Articles

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Contemporary Catholic Studies in a Secular University: Friend or Foe?

Abstract

Through the introduction of a new hermeneutical model of communication in RE, this article intends to explore an innovative approach to developing Christian identity in a secular university. The author holds a joint lectureship in religious education, catechesis and pastoral theological education. Religious education and catechesis are concerned with all aspects of the teaching of religion in schools, within the parish and any other pastoral setting. pastoral theological education is concerned with the place of learning within religious communities and the larger society. This distinction has resulted in this research proceeding along two parallel routes: the institutional educational environment, religious communities and society as a background influencing our value change as well as the way we do RE in schools. The main concern of the author is to develop practical ways of enhancing the Catholic religious identity and theological literacy of students in the state secondary schools and universities in the UK, on the basis of contemporary theological anthropology and educational theoretical foundations. This article is an investigation into a new understanding of the development of Catholic identity and new models of RE used in a contemporary secular university.

Keywords

Contemporary Catholic studies; hermeneutics, religious education, communication; identity, secular university; development of identity.

1. Introduction: Contemporary Catholic Studies:
A contextual and systemic perception

Much contemporary religious education has a central set of concerns for connection, correlation, dichotomies – integration. These concerns lie behind this research. Having briefly explored something of this pattern of thought, and its possible cultural historical provenance, the argument proceeds to offer an alternative perspective: more specifically, we suggest that the hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education in a secular university would be of indispensable importance in contemporary secular Western society, the Western European university context in particular. Our main argument states that Catholic religious education, when using a hermeneutical-communicative model, would help young people to better understand their recent social, cultural and religious situation. It would offer opportunities to develop affinities and competences as regards a re-contextualization of their Catholic faith and Catholic identity. Living, studying and working in a secular university environment will offer appropriate opportunities to meet the challenges and risks of European modernity and post-modernity in all its complexities.

1.1. Methodology of investigation

To give the theoretical basis to our thesis, we will offer an overview of contemporary sociological conceptualisations used to describe the value change phenomenon in the Western world and in a secular university in the Western Europe.

Before even starting to investigate a secular university culture, we want to investigate questions such as:

a) Whether the rapid cultural, political, and economic changes now occurring in the Western European democratic societies lead to the fundamental reordering of the Christian values or just invite them to adjustments where required?

b) Whether these changes lead to an affinity and consistency in religious attitudes, beliefs and values of the young generation, and whether it could be enhanced through RE, or not?

c) What models of value change can be identified, and what are the mechanisms proper to these changes affecting the young generations in a contemporary Western European university? What conflict may arise between the Christian/Catholic value education and a secular Western University environment?

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For our analysis we intend to use the data from EVS (The European Values Study),[1] the WVS (World Values Survey) as well as the theoretical discourses based on EVS and WVS as they are related to religious issues.[2] Another source of our data is the most recent 'map' of European values presented in the Atlas of European Values, which was published in 2011 and 2005.[3]

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[1] *The European Value Systems Study Group* (EVSSG) initiated *The European Values Study* as a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values in the late 1970s. In 1990 and 1999/2000 the study was replicated and extended into many more countries. Recently, all European countries, including those of Central and Eastern Europe, were involved in one or more waves of the study. This series is based on the survey data collected in this project. The latest surveys have been done in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and in 2004.

The EVSSG aimed at designing and conducting a major empirical study of the moral and social values underlying European social and political institutions and governing conduct. They addressed the following questions: Do Europeans share common values? Are values changing in Europe and, if so, in what directions? Do Christian values continue to permeate European life and culture? Is a coherent alternative meaning system replacing that of Christianity? What are the implications for European unity? *European Values Study*, http://staff.um.edu.mt/aabe2/EVS.htm (16.06.2007).

For more information cf.: W. Arts and L. Halman, *European Values at the Turn of the Millennium*, in: W. Arts and L. Halman (eds.), *European Values Studies*, vol. 7, Tilburg: Brill Academic Publishers 2004, pp. 37-56; L. Halman, *European Values Study: A Third Wave Work*, Tilburg: Tilburg University Press 2001. Also see: L. Halman and O. Riis, *The European's Religion at the End of the 20th Century*, „European Values Studies: Religion in Secularizing Society" (2003), vol. 5, pp. 212-237.

