The Religious Factor in the Global World: Indicator and Modality of Management

Patrick Michel, Ph.D.
Senior Research Fellow, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique,
Full Professor, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France
(Centre Maurice Halbwachs, Paris, France)

Abstract:
Our point of departure is Michel de Certeau's statement that when the politics weakens, the religious returns. However, when it returns, it is not the same. The first function of its re-appearance is to emphasise such a severe deficit of politics that it cannot, so to speak, be expressed. Hence the recourse to religion as is shown in the situation of the generalised fluidity of signifiers and markers by the articulation of simultaneous urgency and impossibility to build up a renewed relation of totality.

This central problematics (the religious factor as indicator and management mode) will be explored through certain hypotheses considered to be particularly important:

- *the production, via religion, of an individuation that is compatible with the process of globalization that is taking place in the contemporary world;*
- *the management, through religion, of the re-articulation of the changing relations between the individual—community—universal;*
- *the establishment, through religion, of a renewed relation to politics.*

What I am going to discuss here, in the continuation of a reflection that I have carried on for several year[1], will be resolutely theoretical. The purpose here is, while taking note of the impasse reached by the sociology of religions[2], to consider the question of what the real issue at stake when religion is discussed. This leads to grasp the religious factor not as such, but as a sign which, once it is contextualized, appears likely to constitute an analyzer, an incidentally remarkable one, of the recompositions of the contemporary. Turning one's back on the indigenous theories of specialized sociologies, to use the phrase of Jacques Commailles, what is also at stake is to put religion (and more largely, in the perspective of Michel de Certeau, the "believing") back at the heart of general sociology[3].

We are in fact utterly unable to define the whole extent of the effects of a trend, which is broad as well as universal (and is thus not only limited to the developed Western societies, but affects all the contemporary societies, whatever their specific modalities), towards the individuation of the establishment of a relation to meaning. What is at stake on the religious field intervenes here as the vehicle and the revelatory element of this individuation of believing as well as, simultaneously, a potential resource to curb, contest, or even refuse both the

individuation and the strong tendencies which the latter partakes of and that it may seem to recapitulate. It allows just as much, by supplying the requisite indexes to ensure its translation, "to get to grips" with these trends.

Secondly, and in the same perspective, we should acknowledge the limits which the analyses that are "traditionally" developed concerning the religious have to deal with. The contemporary processes of decomposition-recomposition experienced by our societies emphasize the obsolescence of a conceptual apparatus articulated for the most part, as far as religion is concerned, with the theories of secularization and – in fact symmetrically more than contrarily – with the "religious creations" of modernity, even if we called this a "hyper" or a "post" modernity. Hence the necessity of rethinking at new expenses, the relationship of our societies with believing, by standing in the perspective of an approach through the "believing", and of a conception aiming to set the latter into a practical experience (or, to say it more acurately, in "the shift of a saying on a doing"), and to draw out a renewed and effective intellectual toolbox from this reflection.

The necessity for such a renewal is evidenced by the confusion existing around that theme. Religion is often turned, in the analysis, into an object that is exterior to evolutions with which its relations will be studied from then on. There would thus be, for instance, a "religious dimension to globalization"[4]. The latter would induce effects of adaptation, of adjustment or would result in transformations affecting religion. Such an approach, which perpetuates the idea that there is a religious sphere characterized by an at least relative autonomy, stems in fact from a double presupposition: it would be possible to bring back and to limit the mutations of contemporary believing to what we can perceive of it in the sole domain of the religious; a conception of this religious which is formed in and through the reference to an organizing stability would remain valid in order to identify the evolutions induced by the contemporary movement.

These presuppositions are at work in the way that are raised and handled, on the media level, the political level but also often on the scientific level questions such as: Is religion favourable to some form of economy? Is religion (or some denomination, and of course first of all Islam) compatible or not with democracy? Is there a "renewal" or a "return of the religious", if not a "revenge of God"? In a country like France, is the "laïcité" threatened ? Etc. As many false good questions that an approach through the contemporary recompositions of the believing must enable to reformulate.

Finally, it is important to come back to Michel de Certeau's statement that when politics gives ground, the religious comes back. But if it comes back, it is most certainly not as such. One can make the hypothesis that after the disqualification of utopia as the core of the legitimation of a political enterprise, its visibility would first fulfil the function of stressing a deficit of politics that is so cruel that it would not have the political words to tell itself. Hence the recourse to the religious factor as a register of articulation, in a situation of generalized wavering of reference points and markers, of the urgency and the simultaneous impossibility of building a renewed relation to totality. And on this background of exhaustion of the believable in which even more than the credibility of religion, it is the credibility of politics which is now being questioned.

This central problematics (the religious phenomenon as indicator *and* modality of management) will here be explored, of course without exhausting it, in some of its dimensions, gauged as particularly important. Being closely articulated, they concern:

- The production, via religion, of an individuation that is compatible with the processes of globalization at work on the contemporary stage;
- The management, via religion, of the rearticulation of the changing relation between the individual, the community and the universal ;
- The setting-up, via religion, of a renewed relation to politics.

