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From Values to Religion

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Abstract

Each individual is guided by values that determine his behaviour. A recurrent distinction concerns the difference between applied values and final values, therefore between values concerning individual practices and values which represent real goals to achieve. The discussion tends to slip onto a juxtaposition of universal values and universal rights, which is to say between human values and human rights. It is not always easy to discern secular values from religious values. The main issue regards those who hold religious and secular values. If religious values are presumably conserved by churches, denominations, confessional organizations, for secular values the State is usually considered to be the main holder. Global values and local values can be in conflict, especially when the same individual has to play a number of different rules. And it must be considered that today migration context in Europe presents different communities with different values.

Keywords: values, religion, social change, universal rights

De los valores a la religión

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Resumen

Cada persona se guía por valores que determinan su comportamiento. Hay una distinción recurrente entre valores aplicados y valores finales, así mismo entre valores referentes a prácticas individuales y valores que representan objetivos reales a conseguir. La discusión tiende a plantearse como una yuxtaposición entre valores universales y derechos universales, es decir, entre valores humanos y derechos humanos. No siempre es fácil discernir entre valores seculares y valores religiosos. El tema principal hace referencia a aquellas personas que sostienen valores religiosos y seculares. Si los valores religiosos presuntamente se hallan en iglesias, denominaciones y organizaciones confesionales, para los valores seculares el estado suele considerarse el principal detentor. Valores globales y valores locales pueden entrar en conflicto, especialmente cuando la misma persona tiene que jugar un número diferente de normas. Y debe tenerse en consideración que, en Europa, el actual contexto migratorio presenta diferentes comunidades con diferentes valores.

Palabras clave: valores, religión, cambio social, derechos universales

Human action is motivated by many factors. Among these, values have an outstanding role. Each individual is guided by fundamental values that determine his behaviour. Such values are deeply rooted and abstract ideas, even if they are susceptible of empirical validation, and can be considered “objective”. Values are mostly important, because they are regarded as belonging to a superior level. They cannot be replaced so easily; they are not negotiable, and they are at the same time highly desirable. That is the reason why individuals are prepared to face sacrifices and all sorts of difficulties for them. From the consideration given to a certain value, we derive every practical element. The evaluation of good and evil, right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate is based on the values organization of each individual. Values can be either a starting point or a target to pursue, an idea to be implemented, a goal to achieve. Therefore, we might say that values always inspire human behaviour either as a goal or as an original inspiration.

If taken as such, values may also become normative rules, some sort of validation criteria. They guide individual choices; therefore they interact with interests and pre-existent habits (in fact, values are not immune from those interests and habits that are capable of consolidating them, instead of choosing among a wide variety of options or of interests and habits). However, it is important to maintain a distinction between values as ideals (orienting individual life) and values as real practices (aiming at a certain goal), at least for descriptive reasons. As a matter of fact, both meanings are present in empirical situations, where it is usually impossible to establish which is *prius* and which is *post*. Neither values as ideals nor values as practice are mutually identifiable. To be more precise, we cannot analyse the situation only from a behaviouristic point of view. We will have to go further and consider a wider variety of knowledge, made up by a network of interactions between individuals and society, subjectivity and social structure, attitudes and behaviours.

Nowadays, the ideal construction of [Thomas and Znaniecki \(1918-1920\)](#), which tend to stretch the concept of value to its maximum extent, appears no more valid. Values were considered to be full of meaning, in

social relevance, whereas attitudes were considered the area of individual behaviour even when acted in a context representing the same values. At the present time it seems more likely to assume a connection between inspiring value and practical action, that is to say, between value and choice (or refusal to choose). In other words, the implementation of a value, that is to say the preferred behaviour, involves the necessity for a distinction between what is desirable from what is possible, thus reasonably considering actual contingencies.

Cognitive dimension

Many authors agree on a cognitive dimension of values. At first, we have to remember the work of Kluckhohn (1951) who, besides the cognitive dimension (related to judgment, either positive or negative, and to facts and behaviours) includes an affective dimension (regarding acceptance or refusal of those conforming or not conforming to values) and a selective dimension (that highlights the solid influence that values exert on human behaviour). This third dimension remains at an abstract and general level, especially in the case of reference values, but it becomes a normative rule in the case of particular and contextualized actions (Sciolla, 1998, p. 751).

An ethical and political dimension can be added to the cognitive one. As such it is more closely connected with structures and organized institutions. It is therefore necessary, in order to strengthen individual positions, to connect them with shared values, in order to avoid explaining each time - on an interpersonal level - attitudes and preferences, habits and behaviours, criteria and proceedings. As a matter of fact, institutions do not often sufficiently support individuals in facing such responsibility; therefore, it is quite usual that a single social actor decides personally to explain, to offer motivations and reasons for some personal evaluations. In this way, he would face a harsh plurality of different values and positions, a clear opposition of points of view, of operational choices and evaluations. The relation between subject and society is also discussed, as well as the connection between citizen and state, social actor and social-political and economical context.

In such situations the debate on the “crisis” or “end of values” emerges. In fact, there is a tendency in any society towards disorganization, giving up usual cohesion forms, and choosing easy solutions even if not democratic, in the sense that they are not legitimized by an adequate consensus. If the frame of malaise is complicated by a high massification of communication processes and socio-political influence, a utilitarian kind of action prevails over the communicative one, according to [Habermas \(1984; 1987\)](#). Values become therefore obsolete and meaningless.