[2] *The World Values Survey* is an investigation of socio-cultural and political change conducted in almost 80 countries. It is led by a group of social scientists from leading universities. The survey is performed on nationally representative samples in almost 80 societies on all six inhabited continents. Four waves have been carried out in 1990 (the survey was originally conducted by the European Values Survey group and replaced by the World Values Survey), 1995, 2001 and 2005. Sample size is at least 1,000 in each country and represents almost 85% of the world's population. Issues such as: Religious and moral pluralism in contemporary Europe, Europe and its values in an historical perspective, Contemporary European Discourses on Religion and Morality, Religion and the Spirit of Capitalism in Modern Europe, Differential Patterns of Secularization in Europe, Religion and the Family, Individual Religiosity, Religious Context and Values in Europe, Integration into Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe, Religion and Social Capital Revisited, Globalisation and Patterns of Religious Belief Systems, Unity Produces Diversity: The Economics of Europe's Social Capital, European Identity and Inter-religious Dialogue. For more information see: *World Values Survey*, http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org (16.06.2007).

[3] L. Halman, Sieben, Inge and Van Zundert, Marga (2011): „Atlas of European values 2011: trends and traditions at the turn of the century". Leiden: Brill. http://www.brill.com/atlas-european-values-trends-and-traditions-turn-century. Halman, Loek and Voicu, Malina Halman, Loek and Voicu, Malina (eds.) (2010): „Mapping Value Orientations in Central and

The outcomes of the theoretical study will be examined critically in order to reconsider the development of a religious/Christian identity and the orientations for pastoral theology and religious education among the young in the contemporary Western European university context.

This perspective is also gained through a fresh appreciation of the Second Vatican Council's theology of revelation *(esp. Dei Verbum),* which is shown to have implications for understanding *traditio* as a living vocation of the Christian community-whenever it would be done: in a family setting, school environment, university or a society as such. This is a way of looking at the socio-cultural context of particular society and religion intrinsically holding together text and practice, both in the appropriation of our Catholic tradition and our current living of it. To see things in this light carries with it powerful implications, both for the practice of being truly Catholic/Christian and for offering religious education in a secular university, family and the larger society.

2. Secular University: The Church's presence in the academic world and in a secular University. Search for truth, identity and meaning

2.1. Catholicism in contemporary society:

"Contemporary" refers to a change in consciousness, a change in perceiving presuppositions from where "Catholicism" is understood or given (a different) authority at a given time. Mostly, contemporary is understood as coinciding with the present concrete reality. And often then "contemporary" becomes the norm for what one has to think or do. According to G. Agamben,[4] it refers to a particular relationship with one's own time, to which one belongs, without,

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Eastern Europe." European Values Studies, 13. Leiden: Brill. Luijkx, Ruud; Halman, Loek; Sieben, Inge; Brislinger, Evelyn and Quandt, Markus (2016): „European Values in Numbers. Trends and Traditions at the Turn of the Century". European Values Studies, 16. Leiden: Brill. L. Halman, R. Luijkx and M. van Zundert, (eds), *Atlas of European Values*, (European Values Study), Leiden and Tilburg: Brill 2005. The surveys of WVS and EVS have covered the main life domains. Today the data of these surveys have proved to be a gold mine for many researchers all around the world. *The Atlas of European Values* summarizes the results of the European Value Study of 2000. It presents ideas and beliefs of European people.

[4] G. Agamben, *Nudities*, (2010), Chapter 2. Translated by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella.

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however, identifying with it. It is "belonging", while being at an anachronistic distance. To see and understand what our "contemporary time" represents, one has to be at a distance. Contemporary understanding of Christianity in a secular Western world is only possible if one can become "contemporary" of Christianity of the past. Initiating a new or "contemporary interpretation" of dimensions of Christian faith is impossible without revisiting what the tradition had to say about the same issue. This is an important criterion when dealing with the perception that for so long taken-for-granted presupposition regarding the existence of an "external divine world or being" should be questioned. This means that RE or "Catholic studies" then, as an academic subject, would include students becoming "contemporary" of many thinkers or mindsets of the past. Transition (mutation) of the status, role and meaning of religion in today's society cannot happen without reconsidering the past.

