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Laicity in scouting

A living
experience



Collection
"Thinking
out loud"

Laicity
in scouting

A lived
experience

An Introduction of Sorts

The following article was written ten years ago. When Eduard Vallory asked me to read through it again so it could be published, I initially believed it would have to be completely redone. I would, in fact, write it differently today. But then I realized that my ideas about laicity had not changed much over the years and that the article expressed them clearly enough. I have therefore decided to publish it again without changing a single word.

I should mention that after the European Conference in Ofir (Portugal), the working group went on with its job for three more years and finished with the Seminar in Toledo, a city that was chosen because of its tolerance and its medieval tradition of peaceful coexistence of members of the three most important religions (Jews, Christians and Muslims). The Escoltes Catalans archives contain the papers from that Seminar.

Though time has gone by, we should not be led to believe that the fears which brought the European scout and guide movement to organize such a project have disappeared. In fact, the fundamentalists of different religions continue to rise, sects still attract new followers and, judging by what is currently happening in the United States, televangelists will soon be making a fortune in this country. (In fact, there have been some isolated cases in Sabadell and a few radio stations are broadcasting what can only be called religious pornography).

In personal questions where faith and belief play an important role, manipulation often rears its ugly head and there are sectors which do not hesitate to maintain their status based on other people's gullibility or that spirit of generosity and longing for truth we all share. Some people still need to be convinced that tolerance is an essential value, that coexistence without mutual respect becomes a kind of hell and that the only way to ensure that our own difference is respected is to accept the differences of others. These three concepts, so simple and evident, are still in danger today. Not so long ago, in the name of religious, ethnic and political differences the Balkans dripped with blood.

Oddly enough, there are always people who, in the name of "the fundamentals", believe they have the right to trample these concepts and, depending on what their fundamentals happen to be, think they can force those who see things differently to change the way they think. These people should be avoided like the plague.

The values of laicity make people free and able to decide about these personal questions for themselves. They are also the values that make societies tolerant and democratic. And a society can only be free if all its members are free and know how to exercise this freedom. This should be the key to understanding the values an association like ours proposes for young people.

Anyway, thank you if you happen to reach the end.

R.A.

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experience

The Friday evening I arrived in Geneva it was freezing cold. In Barcelona, autumn had been rather warm that year, but in Switzerland it was like the dead of winter. It was raining, and the airport building was the same grey colour as the clouds, a far from welcoming sight. As usual, they had problems with my surname at the hotel. I finally assured them that Mr. Montserrat would not be coming, but that I, Mr. Raül Adroher¹ would be taking his place, and they gave me the room. YMCA hotels are a kind of cross between a hotel and a students' residence: a good table to work on (only found in students' residences) and a refrigerator with drinks (only found in expensive hotels). I would have liked to go out for a walk, in spite of the rain, to see the enchanting corners of Geneva again: the neighbourhoods surrounding St. Peter's Cathedral, where there are incredible antique shops and cafés specializing in hot chocolate, where elderly Geneva ladies in their Sunday best and hats punish their livers with the best chocolate in the world. Old Geneva is always welcoming, especially

¹ Catalans have two surnames: the first one is the father's and the second one the mother's. They are separated by "i", meaning "and" (e.g., Raül Adroher i Montserrat). The surname can be shortened, but it is the first surname that is used alone, not the second (i.e., Mr. Adroher, not Mr. Montserrat). (Editor's note)

after you've walked a while in the cold and can sit down in a delightfully tiny café to relish a stein of good German beer while looking at the wet streets through the lace curtains. But that day I stayed in the hotel, waiting for the rest of the group to arrive. *À un autre jour de flâner Genève*. Naturally, they did not show up, so I had a late dinner alone and met them at breakfast the next day.

The group was rather unusual. It had taken three years to draw up the constitution and now they were hurrying to finish the work before the European Conference in Portugal. For the first time in many years, a working group from the European Committee faced an essentially doctrinal subject which was not linked to the administration and policies of the Scout and the Guide Committees. And what a subject! We were asked to provide a document on spiritual development in the Scout and Guide movement. Few subjects could offer greater diversity within the movement: there were Jews, Sunnites, Shiites, Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics, Buddhists... All the different religions and beliefs in the world could be added to the list. And now, we were being asked to find a project we could all work on together in order to offer young people a path for development within the Scout/Guide movement that covered basic beliefs and attitudes about what makes life worth living. In crisis-ridden Europe, it was like trying to catch a school of fish with a handbag. But we tried anyway.