In the end, individuals work in a complete vacuum of values or in a context that does not take them into consideration, because values, even if commonly shared, have to come out as precise, not negotiable decisions. The possibility to establish criteria, in this connection, is quite hard, because the risk is to give remedies that are not feasible in practical situations. At this point, among the number of possibilities, one way has to be chosen, either facing the risk of undesirable side effects or clearly going against ideal values. On the other hand, modernity and post-modernity are compatible with such outcome also: one can go back and start all over again.

Sociologists, and especially sociologists of knowledge, have no doubt about the cognitive content of values. The typically Weberian operation consists in giving sense to every single aspect of reality. Therefore values and meanings either seem to coincide or to be one over the other, in any case they have a very close connection.

Identity is another *Leitmotiv* of the phenomenology of values. It is through values that people identify themselves in a movement, a religion, a political party or an ideological faith. At the same time, historical and sociological dynamics are such that individual characters are taken into consideration, together with a proportional development of freedom and autonomy.

One last constant is the guiding role assumed by social structures, political and law institutions, and collective organizations for social actors. Legitimation and identification processes consolidate a feeling of belonging through rational and affective motivations. The centre of such consolidation of social relations consists in some basic values that specify the feeling of community participation.

Modern and post-modern have destroyed the presumed certainties of the past and have opened the way to “alternative” values, that is to say less predictable and flexible (in contrast with the solidity of traditional values). However, these new values allow unusual research for alternative knowledge based on different certainties, as truth becomes a process to build instead of a word to believe in.

A wide variety of possible outcomes for the research of new non-traditional values is presented, these values are no more vertically transmitted by previous generations, thanks also to consolidated habits, that are the bastion of any pre-existent value. Contemporary societies have a very original challenge to face: they have to find new and reliable paths through grounded reasoning and solid motivations. This calls for refined knowledge and adequate experiences. Easy ways out are not allowed in such a diversified society. The very ways of acting of the social actor are submitted to analysis and they produce new terms of confrontation in order to stimulate a more and more complex, problematic and articulated reflexivity, interacting with values, knowledge and social practices.

Interests and habits

Together with values, interests and social habits have also an outstanding influence on social and individual action. However, values have a particular position within the sociological dynamics that promotes and funds them. From the very beginning of its life, the individual faces a number of pre-existent social elements, such as: his parents (but sometimes only the mother), his relatives (sisters and brothers, but also more distant relatives), the citizens of the same country (normally speaking the same language or the same dialect), his neighbours (houses or jointly-owned building). All these people surround the newborn, not only physically, but with their way of doing, speaking and acting also. This is how the very first and fundamental communication begins: the newborn receives a variety of messages, without homogeneity, but to a certain extent convergent because they all belong to the same cultural pattern. That is to say, a shared opinion

about life, about how to face it and about the convenient social behaviour. Finally, even before he is officially registered, the new social subject is *de facto* an “object”: object of attentions and looking after, affection and worries, with all the content of meanings, emotions and signs to transmit.

Actually, those who worry after the newborn have experienced themselves the same situation, when they were newborn. That is how ideas, habits, attitudes and behaviours are transmitted from generation to generations, building up some sort of continuous chain (except from rare cases). There is no other explanation for such a continuity, that is too often taken for granted, and therefore not quite considered in its essential influence on reality, and in this way on a certain *Weltanschauung*. This is taken as a natural event. The world “naturally” considered is accepted as it is, it does not represent a problem, and it enters daily life becoming as a habit where nothing is to be discussed. A typical *Leitmotiv* is “that’s the way it goes”. Therefore, mothers usually feed their newborns or take care of them, as well as fathers mostly take care of material and economic goods for a living, and elderly people provide a link with the past, representing the continuity of existence. However, we must also consider that values fit in an already fixed frame. History has shown how to accumulate experiences, institutional organizations have developed and a solid knowledge has been acquired. This is the place where the new social actor is deemed to live and develop.

Spring water follows the grove traced by former water passing by, as well as socializing individuals follow an already signed path, a sort of compulsory way with no possibilities of choosing other alternatives, especially in the very beginning. Only later, with the years, there will be the possibility of following a non regular path. Only when the age of reason and full autonomy are reached, unusual paths, original ways and unpredictable solutions will be made possible.

Constitution of interests precedes any proposals of values. Interests of newborns, besides some primary needs which are common to all newborn children, do not seem to be innate. There are essential needs as self-preservation, protection, maintenance, search for pleasure, capacity

of avoiding any unpleasant situation and especially physical arm (or affective arm, linked to the loss of something beloved or something judged essential for living). As a matter of fact, values proposed by external stimuli are likely to work upon already defined interests, or well known for the destination subject. The same thing can be said for some social deep rooted habits. They become a sort of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) for all subjects who tend to conform to existing attitudes, or make use of common sense solutions in order to be accepted by others. Finally, even before their own values, social actors have to face external habits, likely to become their own and with the same basic interests, that will be of great influence when they will have to make a choice.

According to Ronald Inglehart, who has been developing systematic empirical research on values in America and Europe, abilities and structures are to be considered the prior independent variables that influence social change. When Inglehart talks of “abilities” (1977: *Introduction*), he refers to the tendency of people to be interested in politics, to understand it and to participate in it, as an attitude of “challenge to *élites*”. When referring to structures, Inglehart means economical, social and political structures of the countries of his comparative studies: France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Denmark, Ireland and Great Britain.