2.2. Secularization

But, what about this disturbing and unsettling evolution related to Western civilization, affecting the sociologically established institutional religions? Does secularisation destroy Christian religion and Christian identity? Or is "secularisation" a not very fitting perception of changes occurring during recent decades?

Secularization refers to a process of growing historical awareness and understanding of what religions are about.[5] A clearer perception of what the involvement with religious matters represents, allows people to manage their dealings with this field in a different way. It helps them to see more clearly what they do not want to live or to respond to. They rather want – as a correlative – to focus upon what they do experience and identify with, which, of course, does not excuse them from pursuing the appropriate discernment.

Biblicists would remind us that secularization is a major characteristic of the Jewish-Christian tradition. The story of the Hebrew people gradually unmasked the "false gods" and related idolatry, and led the faithful to the discovery of the 'one true God', invisible, whose name cannot be mentioned, of whom no image can be made. In other words, without having any kind of immediate 'sign' or experience, Jews and Christians believe in God through the dialectic of an 'absent'

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[5] "Secularization" as historical process inherent to any kind of historical institutionalised religion needs to be distinguished from secularism, laicism, indifferentism, atheism, agnosticism, and the like.

presence, only relying upon mediations for every form of religious communication. One has to forsake the addictive consolation in order to find 'eternal life'. Jews and Christians have to believe, while being confronted with a void. One cannot imagine a deeper or more radical form of secularisation.

Throughout the history of Christendom, the same struggle continues. From century to century, new forms of 'idolatry' and efforts to domesticate the 'one true God' emerged and had to be met through demanding and innovative discernments. The experience teaches us how much we humans constantly fail to respond to Gods mystery, radical otherness in the appropriate way, when relying upon our ambitious aspirations and search for power and control. If that occurs, we have to leave that track altogether and go back to the 'void', loose security, calculated certainties, comfortable niches. That process of moving out of what gradually became inauthentic and a betrayal of the 'one true God' is often labelled secularisation, interpreted as 'infidelity', indifference, disloyalty, sinfulness.

During the twentieth century, anthropology, philosophy, social sciences, sciences in general, contributed immensely to the clarification of ever returning questions like: what is religion about? What happens to a religious person? What are the dynamics of involvement with 'believing'? Sociologists, psychologists, but also theologians, tried to understand the impact of a changing society upon the complex processes proper to the religious domain. The modern historiography set a different kind of investigation about the past and offers alternative 'constructions' of what is called history. 'Philosophy of religion' became a major field of interest for the same reasons.

The outcome of the research over the past fifty years shows clearly that "secularisation" does mean – in Europe – certain forms of 'growing away from institutionalised religion'. But it does not mean that people grow away from religious sensibility or from the sacred. The curiosity for and involvement with the religious field takes on different forms of investment. People may have a better understanding of what kind of religion they do not want and may be searching for meaningful alternatives[6]. These changes are a major invitation to the theologians, pastoral ministers, leading authorities of churches, and the faithful to examine carefully again what constitutes the core of faith in the 'one

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[6] The French sociologist of religion, Jean-Paul Willaime talks about the "reinvention of politics and of the religious field in secularised and pluralist societies" The reinvention is related with the 'individualisation', a fundamental change in the understanding of individuality. Cf. *Europe et religions. Les enjeux du XXIe siècle*, Paris 2004, 347-356, p. 201.

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true God' and to focus again upon the pertinence of a religious commitment in the contemporary context.

The real issue at stake here is the matter of clarifying identity. And the problems with 'religious' identity are inherently related with the changing awareness of human identity in general, its concept, its pragmatic function in contemporary society.