These three dimensions appear to be central if one considers as an established fact that nowadays we cannot think in their totality both the effects of the speeding-up of the process of individuation of the beliefs and those of the inevitable relativization that these beliefs undergo because globalization is an obvious fact. And this inability to think them as a whole leads to many misinterpretations.

In connection with Jesus Garcia-Ruiz's paper, we will use the example of conservative Protestant Christianity, which has experienced "a constant and generalized progression (…) for thirty or forty years". Taking this observation as a starting point, David Martin claimed that Evangelism represented "the most dynamic religious denomination in the developed Western world", explaining that "what is first expanding is not evangelism, which is more ancient and serious-minded, but Pentecostalism"[5]. And, if we might add, not so much "classical" Pentecostalism than a neo-Pentecostalism that considers that the Second Coming of the Christ ought not to be the object of passive expectation: as the Kingdom is already in this world, an active strategy of conquest, occupation, or even of saturation of the public space is necessary.

Faced with this progression, several analytical postures have been tried. One of them favours an interpretation using the religious factor and trying to understand how and why what articulates the Evangelists' offer is likely to emphasize by default, beyond the programmed exhaustion of Catholicism, the ineluctable nature of the sharp drop affecting the trajectories of historical Protestantism. It thus makes of Pentecostalism one of the main components of a religious globalization[6], analyzing the circulations of actors and world-scale resources underpinning this religious globalization. A second interpretation, which is centred on socio-politics, makes of Evangelism, or more precisely the structures implemented with this label, a resource, and a particularly appropriate or relevant one, put forward in order to manage the recompositions induced by the acceleration of the contemporary movement[7].

Both interpretations had to be confronted, whatever were the priorities kept to do it, with the important questions raised by the "constant and generalized" progression of Evangelism. Indeed, this progression forces us now to revisit the idea of a continuous and irreversible secularization of societies that are tormented by the logics of a plural modernity so that it can have been used as an expression of the exactly reverse thesis of a de-secularization, or even of a "return of god" or a "re-enchantment of the world". To simply take up again the titles of books published by Harvey Cox [8] and Peter Berger, who used to be great theoreticians of secularization and are now confessing that they were radically mistaken on the

interpretation of a world that is becoming "more furiously religious than ever"[9], according to them. In this perspective some have presented neo-Pentecostalism as the religion of the twenty-first century…

Moreover, this renewed Pentecostalism does not try very hard to conceal its close ties with a specifically North-American conservative conception of society and of the world. In this conception, of which neo-Pentecostalism is a major vehicle of diffusion, the frontiers between politics, religion, economy and ideology tend to fade, if not to disappear. The collapse of communism has admittedly deprived this denomination of the enemy that was giving it a certain meaning but, when interpreted as a sign of divine blessing, this very collapse outlines the horizon of a planet with American colours, a project which is informed by a "theology of prosperity and wealth" serving the "mission" America would have to see through. According to this viewpoint, the relationship with Islam is essential, since Islam (which is necessarily radical) appears to be *the other* religion, which would be constantly gaining ground, as well as the religion of *the Other* which would substantiate the existence of a "clash of civilization" in which, like during the Cold War yesterday, the United states would embody Good.

This parallel with radical Islam is also likely to make sense in the register of contemporary identities and of the generalized wavering that they would be experiencing because of the recompositions induced by the economic and cultural globalization. Just as this radical Islam would be the pure product of the confrontation with a Western modernity that is simultaneously desired and rejected, a privileged space of the articulation of fantasies and frustrations, the progress of conservative Evangelism would constitute, *as such*, an interpretative grid of the modalities of management of the reconstruction of identitary mechanisms allowing to get to grips with movement. And, ultimately – to loop the loop – the increase in power of fundamentalism would evidence the big comeback of religion on the domestic, transnational and internal scenes.

The interpretations mentioned before all share the distinctive feature of being centred on the religious supply, as it is elaborated, put forward, and possibly adapted in order to take into account the specificities of the fields on which it is projected. They start from the premise that religion would be endowed with a relevance that would exclusively belong to it. Whilst what is at stake is not so much « religion » than the simultaneous and sometimes contradictory uses which it is the subject of. When what is at stake is no longer the conformity to a proposed model (whose interpretation would be the object of a monopoly, and a more or less discussed one), but the capacity of actors to appropriate the symbolic resources designated as available and to mobilize them at the service of competing strategies aiming at inhabiting and orienting the contemporary movement.

If the grounds on which the supply strategies are built can be immediately understood – the spreading of an American influence, or even of an American model, can be easily detected, just as well as the justification of individual enrichment: Igwara, bringing up the case of Nigeria, considered that religion – irrespective of the denomination – was above all a great *business*, as the proliferation of churches first serves the economic interest of their leaders[10] – and bringing to the fore the motives of this supply does not exhaust the subject in the least. Therefore, another interpretation can be preferred to these, one based not on the supply but on its

implementation and thus take place in the framework of a political socio-economy of the use of symbolic goods. In this perspective, the issue would to know who, ultimately, in this complex interplay of reciprocal instrumentalizations between religion and politics, religion and ideology, religion and economics, is at the service of what.

