

FIGHTING THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE

HOW RELIGION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO INTEGRATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH
**YOLANDE JANSEN &
 TOMASZ KITLINSKI**

To what extent are the values we ascribe to Europe today rooted in religion? To refer to such roots bears the risk of alienating certain groups and minorities, but also of turning a blind eye to the multitude of different religious influences that have shaped these values over time. Yet at the same time, discourses of secularism have increasingly hardened and come to bear an exclusionary and colonial connotation in the minds of many Europeans. In light of this, a more inclusive vision needs to be put forward, one that enhances understanding by challenging the prevailing monolithic visions of religious communities to reflect their internal diversity.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: More and more politicians refer to Europe's so-called Judeo-Christian values as our shared heritage that needs to be protected from inside and outside enemies. But what exactly are these values?

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: I personally have a very clear understanding of the values that need to be protected in Europe, as I am dreaming of a balance between religion and secularism in Europe but I don't know how to reach it. In recent decades we have forgotten about religion too much, and it is good to recall religious values in our societies, but those values cannot be reduced to simply Judeo-Christian values – they should be Jewish-Christian-Buddhist-Muslim-Secular-etc. values. These values would, for example, include values like hospitality to the 'Other' that has roots in the Torah, in the Quran, in the major Sanskrit Mahabharata epic, but also in the European Enlightenment. To determine what exactly these values can be, we need to have a debate about Judeo-Christian values, and through that we can enrich the very term.

YOLANDE JANSEN: In the European context it is relevant to recall the concept's roots in 19th century theology, when the notion that there was such a thing as 'Judeo-Christianity' formed part of a so-called supersessionist¹ discourse which held that (Protestant) Christianity was the heir but also the moral superior of Judaism (and of Catholicism), a thought which had already found its way in the historical Enlightenment. The concept, therefore, has to be viewed as a reminder of how Europe itself should be seen as a problem, a reminder of the precarious position of minorities in Europe, instead of as the self-felicitous term that it has become today. The need for this becomes all the more obvious once we realise that the term today is mainly used by populists, with the aim of excluding Muslims. Therefore, I would call this an identitarian concept that has little to do with a positive set of values that brings Europeans together today. We can try to turn the concept into an inclusive one, as Tomasz says, but I also fear this might be a risky strategy today, and we'd better let the concept do some self-critical memory work first.

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: We also shouldn't forget that if we are talking about 'European values', there are secular values that are also religious values. In order to overcome our deficiencies, for example, we need to remind ourselves that, in religion, we can find the seeds of democracy. After all, the Pope is also elected in a democratic process. Unfortunately, present day Catholicism in Poland, for example, is not only undemocratic but also anti-democratic.

YOLANDE JANSEN: It's important when talking about 'European values' not to claim certain values specifically for Europe, as public discourses today tend to do with regard to both freedom and democracy, as well as secularism. These discourses then present migrants of non-European backgrounds as backward or not yet secularised.

It would be much better to accept, as a starting point, that many traditions have their own ways of organising freedom and equality, and Europe has no monopoly on those terms. With the dismissal of the discourse on multiculturalism, we have, in Europe, revived an old attitude inherited from colonial modernity, which is to think that 'we' have the Enlightened values and 'they' have to intergrate or adapt to them. This is plain wrong as a starting point for living together.

¹ Supersession is a Christian theological term which refers to the belief that Christianity is the fulfillment of Biblical Judaism. This term replaces God's covenant with Israel by a new covenant with the Church.

How would you define Christianity in the European context, if we need to find a definition for a term that can cover so many practices and attitudes?

YOLANDE JANSEN: There are and have been many different ways to be a Christian, intermingled with secular traditions, dissident traditions, heretic traditions, as well as Judaic and Islamic traditions, nationalism, patriarchy, emancipatory movements, and so on. So it would be better to think in terms of a patchwork of all those traditions when defining who we are, instead of saying that there is the ‘one Christianity’ and the ‘one Islam’ and the two have to cope with each other somehow. The latter is the model that dominates the public debate today, but this implies we take an essentialist conception of religious traditions as a starting point, and I think we need to

start from a more dynamic, historically dense and multicultural point. Here, I am definitely with Moses Mendelssohn in his early discussion with Kant about the Enlightenment, and a proponent of pluralising our understanding of religious and secular traditions. So, for example, I am not happy when, in debates about the headscarves, it is suggested that European secular or Protestant traditions are concentrated on thought and belief, while other religious

traditions (Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, African) are said to be directed towards religious practice and lived religion. Of course there are different emphases in different traditions, but there are no either/ors in complex traditions: all of them know about practices, and all have their ways to talk about meaning and theology.