The same point of view is used by Inglehart (1997) also in the following research on 43 countries. This research is focused more precisely on modern and post-modern processes, which have highlighted a greater attention on quality of life and self realization, together with more individualization. The new finding is reflexivity that induces to take the distance from absolute values and directs them within a more subjective context, based on individual preferences. This would take place with a degree of uncertainties, hesitations and inconveniences, as well as long waiting, contradictions and disappointments. However, the final outcome elaborated by the individual would be the production of new rules, a law more coherent with the problems of social actors, especially the young ones. As such, the primary socialization process remains in the background, while the

secondary socialization process intervenes in a more decisive way. It enhances a horizontal movement, among generations, ready to substitute the former one, characterized by an inter-generational profile (from older generations to younger ones). The sociological consequence of this dynamic change is a “polytheism of values”, as well as of reasons and motivations of values, therefore of all the actions deriving from it, as **Bontempi** underlined (2001). Within the diversity of considered variables, there is an essential agreement about the sociological discourse applied to values, because empirical findings confirm the interpretation that we have here offered. While Inglehart mainly emphasized the role of education, we here suggest a preference for the phase that precedes school socialization. The secondary phase seems obviously less important than the primary one of the family socialization, which also have a long lasting period of introduction to life, a sort of initiation that cannot be ignored.

Human values

Values can be independent variables, those at the origin of interests, habits, identity processes and social solidarity, but they can also be dependent variables, those deriving from other social factors. In both cases values have a central position. On a general consideration we might call them human values because they are linked with human subjects and their fundamental tendencies, and with their fundamental beliefs and evaluations, oriented to assume decisions. The variety of human values is very wide. It is almost all-pervading. It embraces many fields: from knowledge to communication, from law to ethic and moral, from policy to economics, from education to medical and sanitary, from religion to secular, from daily life to general living. A recurrent distinction concerns the difference between applied values and final values (**Rokeach, 1973**), therefore between values concerning individual practices and values which represent real goals to achieve.

Another distinction quite widespread is between universal values and particular values. But the discussion is still open on which are the universal values. In particular the discussion tends to slip onto a

juxtaposition of universal values and universal rights, which is to say between human values and human rights. During the last Century the development of human rights has kept pace with the “scientification” process, an important increase of social and practical relevance of scientific and academic studies. Especially by the end of World War II, authority and influence of scientific research have been taken more into consideration, particularly in medical, economical and management fields (Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003). However, democratization dynamics, although growing, have not reached the level of human rights at the top of the scale. They passed from an interest with a few nations and organizations at the beginning of the 20th Century, to a number of more than three hundred organizations and nations directly involved by the end of the same Century. In this regard, the role of the so called high education has been decisive (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). We can say that human rights widespread have become a world event. Therefore, it represents a significant modality in the more recent globalization processes. Problems of equality and exclusion, for instance, are a constant issue at the present time. They are a must in the international socio-political agenda. By now, the lack of participation of some groups – especially minorities, rural and of a low social-economical status – to higher education levels represents a strong call for attention and sensitivity for governments and international organizations. Due to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights published by the United Nations, a strong interest for equality among individuals and for democratic participation values has been increasing for years. We shall now ask: “Are there other universal human rights?” As a matter of fact, what makes universal a human right is not a commonly shared opinion among nations. At most the Declaration can represent a valid reference, even if it has not been signed and fostered by all nations worldwide. In absence of a commonly shared opinion among sociologists about the existence of values, sociological research can only give empirical surveys about the presence of average widespread values in each culture or socio-geographical and political context. Only a worldwide survey, using an appropriate and significant methodology, based on a comparative interpretation could provide

general indications about the existence of meta-values, that is to say, values empirically found in various society that, when compared on a larger scale, may be indicated as universal.

In other words, values such as freedom, democracy, respect for individuals, “sacredness” of life, equality among individuals and others are not necessarily to be considered universal, just because they are prevailing in a certain part of the world. There are situations and conditions of various natures in the world which do not recognize such values, thus clearly showing that only a certain part of the world sustains and claims them as universal.

Universal values

The issue of universal values is not secondary. The necessity of spreading abroad the values of some organizations and nations depends directly on this issue. An example can be made for freedom or democracy: we shall ask ourselves if it is ethically desirable to export such values through the means of war which is already an implicit denial of freedom and democracy itself. However, if in a particular context other values are considered as fundamental (or simply more important) than human life, in this case it is impossible to think about “sacredness” of life as a universal value. As we can see, determining which universal values are is not easy. Everything we say may be contradicted by empirical results. Individuals and community structures decide if a value is “good” and worth following it in their daily action or in the long run. Universal values, spread worldwide and commonly shared by all cultures, can only be seen as hypothetical views. The hypothesis can be destined to a failure as soon as an empirical survey shows an opposite thesis. In order to provoke (but also to produce a scientific knowledge applied to dynamics of values), we might start pretending that suppression of human life is a value in order to verify if such a position is commonly shared by all social realities existing in the world. We might find that the sacrifice of one’s life is particularly appreciated in certain areas, within a certain cultural, ideological and religious faith, thus granting privileges to a goal different from that

envisaging a totally negative opinion on taking a man's life either voluntarily or coerced. Moreover, in the same social reality we might envisage a clear opposition between values of the majority and those of a minority group. It is the typical case of the deviant or marginal groups, which follow logics of values that are different from that of the majority. It does not mean that chosen values exert a radically different influence: the group loyalty inside a criminal band may be highly superior to that inside the *team* of a firm.

A possible solution might be found by speaking about quasi-universal or para-universal values. This means that the suggested classification cannot pretend to be exhaustive nor to be susceptible of generalization. It would be better to avoid radical and self-referring positions. Values do not depend only on the capacity of a dominant group to impose them to other individual and social groups. Moreover, respect or no respect for values is linked with many not easily foreseeable variables. Especially in the field of values many predictions are bound to failure. The amount of variables involved in the victory of values is quite varied. In some situations values are commonly shared; in others they are not; in some situations they are in evident opposition; in others they are not squarely opposed to "counter values". As human beings are variable, values as well have a variable stability. This latter depends on the degree of importance that each value has for a single individual and for the group. It is not by chance that the most difficult decisions to take are those concerning a discussion on more than one value, equally present in the cultural and personal background, according to a classification which is more or less aware, but which becomes evident when there is a decision to take. However, even if a certain value has an influence stronger than the others have, it cannot be taken for granted that in the future, on a similar occasion, the same value will prevail again. Situations, actual conditions and other factors, the affective ones also, can have a decisive influence, in such a way as to be often independent from the scale of values of the single social actor.