The unsettling confrontation with secularisation is related to a new experience of the 'void', the otherness of the 'one true God', the experience of total failure when trying to exert controlling power over God's mystery. This is clearly expressed in Joshua's solemn farewell speech to all the tribes of Israel, the elders, the heads of families, the judges and officers, standing before God. Joshua spoke the word of the Lord: "…I took your father Abraham…and led him through the length and breadth of Canaan. I gave him my descendants…", with the final sentence: "I gave you land on which you had not laboured, cities which you had never built; you have lived in those cities and you eat the produce of vineyards and olive-groves which you did not plant".[7]

Sociologists and philosophers claim that, while it is an evolution proper to modern society, modernity itself is the result of the influence of Christianity upon Western society[8]. And thus, the present shift in religious attitudes, or 'religious indifference', is another phase in the historical evolution of religions in the context of a globalized and complex modern society.

So, in summary, we could say that secularisation is a historical process whereby people gradually may understand in a different way what 'religion' is about and how it functions in a social/cultural context. Europeans, mainly supported by the philosophical thinking of modernity have developed sensitivity for humanity, as people became more and more autonomous in their reflection and management of life. Despite the highly diversified attitudes of Europeans as regards their religious traditions, according to sociologist Grace Davy and EVS, the interest in religion and the search for truth is still well and alive.[9]

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[7] Joshua 24,1-14.

[8] N. Smelser, *The Modernization of Social Relations*, in: M. Weiner (ed.), *Modernization*, New York: Basic Books 1966, pp. 44-52, 47. See also e.g., M. Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology by Max Weber*, translated and with an introduction by H.P. Secher, New York: The Citadel Press 1962.

[9] G. Davy, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, p. 34, and L. Halman, R. Luijkx and M. van Zundert (eds), *Atlas of European Values*, pp. 71-73.

2.3. Living in the end of times

When taking a closer look at the secularised Western university one cannot but wonder with the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek if we are not 'Living in the End of Times' of the Christian culture in the Western world. The Western university culture is so often described as a secular and even post-secular Western European culture. The author of the book 'Living in the End of Times' indirectly presents a picture of the Western culture as the end of the hegemony of religion and Christian churches in a self-conscious, democratic, well-educated society. Is it true that the Western-European culture and a university culture are situated within the context of separation between the Church and the State? They are part of a democratic political system. Society is constituting itself as a secular society. Hence the need to reconsider the role of a religious tradition in a secular context.

Slavoj Žižek argues that our collective responses to economic changes correspond to the stages of grief: ideological denial, explosions of anger and attempts at bargaining, followed by depression and withdrawal. The key issue then becomes: what is to be "believed", as distinct from "knowledge", if there is no external, separate divine world (literal versus symbolic thinking about religion)?

Žižek's statement affects what many Christians in the academic world are struggling with. It should be recognized as a key issue in ongoing RE among Christians, particularly in a university environment.

2.4. Broken-interrupted tradition

The Church's leaders are concerned about the cultural-religious situation in Europe: it seems as if an originally Christian Europe is losing its identity. According to the leaders of the Church: "In traditionally Christian countries, a relatively widespread culture gives unbelief, on its platform of religious indifference, a practical and no longer theoretical aspect. It has become a *cultural phenomenon*, in the sense that often one becomes a non-believer not through choice at the end of a long inner struggle, but it just happens *de facto*, because 'that's what everybody else does' – *così fan tutti*. This is the result of the lack of effective evangelisation, the growing levels of ignorance of religious tradition and Christian culture, and the lack of offers of formative spiritual experiences capable of raising marvel and determining belonging".[10]

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[10] *Where is your God?* 'Concluding Document of the Plenary Assembly' *Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today*. Vatican. 13 Mar 2004.

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That is how the Holy Father John Paul II has described the religious situation in the world: "Often knowledge of Christianity is taken for granted, whereas in truth the bible is rarely read and scarcely studied, catechesis is often shallow, and the sacraments hardly received. Therefore, instead of an authentic faith a vague religious sentiment is spread, which easily turns into agnosticism and practical atheism".[11]

However, the situation is not as simple as that. There is an ongoing discussion among the most prominent psychologists of religion, sociologists and theologians about the religiosity and value change in Europe and overseas.

