

DEBATES

THE APOLOGUE OF MARCO AND LEONARDO. A RESPONSE TO JOSEPH WEILER

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1. - After the recent, well-known, and widely discussed verdict of the European Court of Human Rights (section II, November 3, 2009, Appl. No 30814/06, *Lautsi v. Italy*), Joseph Weiler discusses, very acutely as usual, the essence of the issue of the crucifix in schools (*EJIL* (2010), Vol. 21 No. 1, 1-6).

The Author uses an instrument that is quite unusual in scientific debate: the apologue.

Weiler imagines two classmates, Marco and Leonardo, who respectively belong to a religious family and to a not religious family. When the latter pays a visit to the former, he is very surprised: there is an object on the wall that he does not know at all. «It's a crucifix - he is told - every house should have one».

Leonardo goes back home quite impressed, and asks his mother about this strange object. The mother, patiently, replies: «They are Catholics. We respect them and their beliefs». To the her son's request of if they could also hang the crucifix on the wall of their house, the mother answers politely but firmly in the negative. And rightly so, in Weiler's opinion: «It is a secular world view that she wants to impart to her children».

A while later, Marco pays a visit to his friend. Again the visitor is struck by the wall of the house of his host. It is "strangely" bare. There is no crucifix hanging. Marco asks his mother for an explanation. The answer is similar to that of Leonardo's mother: «They are a wonderful family, good and kind and charitable. But they do not share our belief in the Saviour. We respect them». Finally, also in this case, the mother answers negatively to her child's request to adapt their own wall: «We respect them, but for us it is unthinkable to have a house without a crucifix».

So far, so good. The problems begin the first day of school.

Let's imagine first a school with a crucifix. In the classroom

Leonardo is shaken: the school is like Marco's home! He comes back home tormented and full of doubts.

Weiler invites us to imagine, then, what would happen in the school assuming the opposite. Now Marco is the upset one. The school is like Leonardo's home: there is no crucifix on the wall! He comes back home in tears, distraught, and convinced that something is wrong with the position of his family. Moreover – Weiler adds – the situation would be even more alarming if the crucifix, that was initially in the classroom, had been removed.

From this short apologue, the author draws the following conclusions.

In contemporary society, in which «one of the principal cleavages is not among the religious but between the religious and the secular, absence of religion is not a neutral option». Marco's dismay clearly demonstrates this point. Weiler goes on: «The naked public square, the naked wall in the school, is decidedly not a neutral position, which seems to be at the root of the reasoning of the Court [Strasbourg]. It is no more neutral than having a crucifix on the wall». This is the main point of the argument proposed by Weiler: one can perfectly match up the positions of Marco and Leonardo. Their situations are perfectly symmetrical. In Weiler's opinion, the denial of this symmetry is, on the whole, «a disingenuous secular canard, the opposite of pluralism», and we have to unmask it once and for all if we really want our children, believers or not, Christians, Muslims or Jews, to live in a harmonious society with mutual respect for each other.

2. – The apologue has the unquestionable merits of clarity and simplicity. It points out the essence of the subtle problem that we face today: is the “bare wall” really more respectful of pluralism? Or is Weiler right to say that this is nothing but a «disingenuous secular canard»? The main question is the one that Weiler highlights: are Marco and Leonardo indeed in equal positions, overlapping in a perfectly symmetrical way? If the answer is positive, Weiler is surely right. I believe it is better to consider this question in a different way. Making use of apologues in order to expose a theory can be very useful, and in this situation it certainly was. However, this technique has its limits. The conclusions depend on how the apologue is constructed. These considerations underline the need for caution. Indeed, in my

opinion Weiler did not build the apologue correctly. It would have been better, in fact, to reconstruct the points of views of the two families in a different way, in order to give a more adequate account of the complex worldviews that they underlie.

In my own version of the apologue, in fact, Leonardo's mother, when asked by her son about the religious symbol, replies: «We respect the family of Marco and their beliefs. But they are very different from us. We believe that happiness in this house depends only on our goodwill, on our ability to take each other into consideration and on our willingness, and on the ability that each of us has, to deal with the other members of the family in a rational, reasonable and sympathetic way. Conversely, Marco's family believe that their happiness depends not only on what I just told you, but also on God's protection».

Similarly, Marco's mother replies to her child who asks her to remove the crucifix from their wall: «We respect Leonardo's family's beliefs . However, our point of view is quite different. We believe that the happiness of our family depends not only on our willingness, and on the ability that each of us has, to deal with others peacefully and rationally, but also on the help that the Lord in the heavens, in his unfathomable goodness, will decide to give us. For this we pray».

In my view, this small correction of the apologue is very important. First of all, it makes the apologue of Marco and Leonardo more precise; secondly, it leads us to a very different conclusion from that of Weiler. Let's see why.