Social change and moral values

In general, it is impossible for a value to change without having other important mutations around it, especially if other values do change. How about freedom value: a transformation of this value cannot take place, without a different perception of the State and without a democratic participation to the life of a nation. At times combinations between values, within a developing process, are quite difficult to find and it is even harder to venture hypothesis. It happens that values in contradiction between them may live together and give shape to a transformation of primary socialization. One should not forget that the will of a single person is sovereign and is usually impossible to unveil his intent and the deep reasons for his procedural choices. The more commonly shared global and local values go through modifications, confirmations and adjustments also. The very idea of democracy and freedom may be interpreted differently according to different cultural frame of reference and/or initial ideological and political perspectives. When we say “Cuba libre”, for example, that is to say Free Cuba, the interpretation can be double, either it refers to the issue of liberating the Island from the government of Fidel Castro, defined as a dictatorship, or it can be interpreted in relation to the idea of setting Cuba free from US economical, military and capitalistic power.

This dichotomy shows a tendency to oppose values one against the other; therefore, one value would be preferred by one party but not by the other, and *vice versa*. The option is a consequence of decisions operated in favour of an approach which may be affective or neutral, individual or collective, particularistic or universalistic, specific or widespread, ascribed or acquired (Parsons, 1951). Actually, the choice among values does not follow all the alternatives, but it is centred on some topics and issues. Here the central role is played by the variable interwoven with the culture and the society. From a Durkheimian point of view, we can establish some sort of collective morality (Durkheim, 1973), that has its foundation in the society itself, in a common belonging of the individual to a community, whose interest is directly proportionate to the respect that a complex of social rules enjoys among

its members. The question does not concern the solution of the vague idea of Durkheim when he puts forward a “collective consciousness”, as a typical character of a “sacred” society. The respect for society is implemented by practising its moral norms, without any criticism of them. An immediate effect is respect for the individual also, but according to Durkheim this is a secondary consequence. Moreover, in this approach, the individual can bring only a minimum, almost invisible support, because with it and through it only a generic and abstract collectivism is respected - a collectivism that lacks any serious individual contribution to the building up of a collective morality, to be understood not as particularly authoritarian, although deprived of a consensus in the proper sense.

There is no lack of studies and interpretative proposals endowed with different visions that either suggest a relation between values and attitudes (for a functionalistic approach: [Brewster Smith, 2006](#)) or insist on moral values ([Hartmann, 2002](#)) and on a possibility of education, particularly stressed in international reviews such as *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, *Journal of Moral Education*, *Issues in Religious Education*, or finally, special research centres should be recalled such as the *Centre of Beliefs and Values* at the University of Wales, Lampeter.

Recently, an outstanding increment of ethical sensitivity as regards public issues has occurred. This concerns the behaviour of individuals in a collective situation and in relation to public interests within administrative, managerial, political, trade union and economic contexts. In general, public opinion and mass media tend to emphasize those events and episodes that fall below widespread expectations about citizenship, nationality and cultural identity. It seems that managers and policy makers are more than ever willing to move away from individual and institutional control. Actually, it has become quite a problem to detect any ethical foundation in economic and political decisions. Neo-contractual and neo-utilitarian perspectives that emerged worldwide together with the new wave of conservative perspectives, named *neoon* (neoconservative), have reduced the ethic issue to the necessity of bidding by formal rules as a justification to avoid facing new problems.

The ingenious proposal of [Niklas Luhmann \(1995\)](#), based on a conception of society as a mere procedure, managed by cybernetic

algorithms and formal rules, belongs to a para-bureaucratic vision that would see society as a huge machine, without self-awareness and without a historic consciousness both from an individual and a group view-point. The already started and implemented attempts have not produced adequate results; moreover they have increased the number of non participating individuals to a direct management of the society to which they belong. Neither contractual, nor utilitarian and functionalist proposals, even if well presented and revised, have succeeded to promote rooting (or on the contrary, a change) of shared values among individuals within their social network.

Not even Weberian world disenchantment has fostered an ultimate turn, and with his idea of awareness for polytheism of values, he seems to have created more problems. He did not at all solve the problem of an ethic issue for society, because having various principles is equal to having none. In the meantime social actors continuously have to face non avoiding issues and to take urgent decisions. The social and human development itself is bound to be affected because this kind of development confronts us with a problem that cannot be examined, not even solved, by giving up any hypothesis of orienting ethical criteria as far as the initiatives to be implemented are concerned. Weberian *Wertfreiheit* provokes a number of critical opinions as well. This approach insists on the distinction between facts and values, therefore social scientists are asked to keep at a definite distance from their own values, thus totally renouncing to any sort of evaluation judgement towards a scientific "object". The outcome is that the analysis of social scientists is limited to data gathering and interpreting. A major criticism to this approach is the non-neutrality of a scientific method and the presumed neutrality of all kinds of theories of knowledge. Apparently, some sort of influent and active value references or ethical fundamentals are acting behind every presumed neutral research, even if scientists might not be consciously aware of it. At the very beginning of any methodologically correct research experience declaring its neutrality there would be apparently a great number of values. Just because these values are different and polymorphic, they are the evidence of value pluralism at the source, *in nuce*, even before the research has started.