According to the British sociologist Grace Davie, a key to understanding the uniqueness of the European situation is the recognition that it is unchurched rather than secular. She claims that, Christianity in Europe is becoming a Diaspora where the statistical majority of inhabitants are "believers without belonging" while the other people "still belong to the Church but without believing".[12] This situation destines Europe to review carefully its own identity or even to go in search of a new identity.[13]

In this article we argue that the main problem that we are having in the Western culture is not a complete and utter refusal and denial of the Christian values, but an interruption of "tradition" as literal understanding of religious representations and images. Modern Europe represents an emergence of a new social reality. We can look at this reality from the philosophical, theological and socio-economical perspectives. Rapid changes in religious values have implications for the philosophical and theological thinking on whether religion will have a significant role in the new European context or not. Using data of the three waves of the European Values Surveys, Ronald Inglehart has singled out the growth of 'post-materialist values', correlated to the loss in influence of traditional religions.[14]

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http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20040313_where-is-your-god_en.html (12.08.2017).

[11] Pope J. Paul II, *Angelus 27 July 2003*, "L'Osservatore Romano", 28-29 July 2003, 1.

[12] G. Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case, Parameters of the Faith in the Modern World*, London: The Bath Press, Bath 2002, p. 47.

[13] G. Davie, Europe: The Exceptional Case, Parameters of the Faith in the Modern World, London: The Bath Press, Bath 2002, p. 48.

[14] R. Inglehart and Ch. Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy, the Human Development Sequence*, USA: Cambridge University Press 2005The Human Development Sequence</TITLE><PLACE_PUBLISHED>USA</PLACE_

In order to address the issue, we need to employ hermeneutics (historical-critical and text and context analysis) in RE as a tool for understanding religion/Catholicism in particular. This is an educational tool, which enables us to look at Christianity with an open future-oriented perspective: God is becoming, rather than being an absolute, static "given". To see Christianity in the contemporary secular world and to educate young people in the faith, would mean to accept and to teach them a Living Christian tradition.

2.5. Christian identity

People's attitudes and values do not emerge in a vacuum. They are deeply rooted into a particular culture. The value patterns of Europe cannot be understood unless we take its history into consideration. Values are embedded in the broader social and historical context. History and context define constraints and determine opportunities, affecting actors in their choices, priorities and value preferences.[15] We know that, in the context of the changing economic, social, political, and cultural context, Christian values are affected by modern and post-modern time. The shifting of values is linked, on the one hand, with the cultural changes as they occurred during the few past decades,[16] whereas, on the other hand, the socio-economic transformation has a decisive influence on peoples lifestyle. As Inglehart points out, the relation between the cultural and socio-economic changes is a reciprocal one, because the "major socio-economic changes reshape the culture" and "through processes of random mutation and natural selection, culture adapts to a given environment."[17]

The consciousness of open-endedness of the concept of identity, as inevitable and unbreakable, is a root metaphor in the understanding of Christian identity. Besides the genius of the Second Testament texts, secured as historical revelation by the end of the second century, the Church Fathers and Councils

PUBLISHED><PUBLISHER>Cambridge University Press</PUBLISHER></MDL></Cite></EndNote>, pp. 51-52. Also see, R. Inglehart, *Human Values and Social Change*, p. 132.

[15] M. Hechter, K.D. Opp and R. Wippler, *Social Institutions: Their Emergence Maintenance and Effects*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1990, p. 212.

[16] R. Inglehart, *Modernization and Post-modernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*, p. 54.

[17] R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1977, p. 59-61.

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developed the basis of a theological interpretation of the proper meaning of the faith in Christ, and of the Church tradition.

The specifically 'Christian' identity was not a given; it had to be worked out, step-by-step, mainly through unforeseen events, challenging circumstances and encounters.

Throughout history, the understanding of the specific identity of the Christian was and remains a crucial issue. Nearly every century, every expansion to other cultures or continents, every emergence of a new type of society gave rise to crises and challenged the Christian communities or the Church as a whole to clarify its identity. It's neither secured nor taken for granted. The great historical Church councils did not solve the problem once and for all. The adjusted formulations of dogmatic or pastoral conclusions address particular historical contexts, but constantly need further clarification and re-interpretation of the original references. The unknown divine mystery, the absent-present living God leaves a void when trying to clarify the origin of identity beyond the faith perspective.

a. What distinguishes Christians from other people? And for whom and why does it matter that Christians are distinct from other religious or philosophical denominations?

