 'imperatives' of religious life. It is a war against absolutistic rationality – the overwhelming type of relationship in the secular, modern world – which primarily takes care of requests for securing pure power based on pure interest. This useless, old type of rationality pushes back the issue of human freedom, justice, truth, morality, happiness. That is why it is important to remove the damaging consequences of absolutistic rationality, in the name of human liberation! Actually, this means that apart from the matters of the mind, one must take into very serious consideration human needs and feelings, imagination and judgment, wishes and passions, and must envelop all the dimensions of humanity with them. Through the fight for a 'new type of rationality', which goes against the repressive mind's orders, the doubtless, huge potential of the ontology of faith becomes clear.

Let us conclude: we are faced with a question which requires a determined answer. How can the human being integrate her/himself into the existing social community, follow its orientation, motivation, regulatory and legal norms, and not destroy the autonomy of her/his faith or 'block' the possible exit? Doesn't this show the tragic position of believers in today's world? As far as our part of the world [Balkans] is concerned, things are more than clear: we witness the calls for preserving human rights and freedoms, religious ones included, while we see them being negated at the same time! This is being done by the 'virtuous' fighters for democracy and our 'return to Europe', who completely 'forget' the fact that Europe was created by religious (Christian) doctrinarian/practical actions, as a specific historical, cultural, spiritual, and civilizational space. But at the same time they are against any 'stimulation of religion in public life' and for 'privatization of Christian life.' Also, it seems they do not realize that they are representing a typically socialist attitude, according to which the Church belongs primarily to the domain of human 'privacy,' having nothing to do in public social life – and therefore, they are reaching for the 'repetition' of the so-called 'Yugoslav Socialism,' which they try so hard to evade verbally! Therefore, the believer has the option to live his/her 'religious life' in church only, during solitary and deeply intimate moments, to forget this life when entering the public, and to practice her/his civil rights and freedoms exclusively as an atheist. Thus, the only choice a believer has is to either give up on the idea of him/herself as a believer and make decisions on political issues, or 'remain religious' but excluded from politics. A believer in politics? A religious look at the world as a 'legitimate' option in current dialogues about social community? Theology and rationalism, equating of positivistic, empirical and spiritual arguments? This might be possible but not in this time and space! This is exactly why our present day integration into Europe requires vivification of the Christian part of our identity: a critical evaluation of Christian ideas, values, tradition and a decision about their place in the new post communist society in this part of the world.

Due to all of the above-mentioned reasons, a hierarchy is being 'silently differentiated' and created among believers: actually, it is a division between the 'authentic' believers – abstainers - and the 'secularized' believers. While the first firmly reach for a life filled with truth, justice, love, mercy, personal self-limitation, apology, sacrifice, true sociality – not accepting the schizophrenic duality of the 'private' and 'public' being – the others integrate themselves into the secularized, modern political community, respecting all of its 'written' regulations about how to behave and live, and satisfying their religious needs in 'private.' There is no doubt that these 'believers' remain trapped in the superficial, exterior, ritualistic, folkloric, and even marketing dimensions of faith. It seems that the most desirable and only acceptable type of believer is the 'surrogate believer,' who practices religion in private life while being an impersonalized citizen in public life! Even among the Church hierarchy one can hear the opinion that a believer living in the secular world is not obliged to climb the 'ladder of monks' during his/her 'religious upgrading', but that s/he should consume 'modes that bring salvation' on the 'market of spirituality', which are not contradictory to his/her secular obligations. As if it is possible for one to believe in God on 'different levels' and to practice faith partially.

Therefore, one can conclude that a believer is 'torn' within into a 'private' and 'public' part; s/he can function privately as a believer, while in public s/he must behave like a 'citizen' devoid of concrete personality traits, authentic feelings, needs, hopes, and dreams. Doesn't that mean that religious freedoms are just proclaimed, normative, and legal; and that it is up to the inner strength of every believer to make these religious freedoms part of the modern world's practice?

Translated from Serbian by Jelena Stojičević