The Kantian idea of a universal ethic, from which common values for

harmony in the world and among men derive, has lost many fans and is no longer in fashion. Contemporary sociologists cannot ignore that there is something more (or less, according to the different points of view) than “a starry sky above us” and more than the “moral conscience which is inside us”. Calling for rationality adds more complexity. What rationality should we use? The lay rationality generated by the French Enlightenment? European history (and not only European) has shown limits, idiosyncrasies and eventually tragic consequences of that approach. More particularly, history lets us see that thought, even of a small *élite* and very attentive, is not effective and protective of everybody’s rights. Shall we give up research, which is likely to give useless results, in order to look for shared ethical references? Or can we decide in favour of comparing various ethical systems of inquiry, in order to define the more acceptable and recurrent tendencies? Habermas suggested an ethic of discourse. A double-way of open communication to be acted among pairs, with people having faith in each other and who are open to critical remarks, who do not hold the absolute truth, who are receptive of other people’s opinions, oriented to continuous research of common good and in the interest of the community.

Values, ideologies and religion

At this very point, the weakness of ideology has been clearly shown. Ideologies deny any solution with an ethic of discourse. Such a critical note concerns both religious and lay perspectives, because both of them are glued to their deep convictions. A double fundamentalism, religious and lay, is not suitable for communicative acting, which is in search of an adequate solution for a number of social subjects. A quick solution is not desirable from this perspective, because it has to be reached with an explicit consensus of the majority. Actually, a widely useful solution might also come from the point of view of a minority. The most important thing is that it is not coercively imposed, without any legal, military, and affective blackmail. A rapidly and easily reached goal is with no promise for the future. Only a consolidated praxis, which has become tradition and habit, even though respectful of the interests of the social actors, can succeed in becoming a wide consensus reference.

However, a delicate issue is the influence of individual interests. When they have become steady habits and traditions, they are hardly put aside in order to give way to a social perspective. Regulation of subjective requests seems to be necessary, in order not to harm collective expectations.

Nowadays, there is an evident increasing respect for individual rights, which are separate to a certain extent from the social context and do not easily combine with the issue of solidarity. The idea of a social actor is therefore an attempt to place the individual within a relational network, thus underlining his/her human characteristics of socialization, sharing, dialogue, confrontation, values, from neither a non utilitarian nor functional point of view. Migration dynamics, which have a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic shape, emphasize the urgency of common values and adequate ethical principles which are able to solve conflicts, misunderstandings and struggles. The hypothesis of universal values widely accepted by different ethnic groups seems to be far too utopian. The idea that social subjects who belong to different religious faiths have visions of life squarely divided into good and evil with no possibility of dialogue, mediation, or discussion to find shared positions without conflict cannot even be thought of. Sometimes there are rules, adequate behaviours and coherent attitudes, usually widely accepted, which not even through the transcendental dimension of a religion really become accepted. That is why, speaking of ethic values, it is worthwhile reading Weber once again. But, this time, accepting Weber's suggestion in terms of an ethic of responsibility, thus taking into account the immediate situation, the urgency of problem solving without harming anybody, if not to a minimum extent and for the good of the community. One might take into consideration evaluating the consequences of a certain action, or seeing the effects of some kind of acting. Therefore, the complexity of making a choice is always in between community maximum gain on the one hand, and what can possibly be realized, on the other hand.

All the so called universal religions contain values that present a certain vision of the world, a certain meaning of life and a specific idea of human destiny, from those referring to books (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to oriental ones (Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism,

Buddhism, Shinto). A concise value centred attempt of syncretism may allow a slight convergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, despite many past and present historical events show a clear intolerance of these religions to reach shared solutions. However, official and organized attempts have been made, and others will be done in the future, probably. Oriental and Chinese religions have the remarkable experience of Ju-Fu-Tao that melts together Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in one religion. Ju-Fu-Tao is fairly practised especially by modern Chinese people. Somewhere else, in Japan, they go further, not only have they cults and values that belong to other Asiatic religions (especially Shinto and Buddhism) but they also include some elements of Christianity, thus determining a mixture of values and practices which are often alternated, according to the personal living of subjects, their families and communities. It is not by chance that in the first decade of the past Century there was an attempt of melting Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity. Among the more widespread values in the East, veneration of past generations has to be remembered. Actually, it is a real cult of the ancestors. Part of it is also the highest value given to piety for sons, which extends to a respect owed to any other human beings. In some cases attention to people precedes the devotion for divinity, so that important personalities, called masters, become more important than divinities. In respect to the ethical and social character of Confucianism, Buddhism develops more the value of spirituality. We also have to say that the declaration of the Republic of China, at the beginning of the past Century, the system proposed by Sun Yat-Sen became widespread. This system is based on three new values: nationalism, democracy and socialism. Socialism assumes a less idealistic and more military character with the advent of Maoism.

Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, continue to appear more sensitive to eschatological issues, in particular to the destiny of human beings at the end of their *parcours de vie*. In fact, central values of Hindus and Buddhists are connected to the dynamics of the transmigration of souls, which is why spiritual aspects are emphasized. However, within Hinduism, the division in castes produces certain consequences. Attempts of refusals, for instance, gave way to the birth of new religions, such as Sikhism, which was funded by Nanak five

Centuries ago. Kabir's attempt of bypassing ritualism and idolatry is almost contemporary, enhancing a melting of Hinduism and Islam. Such an idea was proposed again but from a political point of view, by Muslim Indian emperor Akbar. Islam succeeded at the end, owing to military reasons as well imposed by the Mogul sovereign Shah Jahan. Hinduism comes into fashion after a more spiritual turn (deriving from Brahmanism), which introduces the predication of values such as goodness, sustained by Devendranath Tagore, father of the famous poet, who was himself a fundamental reference for Hindu culture. A further push towards uniting different religions appears from time to time: at first with Ram Mohan Roy, who was in favour of a so called Unitarian Hinduism and enhancing British reformism in India. And after with Keshab, who tried to annex Christianity within Unitarian Hinduism. Later on, Ramakrishna fostered a total syncretism of all religions. The vitality of Hinduism's internal dynamics is confirmed by the exalted value for vegetarian life, preached by Dayananda Sgravati, who is also active in Europe and in the United States. Finally there is Mahatma Gandhi who prays for values such as non-violence, passive resistance, purity and truth. Later on there is also religious tolerance as a further value. On the other hand, Buddhism has insisted on absence of desire as a value, connected with body control and the principle of self-help. The birth of a theosophical society, based on Buddhism and Hinduism, is related to the age-old trends of oriental religions.

In the meantime, the history of mankind is full of philosophical and religious readings, from Arabian Averroës to Hebrew Maimonide and Christian Thomas d'Aquino. In Literature, Chaucer exalts community and social brotherhood values in his *Canterbury Tales*. Erasmus and Thomas Moore speak about the value of a simple life. Rousseau insists on free thinking. The philosophers Lessing and Herder envisage the possibility of human development in all religions. Wordsworth notices the spiritual side of community life. The New York Ethic Society is founded by Felix Adler while Stanton Colt creates the English Ethic Society. Horace Bridges has to do with the Ethic Society of Chicago. Tolstoj and Kropotkin write down the values of social justice and human brotherhood. Rauschenbush should be remembered for his "social gospel", while John Dewey and J. Middleton Murry should be

remembered respectively the former for *A common Faith* and the latter for “religious socialism”. Albert Einstein should also be mentioned for his respect of human life and ethic values. Martin Buber as well gives great importance to the individual dimension. With such premises, the idea of realizing the first international congress on humanism and ethic culture comes as a natural consequence by the second half of the last Century.

Hans Küng, who has completed the publication of his trilogy on the three “book” religions, besides having underlined the numerous common elements among them, he also confirms that “there are common bases: do not kill, do not torture, do not violate; do not steal, do not corrupt, do not betray; do not lie, do not give false testimony; do not commit abuse. These principles belong to all religions. Usually, Catholics totally agree. In some cases the problem arises, when respect for life is identified with the condemnation of contraceptives, when there is a consideration of abortion which is too rigid, if there is a discriminatory attitude towards homosexuality or if the problems linked to euthanasia are not understood”. He concludes: “we need moral fundamentals. But these cannot be laicism, neither can they be clericalism, or restoration of Christian Europe as Pope Wojtyla desired. There cannot be a restoration of an atheist State as it happened after the French Revolution. We need a common ethic ground, which means to accept basis ethical norms sustained by all important religion and by philosophical traditions, which can also be accepted by non believers”.

Values and needs of social life

Religious values, because they are contained within an ideological system, have a number of fundamental ideas, which often mean condemnations, precepts and prohibitions. Such a characteristic does not prevent them from being quite widely accepted. It can happen that for the sake of a confessed and practised religion, one tries to propose ones own values, asking for a legal recognition in the constitution, within actual norms and in the regulation of cults, with extensions that can comprehend aspects which are far from those peculiar to a religious

faith. Especially when a crisis of values occurs, recurring to religious values seems to be a successful and unavoidable remedy. However, sociological research results clearly suggest that no value, either religious or lay, can totally satisfy all the needs of social life alone. The same can be said for every group of values that belong to a certain religious faith. Law, public organization and public procedures cannot solve their complexity just within one frame of reference values. At first we have to consider that all situations evolve, appearing in unpredictable ways and often presenting complications impossible to solve. The possibility of conforming a jurisdiction to a specific group of religious values in order to “educate” social actions does not seem to be an adequate solution to face the diversities inside societies and to solve the problem at its very origin, even less can it help predicting the development of democratic dynamics or anticipating any sort of political choice. Moreover, whether religious or not, values do not complete their influence and function in a particular law order. They are more than that. That is why they have a much wider reference, a more solid foundation given by the same social actors, and beyond any futile simplification they exert a strong critical influence on choices to be made.

Values do not seem to be an “all occasion recipe”. An attentive analysis of social reality is usually required to put values into practice. Even more so, values are a general tendency and they are not capable of depriving the individual of his freedom taking the place of the individual’s reflexive action. More than some sort of defence, values are like an encouragement for acting in the world with great attention but fearless. Actually, values seem to have something in common with scientific theories: both are able to guide without forcing the individual, they both give autonomy to a certain extent, they use “transcendence” not in a mere religious sense but as a way to overcome exclusive, unchanging and unailing principles. However, it is not a sort of diffused relativism to be used at all costs, it is rather an attentive and educated approach, which comprehends pluralism but at the same time shows an awareness of relativity of the existing and possibly feasible different positions. The social actor can therefore assume a sort of starting weakness of values, more than flexibility, because they are

bound to come up against social reality data and face their own evolution.