Since Vatican II, the theme of *inculturation* – and its relationship to evangelization – became a key issue for the clarification of the Christian identity. The recognition of the original value of local cultures throughout the world, awakened the consciousness that in the past, in the name of colonization and evangelization, their authentic value was not recognized. The original story, the growth into wisdom and the religious traditions were not always taken into consideration for the recognition of possible original features of the Christian faith in the context of non-Western civilisations and cultures. Local cultures have a unique contribution to make in order to clarify what the Christian faith stands for given their context.

Of course, one does not need religion to live a successful and most valuable life. In reaction to the strong impact of Christianity upon Western Europe one notices that people want to underscore this: you do not need religion to live a meaningful life! Religious belief and practice belong to the private sphere, representatives of a secular society claim. It's a matter of a person's personal decision. Parents will say: if our son/daughter wants to live as a Christian, that will depend upon his or her free decision; we will not stop them, but we will

not encourage them either, as we do not consider a religious commitment as self-evident.

This cultural religious context could be easily identified not only in a broader society but in the secular Western university as well. This fact represents a serious challenge for believers. Christians, in the new university contexts, have to justify their option in response to specific social circumstances or contemporary challenges. The "Christian identity" represents (still) a different profile though. In a secular university environment young people themselves would discern what characteristics they consider as specific for the identification with the Christian community. One finds a wide and diversified range of profiles of "being a Christian". It's the responsibility of the Church to discern together with the young and local communities what the proper contribution of Christians should be in an open society. Openness and flexibility would not mean mere adjustment to occurring changes or shifts in priorities. It is the Church's responsibility to focus upon the specific and lasting features of a Christian identity. To be attentive to the inner attitude, personal sensitivities, the personal life story, and the personal interpretation of the meaning of life, also in reference to a religious tradition are also to be taken into consideration in this discernment.

Of course, the question is not new. In fact, it was raised from the very beginning, when Jews started to follow Jesus of Nazareth, the risen Christ. In chapter 11, 1-18 of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter was asked: why did he visit the uncircumcised and sit at table with them? Why did he think that the Gentiles should be baptised in the Spirit as well? Peter referred to a coincidence of dreams he had and the meeting with a man who asked him to be instructed in the faith. Peter developed a sound argumentation, stepping beyond the static interpretation of the Jewish law: becoming a follower of Jesus was not to be limited to the circumcised.

b. A first attempt to give content to a Christian identity

This was an important step in the process of giving a specific content to what later was going to be called the "Christian identity". Many more discussions followed among the apostles to clarify the issue. The development of the Christian community is a long and still ongoing story which organises itself through an endless series of plots. As e.g. with the expansion of Christianity as a Constantine State religion. The confrontation with the original pagan cults and temples throughout Europe initiated an impressive inculturation process. The confrontation with slavery was an opportunity to clarify the Christian concept of the human person.

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The monastic life of the late Middle Ages shaped the profile of the European Christian spirituality. The protests of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and their followers called for a Counter-Reformation movement which initiated a stricter doctrinal understanding of the Catholic identity. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, rationalism and scientific thinking challenged the medieval presuppositions and forced the churches to redefine the specific characteristics of the Christian tradition. Both Marxism and capitalism put the core values of the Christian faith at risk. In recent years, the status of workers, children and youth, women, initiated a deepening clarification of the specific qualities of a Christian identity. Equally so, the scientific and technical control of the beginning and the end of life, the endless struggle for peace and for the protection of the earth are opportunities for clarifying the kind of discernment Christians should articulate in interaction with the hot issues of contemporary society.

The study of this issue throughout the history of Christianity shows that there is no final, static, absolute definition of what Christian identity stands for. It is a dynamic concept, which needs to be adjusted and reviewed in response to the changing circumstances of cultural and social contexts.