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: Today there is LGBTIQ Christianity, feminist Christianity, as well as atheist Christianity, and I am very happy about that. But what worries me is the ultranationalist Christianity that develops today in Russia, Hungary, Poland and the rest of Central and Eastern

Europe. This trend is very dangerous, and has nothing to do with the initial open form of Christianity. I think the Polish Church is a mafia of ultranationalists and xenophobes, and its message has nothing to do with Pope Francis’ mes-

sage about ecology and hospitality. The images of the Pope in Lampedusa and Lesbos and his messages about the acceptance of refugees were extraordinary. For the Polish audiences he is the only respected voice that is supportive towards refugees and sexual minorities. Therefore, his words are often mistranslated in order to reflect more the majoritarian discourse – the ultranationalists are so afraid of his opinion having an effect on public opinion.

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Of course this is not a new phenomenon. The nationalism of the Catholic Church in Poland can be explained historically: in the 19th century, Poland didn't exist as a state, and the Church was the only institution to promote 'Polishness' among the people, so there was this equation of Polish-Catholic, and this has terrible consequences now when politicians use the Church to legitimise their goals, and vice-versa. This leads to an unholy alliance. But I am sure, if we manage to build a coalition of inclusive movements, among other LGBTIQ and feminist movements, we can make Poland a hospitable place.

Do you consider *laïcité* and secularism integrating or disintegrating forces in Europe?

YOLANDE JANSEN: It depends very much on context; they are not at all the same all over Europe. In general, religion only became an important issue in the 1980s, after decades of being only of secondary importance. In the decades before, it was more important whether someone defined him/herself as capitalist, communist, colonialist, imperialist or nationalist.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall a political paradigm re-emerged, according to which, religion and secularism are important components of our political identification, just like it was the case in the early 20th century in some European countries, such as France.

It is also important that secularism, like every concept, has more than one meaning, and the public meanings attached to concepts do not have to be realistic. In France, for example, contrary to many interpretations, there has never been a full separation of Church and State: there has always been a relation between state and religions, which included a strong tradition of support and control of religions. Moreover, secularism has been defined in an identitarian manner, mostly in relation to Muslims in recent decades. Secularism in that sense hides many of the effects and emotions that need to be discussed publicly, and that have their roots in the colonial past and colonial mentalities, in racialisation and hierarchies related to class and citizenship. Remaining within the framework of secularism is misleading, because there is much more than religion as a system of beliefs and practices that has to be problematised. This is also why the increasing focus on a secular-religious framework in the European context is problematic, and we need to take more vectors into account to fully understand the power relations at work; all this needs to be determined contextually.

Another problem with secularism is that it is connected too much to one particular and politicised interpretation of religion, and that it serves the self-complacent idea that secular and European values are those that all Europe's 'Others' should just assimilate to or integrate into.

At the same time, I would say today that we cannot throw away secularism as a concept. There are too many people with progressive ideas who identify with secularism, and it does serve a function in specific contexts where conservative, nationalist and patriarchal interpretations of religion prevail. So, despite what I said in the above, you can't just say that it is a disintegrating concept. We have to realise though, that for many European citizens with their backgrounds in the Global South, and for many in the Muslim world, discourses of secularism have this exclusionary, and colonial, connotation. At the university where I teach many Muslim students, I always note how for almost all of them, 'secularism' serves as a concept that concentrates much of what they find problematic of living in Europe and it is deeply connected to their experiences of being discriminated against. They experience it as a concept through which things that are important in their lives are rejected. And we can't just dismiss that.

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: In Poland, I don't think we can talk about the impact of secularism. Instead, I think we need more secularism, in the sense of separation between the Church and State, because we have never had secularism here.

Instead, almost every child receives some kind of religious education – not at school, of course, but at home, in churches and in synagogues. In the past, there was a compromise between the

Church and the communists at the time, because both of them were nationalists, so they got along well. But there were no critical discussions about religion and the Church. And I think for Poland it would be much easier to integrate into Europe if it wasn't so madly Catholic. Moreover, we need to have a separation of the

State and the Church, because the Church has always impacted the policies of the government in Poland – even under leftist governments. So we need to introduce secularism in Poland, and then we need to emphasise that freedom and equality are both secular and religious values.

Tomasz said we should include a number of religious, as well as secular, values in our definition of European values. But how can we do that if we can't even acknowledge the Islamic and Arabic influences in Europe (including medicine, physics and mathematics)?

YOLANDE JANSEN: I think first we need to acknowledge that, although the current, non-inclusive definition of Judeo-Christian

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and European values is strongly present in the public political discourse, in tandem with a fear of losing out on Europe's privileged position in the world, there is also a lot of resistance against it, both in academia and in public culture. Students at universities are very interested in Islamic and Arabic works. In my faculty we have put the work of the Muslim philosopher, Al-Farabi on the mandatory classics list and the students like it; in popular culture there is a lot of artistic work by people with backgrounds in the Global South who know how to combine being attractive to large parts of the majority populations with being critical or nicely ironic about the new European fear cum self-complacency. But it's true that as long as the non-inclusive view can be near hegemonic in the public political discourses, Europe will remain deficient in reflecting on its own postcolonial and racial histories.