It is not by chance that a fundamental state law, which is the constitution, even if considered “sacred”, needs to be up-dated and to be revised, also for the search for “almost” universal values. Such “almost” universal values means that they are mostly retained consensual towards what cannot be ignored at a *certain moment of time* and *within a certain society*. That is why every attempt of state religion, as a pact between religion and state, does not last long. Individuals are willing to personally elaborate what is codified. That means that they are keen to give their own interpretation and, even more, they tend to apply it with measure, criticism, focusing on the situations. Pacts between churches and public administrations, even if, on the one hand, they lead to good results, offering advantages and facilitating religious organizations, they also represent an obstacle for an unconditioned acceptance by citizens. Thus, taking back their individual rights, citizens exert their own rights bypassing the agreement between high religious and political officials. Religion loses its character of value-bearer for all and is perceived as mere ideology and power, therefore it becomes similar to other forcing structures.

Secular values

It is not always easy to discern secular values from religious values. Some religious values are widely accepted also by those who declare to be of lay tendencies. Vice versa, there are some typically secular values which are accepted by people inspired by religious principles. The main issue regards those who hold religious and secular values. If religious values are presumably conserved by churches, denominations, confessional organizations, for secular values the State is usually considered to be the main holder. However, in this case it is better to use another adjective: in fact they are “secularist” or “laicist” values, more than secular or lay values which usually have their moral basis in personal consciousness, which is in the free and autonomous possibility of choice of the individual. At this point there is a similar individual attitude and behaviour towards religion and politics, as well as towards

church and state. Finally, absolute values are not sociologically dominant because values and ethical aims are various and differently shaped, therefore they are not related to the same one religious and/or political system. We also have to consider that a supposed unity of religious values is not necessarily related only to one form of political organization, as well. Vice versa, a shared political situation does not mean that there is only one platform of values. In other words, Weberian polytheism of values is true both for the religious as well as the public sphere. Every institution is founded on a certain degree of shared values, therefore it is never neutral and without prejudice. A lay point of view also has its own burden of values. A State that assumes to be ethical, for example, becomes the main source of values for its citizens, who usually turn their autonomous capacity of taking decisions, using their own personal conscience and taking advantage of their freedom of acting. However, if the State is founded on ethical principles and aims at protecting them within its citizens, it becomes a further guarantee for freedom of thought and action. Especially if the value of freedom is highly considered, in relation to the individual rights on one's body ("this body is mine and I can do what I want with it") as well as on property rights on non material goods ("this is my mind and I can use it as I like").

Also a "cybernetic" idea of social reality, such as [Luhmann's](#) neo-functionalism (1995), might be identified as based on the laic-secular values of good functioning, order, social balance and of a systematic regulation. Historical and social experience has already verified that this approach is not self-sufficient and has to face individual autonomy and its own free choices. When there is no reciprocity between State values and the citizens tendencies a crisis of society occurs, thus causing conflicts of values and an increasing number of anomic behaviour. A good functioning of social structure is assured by widespread values, and it can only occur when the structure is basic values and all its subdivisions are in harmony with the orienting tendencies of social actors. As [H. Tristram Engelhardt](#) (1996) would say, individuals are not "moral strangers". On the background of these secular and lay pictures is the value of freedom of consciousness, a basic character that no State can substitute. That is why any State, whether lay, "laicist" or secular,

“secularist”, cannot leave out from consideration either ethical autonomy of religions or ethical autonomy of social actors. However, even if it does not imply that politics depends on religion, they both have to recall the value of reasoning, whose characteristic is to be a lay-secular value originated by French Enlightenment but which is well known by universal and non universal religious traditions. It is not easy to contest that secular and lay values have some origins in metaphysical faith. History of philosophy is full of examples. A number of philosophers have actually fostered the consolidation of some values by giving them a sacred “aura”, which is already a metaphysical definition.

The existing relation between secular and religious values therefore is not a surprise. As a matter of fact, in order to understand change of values, it is necessary to understand the origins of such values as well. Therefore, traditions and old paths have to be explored again, in order to have a clear vision of the present situation. Along this research, it is easy to realize that a wide part of contemporary values has ancient origins belonging to religious inspiration. From the point of view of sociology of knowledge we can say that a longer lasting of religious institutions and their intellectual *élites* has influenced social dynamics more than the ephemeral tenure of political and State structures. However, the enduring effects of norms, administrative structures, styles of life, social habits of a nation, and the linguistic idiom itself that, defining and distinguishing phenomena, people, events, objects and much more, they actually recognize, legitimate and consolidate the field of values. In the meantime, if religions lose strength and the ability of orienting themselves, their typical values show the effects. They become weak on a large scale, as well as value principles of political parties, or union trusts, or any other kind of group which starts to lose popularity in public opinion. One of the first indicators of this kind of weakness is the advent of new value pluralisms, with alternative values, and an increasing instability of previous values, defended in the end by more militant groups, which are therefore keener on fundamentalisms.

Global and local values

A better mobility of people throughout the world is visibly increasing the occasions of sharing values as well as occasions of clashes between different values. That is why there is a sort of competition of political and governmental structures for defining constitutions, laws and rules in order to protect basic local principles from other cultural values imported from people expected to arrive. In the meantime, better solutions for facing the clash of values are under consideration. The US at first tried the strategy of the *melting pot*, which consists of mixing all cultural peculiarities and hopefully delete the differences, and after it tried the strategy of the *salad bowl*, willing to respect the different values without changing them, but none of these attempts had positive results. Europe is now trying, and not only Europe, to make laws on the basis of local particular values of the belonging countries. However, every single country has the right to adjust such values according to its necessities even if it cannot refuse European shared values.