The recompositions induced by the acceleration of the contemporary movement are largely apprehended and lived by the actors on the mode of « crisis », a crisis in which the spread of the Pentecostals or the presence of a political Islam would be both indicators and modalities of management. This crisis is *first of all* cultural and can be first and foremost seen, between identitary inflation and necrosis, in the discrepancy between the "traditional" identities, consequently defined by falsely stable criteria, and a reality in which it has become impossible to make people believe in this stability of criteria allowing to build identity. Religion would be here a pure vehicle allowing to articulate, in Michel de Certeau's phrasing, "both the necessity and impossibility of taking hold again of the whole"[11].

Thus, sticking to the Latin American field, conversion to neo-Pentecostalism has assuredly the effect of producing an individual who is compatible with the globalized economy and it fulfils the function of controlling the conformity to the model (so much so that Samuel Huntington managed to establish that belonging to this religious movement was the only unquestionable evidence of the successful integration of Latin American migrants in the United States[12]). The whole issue is consequently to know – but we lack the necessary hindsight to answer it – whether, in this procedure, the individual is made use of, insofar as his formation as an individual through the use of religion is only the means to spread the influence of a specific model, or whether in the long run the individual constituted as such through conversion will not reject, as an individual, this conversion as well as the model it spreads. In other words, we can see how, starting from the contemporary individuation of the believing and from the full social legitimacy acknowledged to this individuation, religious entrepreneurs take on the privatization of the religious and turns it into a performing vehicle of a re-communitarization that is thought, eventually, as an instrument of a neo-pentecostalization of the public space. Nonetheless, what is being conceived by these entrepreneurs as the point of arrival of the whole process could very well be for those who are involved, a stage (and a means) in a larger-scale process, in which neo-Pentecostalization would only be a moment in the formation of individuals who experience themselves as such in the movement.

We can notice, in passing, that the over-use of « religion » in the political and social discourse in the United States (at the origin, among other things, of the thesis about the "European exception") should not delude us. Stephen L. Carter underlined, in *The culture of disbelief*, how much "religion" had become a commonplace, the very meaning of the word, stamped as "trivialized", posing problem : "having lots of religion is not the same as taking it seriously, and the presence of religious rhetoric in public life does not means that the citizens to whom this rhetoric is precious are accorded the respect that they deserve"[13]. Religion is becoming an instrument of disqualification of "the other", in a situation in which 85% of the Americans think of themselves as belonging to a Christian nation: Carter thus noticed the silence surrounding the other denominations, especially the Jews.

Evangelism appears to be a privileged resource to redefine identity and put back again this rebuilt identity in a world of fluid circulation. We can make the same statement about Islam. Therefore, as far as the setting-up of a "European Islam" is concerned (we are here drawing our inspiration from Chantal Saint-Blancat's approach[14]), the use of a Muslim referent is part of a deterreritorialisation- reterritorialisation of belongings – particularly in relation to the country of origin, as a process of "loss of cultural identity" authorizes identitary reshaping. The reinvestment in Islam can thus be interpreted as one of the means to built a French, German belonging, etc. Therefore Islam is not an object *in itself,* which should be grasped in chiefly cultural terms, but it is once again a major resource in a process of identitary (re)shaping. It partakes of a work to define oneself and the other that is likely to mobilize all the available registers.

But is not the condition to which it can fulfil this function merely a specific context that makes of the religious a resource ? If the context changes, its relevance as a resource is mechanically no longer self-evident. We can thus see the role played in the activation of a political Islam by the conjunction between the acceleration of globalization on the one hand, the threefold exhaustion of nationalism, socialism and third-worldism on the other. We can also see how the fear of communism played a part in the increase in power of Evangelism. However, in the case of Evangelism, after the collapse of the Soviet system, it is far from surprising that the idea of its constant, generalized, or even irreversible, spread must thus be seriously qualified[15].

Nonetheless, Evangelism represents a significant locus from which we can observe the new values of societies which are affected by a movement to which it is said to share affinities. It also represents an invaluable indicator of the modalities of establishment, by these societies, of a relation to pluralism, of which it appears to be one of the components and as such one of the proofs. Everywhere there is the temptation to go from the status of a religious actor to that of a social, economic, and above all political actor. Moreover, the fact that actors who consider themselves to be "chosen" keep taking the initiative reformulates the logics of legitimacy. The privatization of beliefs entails that of the institutions, of their financial dimension, of their capacity to articulate modes of community functioning, of the legitimacy of their belonging. In that sense, the historical logics that regulated the relationship between State and society tend to transform themselves. This means, among other things, that everywhere, under the pretext of restoring a "discipline", what is aimed at is an attempt to establish a "control".

Two remarks by way of conclusion. Probably never before has a thinking of the global appeared more necessary. But this thinking is always colliding, in an intellectual world marked by an increasing specialization, with the repetition of the specific, with this "narcissism of small differences" mentioned by Pierre Hassner. And this reiteration of the specific – second remark – partakes of a vertical view in which the local is supposed to recapitulate it, even though the specificities of the local constitute today one of the privileged spaces of production of the global.