The results can be found in the document presented at Ofir. It is neither brilliant nor mediocre, but provides food for thought. People will evaluate

it from their own point of view and, as always happens, it will receive a lot of criticism. It doesn't matter. The idea was to throw a stone into stagnant waters in order to create movement. The waters will move and the document, like the stone, will drop to the bottom, out of sight, and nobody will remember anything about it.

What I would like to do now is follow the train of my own thoughts during this year of work. It is true that some situations are stimulating and for me, an agnostic coming from a lay association, the challenge consisted of expressing all my beliefs as seriously as I could because I was dealing with professional theologians who lived their faith by working with very important ecclesiastical organizations - another reason why I would not like my thoughts to go unrecorded. If nothing else, my association, Escoltes Catalans, has the right to know what I did, what I said and what type of opinions or questions were raised by the presence of a person from a lay organization. That's why I wrote this article.

What is Spirituality?

This is the first question and one that has always been difficult to answer. All the members of the group were aware that the subject we were to talk about was focused on religion. But knowing this was not enough. We had to delve deeper. Marx says that in the case of man, matter becomes aware of itself and, subsequently, man takes on a special dimension because the path to his own freedom becomes clear.

No animal can choose the way man does. A higher animal can fight and kill one of its kind for many reasons, but it has no choice in the matter. Man can choose to kill another man or he can choose not to. Man can feel compassion for another man who is very far away, even if he has never met him. An animal cannot. Man can communicate with others through poetry, music, art or theatre. An animal cannot. Man asks questions about himself, about his relationships with others and about their meaning. Animals do not. Man is a depository of culture who criticizes, modifies and interprets. Animals are not and do not. The search for meaning is a historical constant in man. The preface to *Witches and their World* by Julio Caro Baroja raises some interesting thoughts on this subject.

Meaning instills actions and objects with "magic". Magic is when a mother makes the first pair of booties for her newborn child; magic is the lover's object of devotion; magic can be a flag, a monument, a special holiday, a song. All these actions and objects have meaning. And our lives are built up of these meanings: the meaning of our own experiences, the meaning of those around us, the meaning of our selves, nature, life.

But for man, magic actions are not enough. He needs to find a rational explanation for what he does. That's why the search for meaning is so complex. It is not simply magic, nor is it merely rational. This search is what shapes each person, what makes her unique and gives him personality. Searching, thinking, living, doubting, deciding. The path is very long, but it is as natural as it is positive;

it is the way one makes oneself.

This is the realm of spirituality, the sphere that affects our position with regard to others, the world and ourselves; it is what gives meaning to relationships.

That was the way we left it. This ambiguous definition - open to many interpretations - is the one we adopted, and I think we were right. In Escoltes Catalans we also have to know how to stimulate the development of this spirituality between boys and girls and those of us in charge have to keep the spirit of our own search alive.

What is Religion?

Throughout history, man has gained a wide range of cultural knowledge which has always been adapted and contributed to by subsequent generations. The logical result of the search for meaning is the creation of several deeply rooted ideologies and beliefs that have had a marked effect on certain aspects of culture. Christianity in all its different variations is one of these ideologies. From the western point of view, religions provide the foundation of the spiritual world. Religions offer a key to meaning. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is the foundation of religion - a basic idea from which a complex and elaborate religious system emerges, is modified over time and embraces everything from philosophy to morality and ethics.

This entire ideological system is based on one simple

yet essential question: whether or not God exists. Therefore, believing in this God is the starting point, the centre of everything. God is an idea, a theory that cannot be proven physically or rationally. All attempts throughout history to confirm the existence of God have failed, which is why the driving force behind the world's religions is faith.

Most people accept the fact that you become part of a religion through an act of faith. An act of faith is that moment from which you adhere to a specific creed, which is the set of ideas that give structure to a religion. You now accept that God is real and begin your search from a solid base. From this very moment you are a believer.