The synods of Bishops in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia highlight the importance of nurturing the cultural diversity of Christian identity. Whatever the original features, there are common experiences throughout history and similar processes of interpreting the Christian tradition. The Christian faith is most of the time recognized as a gift and as an enthusiastic response – moved by the Spirit – to an unexpected understanding of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. The depth of the insight is overwhelming and perplexing. One can no longer dismiss it; one has to respond to the potential of life with the God of life. The depth of the discovery and the free commitment guarantee the development of a solid identity at the basis of a given word. Personal commitment and Christian praxis go together and form the necessary conditions for forming a community.

3. Friend or Foe? Meaning and arguments depend upon the "contextual" perception of the interaction between the secular university and the RE in the university

The possibility of developing and nurturing one's Christian identity freely, while studying in a secular university, needs deeper investigation. How academic

studies of a Christian young people at a secular university can be justified? What do students experience in this regard? Whom do they want to become? What do they identify with? Where are their hopes? What kind of interests are motivating them to follow higher education in a secular academic and cultural environment? No doubt, their identity is at stake here. They know that they will not remain the same over the years, but they hope that the "other self" will emerge and become a reality with new possibilities. Are their hopes realistic, given the present situation, and will they meet the proper circumstances to pursue them? What is to be studied – and what does 'study' mean – in order "to be an intellectual" person with a clear and defined Christian identity? What kind of responsibility are Christian intellectuals going to take on in society? And where are the "prophets" who will help them to discover the unexpected insight about the living and risen Christ?

Institutions of higher education, including universities, have an eminent social role in society. They offer opportunities for young adults to develop fully their potential resources and to take on a leading role in society. This includes, of course, the preparation for a professional career and a reflection upon their future responsibility in society. But, young intellectuals are also expected to situate themselves as ethical personalities. They are to take initiatives for the development of a human and just society and to address critical situations people are struggling with. They also have the potential for enhancing the meaning of life and human values in response to changes and new challenges of contemporary society.[18]

This understanding of the responsibility of a university is valid for any one of them, independently of the philosophical orientation, the ideological or administrative origin. The question to be examined here deals with the personal ethical and philosophical convictions and beliefs of students and staff: has the personal orientation anything to do with the intellectual formation? Is it a dimension which has to be put in relationship with the formal academic training? Does the ethical, philosophical or religious commitment of staff and students interfere with the public debate about the responsibility of universities in society?

The churches may be concerned with the ongoing formation of Catholics studying at the university and the support to be offered for the integration of a Christian life style.

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[18] A. Mulamoottil, *A Contextual Theological Approach to Christian Identity and its Implications for the Ongoing Faith Formation in India*, Leuven 1998, p. 324.

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The main question, though, concerns the specific responsibility of Catholics in society today. Traditionally, Christians believe, according to the gospel, that they have a mission in society, entrusted to them by the Christian community. To be a Christian is not just a private, personal matter. The underlying vision offers a universal orientation: a concern for people throughout the world, whoever they are, wherever they live, in whatever culture, particularly for those who live desperate situations, without any hope to overcome oppression, exploitation, misery, fatal dependence. This is an interpretation of Christ's presence in the world today.[19]

University students see themselves as adult people. They own a personal life nobody is controlling, they are trained for autonomous study and independent thinking, searching, solving problems. Religion, ethics and philosophies of life represent a delicate area where people can be "brainwashed" or oriented in a particular direction, without the possibility to react in a critical way. Today, people in democratic societies are resentful as regards the influence of churches, religions, life visions. Many people (previous generations) suffered from too obvious mental, moral, corporal, religious-doctrinal control. Many adults, particularly young adults, may associate the rites of initiation and indoctrination strategies with offensive, destructive influences, contradictory to the intentions proclaimed officially.

Over the past decades, the public opinion, and some influential leaders, amplified by the media – gradually adopted a more outspoken anti-religious attitude and argued in favour of the individual freedom to decide independently about the attitude towards life vision, moral conduct, and membership of religious institutions. These should be private matters only, and should not be part of a compulsory curriculum, they argue. This is a debatable issue of course. It is obvious that Catholics and Catholic institutions should develop a well-argued viewpoint and take part in the public debate in order to safeguard the right for people to live, speak and act in public according to their personal convictions. But with respect for other convictions, with the competence for dialogue, without any proselytising attitude. The role of such an exercise in a catholic university would be crucial to change the overall perception and attitude students may have adopted through their contacts with peers, with ambiguous social agents, with slogans and fragmented, often biased information through the popularised media and consumerism, of a neo-liberal society…

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[19] Comité de théologie de l'Assemblée des évêques du Québec, *L'engagement des communautés chrétiennes dans la société*, Québec 1994, p. 70.