3. – Firstly, the apologue is more accurate. Through it one can realize that the things the two families believe in are not entirely opposite to each other. Indeed, the beliefs of the two families partially overlap each other. Both families believe in some important "human" virtues: rationality, reasonableness and mutual understanding. The two families are therefore likely to find a shared ground. Indeed, they appreciate each other.

The difference between the worldviews of the two families is the following. In the Marco's family's view their future not only depends on the resources of rationality, reasonableness and mutual understanding. Their fortunes also depend on religious faith.

As one can see, the symmetrical image suggested by Weiler

is misleading. Conversely, a scalar image would be more appropriate. The first step is common to both families, whereas only Marco's family is able to add a second step to the first, namely the belief in an afterlife entity.

The worldview of Marco's family, then, is not "opposite" to that of Leonardo's. Rather, the former encompasses and surpasses the latter. We can say, briefly: the first family has more resources, more arrows to its bow than the second one.

We can now return to our question. Are the positions of Marco and Leonardo really symmetrical, as Weiler argues? What I have just highlighted clearly leads to a negative answer. Marco's relatives trust in resources that are denied by Leonardo's relatives. Conversely, all of the resources trusted by the latter family are shared by the former.

This different version of the story greatly changes the way of interpreting what happens on the first day of school. The crucifix on the wall would force Leonardo to accept a religious symbol as a part of the beliefs trusted by the community, even if he does not share this belief. On the contrary, when Marco is faced with the "bare wall", he is not forced to trust in something that does not correspond with his beliefs. The scholastic community believes in only a part of the resources that Marco believes to have. He is not forced into anything. He is only asked not to impose on others what they do not believe in. Unlike the former, this is a "nonviolent" way of living together.

As one can see, the situation is very different from Weiler's description. Therefore, the conclusion he reaches cannot be shared. It is worth noting, *inter alia*, that if the positions of Marco and Leonardo had indeed been truly symmetrical, the problem would not have allowed a satisfactory solution. Any solution, in fact, would contain elements of violence against one party. Fortunately this is not the case. It is obvious that the choice of the "white wall" calls for a sacrifice from Marco, and not from Leonardo. It is not, however, a sacrifice comparable to the one forced on Leonardo, if we assume the opposite. If we do hang the crucifix in the classroom, we will ask the latter to endure something far from his beliefs. Conversely, if we do not hang the crucifix, we ask the former only to accept, in the public sphere, a language shared by everyone, even if he has to give up part of his own language.

4. – The following example, in my view very fitting, could be added to the tale of Marco and Leonardo.

Let's imagine a group of friends gathered to chat in the evening. There are people who come from different countries. There are guys from Germany, France, England, Spain and Italy. Of course, all of them can speak their own language. Each of them also speaks English, but nobody is able to converse in a language different from the latter and from his own language. In such a situation it would be extremely rude to insist on speaking a language other than English, even with a fellow countryman. Moreover, it would be absurd if a non-English guy asked the others to converse in their own language.

Why do we consider a conversation in English in the situation above described a better solution than the other possibilities? Obviously it is the most inclusive option. It does not leave anyone out. It looks after the interests of every one. One can certainly say that this option is the more pluralistic one. None of us would consider this solution to be an imposition of the Englishman on his friends, though undoubtedly he is the one that benefits from the situation more than the others.

On the other hand, why do we not hold as a good choice to speak in the language of the majority in the group? Because in this way, although it is based on the majority principle, it would be heavily penalizing to the minority, as it would prevent those who belong to the minority from being full members of the group. Things should go in the same way in everything that affects the public sphere of a genuinely pluralistic constitutional State. What is the only language that all of us are able to speak? The language of rationality, reasonableness and mutual understanding. Not those of religious faiths, as widespread, historically rooted, or tolerant and enlightened as they are. The public sphere, therefore, can be guided only by what can be attributed to that language. And the walls of a public school, one of the most important institutions devoted to educate us and our children to the common language, are undoubtedly attributable to it.

The example of languages, moreover, may be particularly relevant for Christians. Consider the passage from the Acts of the Apostles in which the Holy Spirit gives some disciples the power to speak all languages (Acts 2,1). It is a gift to those who have faith. How would they behave in the situation suggested above?

Of course - driven by charity, the most important virtue, according to the famous passage by the apostle Paul (1 Cor 13) - they would make a great effort to speak English, although this would have been a sacrifice for them.

Christians should behave similarly nowadays, in pluralistic societies. In the public sphere they should look at the others in a charitable way, and speak a language that those who do not participate in the gift of faith can understand. This obviously does not prevent Christians from trying to communicate their good news to others, trying to allow them to share in this gift. But charity should encourage them to strictly separate this activity from those that take place in the public sphere.