Among the major values are: gender equality, freedom of speech, freedom of education, the refusal of war as a solution for conflicts, peaceful living together of people with different cultural origins, abolition of the death penalty, non racial discrimination, school integration, ideological and religious pluralism and last, but not least, freedom of consciousness. Regarding this, there are already a number of official declarations and signed documents by various parts. The definition of the parts also shows a clear will to declare to be faithful and practicing of religion, as well as being part of a nation. In Italy, for instance, both Islamic and Hebrew communities are particularly willing to specify their national as well as religious belonging. This is also the outcome of a long history that has given maximum power to God at first (sovereigns as well were assigned by divinity) and only in a second phase has offered to its democratically elected representatives the possibility to elect rulers in order to make laws for the whole community. In the past not respecting the rules was a sin against God, nowadays it is called crime and is committed against individuals and societies. Responding to such a change of mentality the Catholic Church, which is a main part of universal religions, has renewed its

vocabulary by defining crimes major social sins such as: fiscal frauds, negligence at work, drug selling, gambling, mystification of public truth by modifying communication contents, and other "anti-social" behaviour.

However, these preached values are not really accepted because damage to the community is hardly considered a strictly fundamental value for individuals. There are just a few shared referring values for recurrent convictions concerning homicide, stealing, sexual harassment and few other crimes. Notwithstanding this, society preserves a sacred, superior and almost metaphysical character. Social values seem to be required by unavoidable authorities that force individuals to respect them. And this happens when values have been interiorized and deeply accepted by individuals.

Global values and local values can be in conflict, especially when the same individual has to play a number of different rules. In this case interests and habits are struggling, therefore there is a conflict of value oriented choices against goal oriented choices, as well as interests of the community against personal and/or family needs. Other factors may play a role, such as interpersonal relations, class relations (which is not an easy dimension to wipe out, well beyond Marxist theories), awareness of one's role within a certain society. It is clear enough now that some "universal" values (nowadays called global values) are actually representative of one social class only, which is the bourgeoisie. In other words the French revolutionary triad of values of freedom, brotherhood and equality is now going through a wide and rigorous revision. At the end, the social actor also decides to accept certain values instead of others according to a rational calculus of personal convenience, in other words he can operate a "rational choice" (as one of the most quoted contemporary sociological theories) (Coleman & Fararo, 1992). However, we cannot ignore the individual choice in favour of personal preferences, the social actor in fact may choose some values also because they mean something to him, or because they are attractive and convincing even though they do not represent a rationally useful choice. One last individual interpretation of values cannot be forgotten. Values may reduce to something without significance, thus becoming open to any kind of further interpretation and implementation.

However, the scenery emerging from the background reveals a shared tendency, with individuals oriented towards self realization and autonomy, which are post-materialistic values according to [Ronald Inglehart's](#) definition (1977). The idea of value totally vanishing is not convincing, however. We are well aware of the role that values still play within the contemporary world.

Conclusion

In the frame of international and national issues the attention to values was often shown in formal and substantial demanding solutions, as well as with worldwide organizations such as ONU, UNESCO and FAO. In ethical codes written by professional corporations. there is a complete value system to be considered in the first place. This value system decides what can be accepted and what cannot be accepted and it becomes a means of control on norms obedience, especially if the professional relation directly implies other people. When certain values are so well interiorized as to be taken for granted and considered part of common natural behaviour, the issue of the personal perspective for interpersonal relations emerges.

It is well known that values are continuously re-defined by individuals during daily interactions. However, discontinuities are to be taken into account as well. Discontinuities, in fact, can be found within the same country, as well as in the same religion. All types of generalizations risk confusing a sociological point of view so as to obscure any trends in empirical consistency. On another side, we should remember that every relation is a power relation, which is exerted in both ways: those who hold the power may not use it directly; however, those who do not hold power have a basic disadvantage but they cannot also recur to any coercive action, which is not a secondary issue. It is not always easy to define which the desirable position in some given condition is. We may have to give up some primary values because of an impossibility of action in harmony with personal referee tendencies or because in contrast with other individuals preferring less shared opinions, which are based on values opposite to those of participation,

respect of individuals, gradual intervention. Moreover, if we consider the people to whom a certain intervention is addressed, the issue is even more complicated. If they do not share the same values as those offering the intervention and are moved by other base values than the foreigners willing to help, every single step will be overcharged with difficulties. That is why also offering solutions that please only holders of economic power are not a good strategy (such as those who finance an initiative). On the contrary, ways out have to be found for the receivers in order to solve their dependence on economic powers.

Even if values have a long life, they do not remain the same during time. They may show contradictions, inadequacy, and incomprehensibility. Not everybody has capacities, knowledge, experience and solutions enough to overcome the critical stage of a decision to take, choosing between local traditions and innovative global values. We have to underline that economic and technological growth cannot be defined harmful *per se*. In a situation where human values should be harmful, they would be able to stop any development, in order to prevent any negative consequences from occurring. The same change of values is, however, not completely extraneous to financial and technical transformations. An obvious objection that can be made is actually a question: can the present system of values induce us to make previsions on the effects of future development? The answer is positive, because it is hard to believe that human beings would be so blind as not to realize the path undertaken and of its possible immediate or future destination.

In fact, the rationality of an intervention is supported by a basis of values, no matter - as [Inglehart](#) says (1977) - if it is a materialistic or non materialistic one. This group of basic values does not prevent one from recurring to new solutions, to new systems, new energies and new resources. Pessimistic hypotheses, however, do not consider that in the future new discoveries, new treatments, new systems, new procedures, new findings and new applications can take place. Furthermore, they are not able to define what the next generations may have towards arising novelties.

Once more, it is quite likely that human beings will be able to face future problems with an adequate reserve of wisdom. This does not

mean that chosen solutions will always be the right, rational or winning ones. There will be drawbacks, defeats and second thoughts. But it is hard to believe that social actors will ever encourage the desire for self-destruction. Finally, the very value which is rather difficult to abandon is still the value of existence, even if there are always exceptions.

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