Describing this particular model of an academic exploration of the proper content and status of religion, meaning and life visions, I am not offering an answer, which should be adopted as such in the western universities. But it may help to see more clearly the kind of reflection that should be developed with the students here, given the particular circumstances of this society, the recent history of this country, the position and status of the church, of religion in general. The emphasis here is upon a church-in-context, a university-in-context, and academic study about the Christian / Catholic traditions in the same context, clarified by a critical understanding of the past. The critical and soundly examined reflection upon these changing interactions can make the difference.[20] The effort then can be "relevant" for the students, and for the future of Catholic intellectuals.

Catholics may rely upon this vision to interpret their presence at the university as a commitment. They may try to live and work according to their convictions and take part in the intellectual debate from this perspective. They cannot consider a (State) university as a neutral terrain. Thus, it is justified to bring the personal conviction to the fore and to invite colleagues (whatever their life vision) to do the same.

4. Summary of the research. Reorientation of contemporary Western European university in its dealings with Christianity is needed:

– Promotion of the emergence of "holy ground", "sacred spaces" and "sacred (Christian / Catholic / interreligious) rituals" in a secular context. Silence as a major concern in contemporary art and mental health.

– Reconfiguration of chapels, silent rooms, prayer rooms, churches, basilicas and cathedrals into new spiritual spaces where the God professed throughout the tradition can emerge, as opposed to different forms of "profanation".

In summary of what was said in this research paper, I can assume that the meaning and arguments whether a secular university is a foe or a friend to RE in a higher education environment depends upon the "contextual" perception. I believe that, despite the alien secular university environment, Catholic studies can still be seen as a "friend" in the university:

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[20] H. Lombaerts, *Poszukiwanie współczesnych modeli katechezy dorosłych*, in: E. Osewska, J. Stala (eds.), *Drogi katechezy rodzinnej*, Poznań 2002, pp. 127-140.

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– When seen as a powerful component of "deconstruction" of the taken-for-granted presuppositions.

– When offering a basis for reconsidering and studying the specific contributions Catholicism has to offer in relation to life on this planet, and the mystery of the human community.

– When the traditional presuppositions are maintained as normative content for "catholic studies".

– When encouraging people to develop an open mind and receptive exploration of what Religion stands for, Catholicism in particular.

– When supporting social institutions, like a secular university, to play a significant role in clarifying what meaning systems represent in a given society (context), and in stimulating the efforts to discern what it all will become in the future.

– When the 'hermeneutic' territory of Christian Theology is taken seriously in RE in a secular university as well as recent theories about the meaning and role of 'interpretation' of the Catholic Tradition.

More specifically, we suggest that the hermeneutical-communicative model, when implemented, can be of indispensable importance in contemporary secular university in order to prepare Catholics to live their faith with creativity in a secular environment. Religious education, when using a hermeneutical-communicative model, would help young people to better understand their recent social, cultural and religious situation, and offer opportunities to develop affinities and competences as regards a re-contextualization of Christian faith.

The hermeneutical-communicative model, which takes 'personal stories' and differences seriously, would encourage students not to be afraid of their 'confused' Christian belief. It would rather stimulate them to be more open to the 'differences', and to value diversity even within the Christian tradition. The hermeneutical-communicative model integrates tradition, experience, as well as critical thinking. In today's open communication society, people can find many opportunities to discern what represents the difference of Christian faith in a person's life. People need to be stimulated to spell out and to deepen what they believe, and to justify the outcome of their search for truth in general, for religious truth in particular.

It will enable people, with different identities, to coexist with more openness and "dia"-logical interactions, while, at the same time, taking on responsibilities for safeguarding the Christian tradition and guaranteeing its continuity in a secular university environment and beyond it – in a wider society.

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