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: The same is visible in Poland, where minorities such as the Muslim Tatar community feel excluded. Tatars have lived in Poland for many centuries; they served in the Polish army, and also became parts of the Polish nobility. They are an integral part of Polish history, and a very culturally-active Islamic community in the country. But now they feel threatened because the public discourse is suddenly demonising their religion. Memory work needs to be done – and not just simple nostalgia, but a critical analysis of our past and present. I don't think that we need to see 16th century Poland as a paradise – because clearly it wasn't – but we need to acknowledge that Poland has in the past centuries often been a place where religions were able to live together peacefully. In contrast to today, Old Poland was an intercultural organism with a lot of discrimination and violence against the Other, primarily its

Jewish population. But the Jewish communities developed an amazing form of internal democracy, as the political scientist Shlomo Avineri has demonstrated. The community elected its own rabbi, its council, etc. This and anti-war, anti-feudal Socinians (exiled from Poland because of the country's rising intolerance in the 17th century) could serve as a starting point for European integration: strong grassroots self-government and transnational tendencies.

How can Greens include the issue of religion in their message?

YOLANDE JANSEN: Greens need to know that there are lots of ecological resources in all religions, and it would be important to use and reinvent those resources; Erica Meijers and Nuala Ahern have explored those possibilities together with Green politicians in their recent book *Green Values, Religion and Secularism*². Also, when we look at the question of whether religion can be an integrating force, we need to keep in mind that peace is a major value in all religions, and the message of peace could also bring people together.

However, I am not sure that integration in itself should be such an unquestioned value. I would say that aiming for peace, cooperation and conviviality would be more important than integration. Many discourses in terms of 'inte-

gration' today are in tension with basic and legitimate – even lively and desirable – forms of plurality and cooperation on a voluntary basis. And here, I mean both European integration, as well as integration of migrants and 'Others' into European societies.

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: In Central Europe, we had a different experience. I think the whole of Central Europe is in need of integration. All that we achieved here in Poland is thanks to the European Union. The first words about non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation were introduced into the labour code solely because of the EU. I know that integration can invoke exclusion, but for Poland, Hungary, or in the future, for Turkey, this is the only opportunity to leave behind our own fascism and ultra-nationalism.

YOLANDE JANSEN: What Tomasz says is really important. However, I would add that European integration has become way too neoliberal. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in the early 1990s, there used to be funds for small cultural projects with an active societal dimension, while now all that money goes to the big players and their large projects. And neoliberal integration itself plays a role in the emergence of populism and nationalism in all European countries and perhaps especially in Eastern Europe, so it is not a question of either integra-

² The book is edited by Erica Meijers (De Helling) and Nuala Ahern (Green Foundation Ireland). It features conversations with politicians and activists from France, Turkey, Poland, Ireland, Greece, Belgium, and the Netherlands. It can be downloaded at http://gef.eu/uploads/media/Green_values_and_religionDEEpdf

tion or nationalism. So here, as well, a critique is in place: integration itself is not the goal. Justice, freedom, equality and a relatively good life for all of us are the goals, and processes of integration (or however you choose to call them) should be evaluated for how well they advance these goals, and in those evaluations, we should be including the dynamics between neoliberalism and the new nationalisms.

TOMASZ KITLINSKI: And this is exactly where the role of the Greens comes in, all over Europe, to promote progressive solutions, and progressive values as part of the process of integration. Just one example: the huge transnational network of the Greens is very important for us here in Central Europe, because there is not enough money there to organise cultural initiatives for LGBTIQ and feminist cultural projects. I've had some experiences with situations in which none of the traditional corporate and public donors were willing to promote exhibitions and other cultural projects, and the only moral and financial support came from the Green parties and their organisations. In fact, my dream is a transnational federation of the Green; a Green International that would function as the voice of the excluded, of the Other, of the enemies of the far-right. The aim of us Greens should be then not only European integration, but also a world integration – world religions in their dynamic forms could be models here as they unite people and protest injustices. ■



YOLANDE JANSEN

is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and at the Free University of Amsterdam. She is the author of *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*; *French Modernist Legacies* (2013, Amsterdam University Press), and co-edited *The Irregularisation of Migration in Contemporary Europe: Detention, Deportation, Drowning* (2015, Rowman and Littlefield).
<https://uva.academia.edu/YolandeJansen>



TOMASZ KITLINSKI

is an academic and activist who has studied with Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. He served as a Fulbright scholar at the New School for Social Research. A member of Poland's Green Party and trade unionist, Tomasz led 2009 protests against lay-offs at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, and co-directed Lublin's 2011 Transeuropa Festival with Jewish, refugee, LGBTIQ and Green activists and events.