However, an act of faith is not a strictly rational one. The theologian Héctor Vall tells me that faith has an indisputably rational component, but that there are other elements which are just as important. You believe because the spiritual matter we all have inside us guides you toward belief. Christians say that faith is a gift from God. In other words, belief does not come from knowledge, reason or feelings alone, but through all these things together and, if we are to take Christians' word for it, because God himself has lent a hand.

But religions go even further. They establish an authentic formal system that includes the relationship between the God you accept as real, yourself and all other believers. The liturgy offers moments of magic and eschatology provides the formal aspects of the relationship. Morality and ethics determine behaviour. Religion can fulfill our

spiritual needs. In fact, it can fill our entire lives.

Religion should not be confused with the church. In fact, the church is merely the organization that believers create in order to defend the idea and constitute a collective depository. What often happens is that, because of the transcendence of the ideological concepts deposited, the organization takes on considerable weight in its own right. The history of the Catholic Church provides myriad examples of the incredible influence it can have. But let's go back to organizations and ideas.

The Domain of Freedom

My reasoning is complicated and may not be completely academic or philosophically rigorous, but I would like to outline what is understood when we talk about a lay association. That's why my thought processes are so tortuous. And what does talking about freedom have to do with it? Possibly very little, but it is a concept that introduces us to a way of life.

Freedom is always a right of each human being. If you notice, declarations of human rights refer to individuals. Any group freedoms, i.e., a group's right to start something, to express itself, to take initiative, depend on the freedom of each individual in that group. Rights and freedoms belong to each individual, and this is the essential rule of democratic coexistence at all levels and for all people.

There are no two ways about this rule. If we snatch these rights and freedoms away from others by force

(or by some other means - there are countless ways of doing it), we deprive ourselves of those selfsame rights. We break the generally accepted rules of coexistence and, in the future, we will not be able to demand that they be applied to ourselves.

This situation can lead us to consider some concepts we're all familiar with. A people as a whole can be free only when all the men and women in that group are free. If not, the group may only be free to be what somebody else wants it to be, but not what group members want. Freedom is logically restricted by the limits of coexistence - even the limits imposed by very special circumstances. What is not logical is for one person to impose limits on others. It is neither logical nor advisable.

What we really want to do in Escoltes Catalans is to educate in a context of coexistence and freedom. We educate children and young people in the areas that will allow them to make freedom a reality, not a utopia, which is why the boys and girls in our units have to be free, have to feel free, and have to learn to accept their own freedom and that of others. When we establish the framework of coexistence, our commitments have to permit freely adopted group aims to be realized because, for us, education can only come through freedom.

But precisely because only men and women as individuals are subject to freedom, feeling personally free is the key to our system. No one should feel oppressed in the Association. No one should feel discriminated because of their personal characteristics. No one should feel excluded because

of their personal choices, provided they apply the same rules to others, which is nothing more than accepting the freedom of others.

Ethics and Myth

In 18th-century Germany, Immanuel Kant accurately defined how ideas were transmitted. For Kant, an idea is ethical when it can be explained, when it is rational and when it is subjected to elaboration and criticism because of its nature. With time, an idea, an ideological unit, will receive contributions and will change, but will always preserve its openness. Science provides numerous examples of ethical ideas. Any scientific theory is subject to transformation by the subsequent work of other researchers: Newton's mechanics led to relativistic mechanics and Rutherford's atom to quantum models.

However, an idea can go from being ethical to aesthetic when it loses its openness and becomes an untouchable basis for thought, i.e., when it becomes myth. When it becomes myth, an idea is no longer open to transformation and criticism and cannot accept contributions from others. The idea becomes a thing in itself, like an immanent entity, far removed from human values.

Myths have interfered in man's development for countless centuries. On account of myths, men have been burnt at the stake, hanged, thrown into prisons and concentration camps. Clinging to myths has kept important thinkers from reaching crucial conclusions. We've gone from the liberating

ethical idea to the aesthetic idea, which becomes an oppressive myth.

Some of the most terrifying myths can be found in politics. Otherwise, how is it possible to justify power wielded with tyranny? How can the worst oppression be explained except through myth? Kant himself advises that myth be used to justify the power of the crown. It was the time of Enlightened Despotism and the figure of the king had become the source of all power. Only with the arrival of Encyclopedists did political science break with this system, at least in theory.

Going back to the previous point, ethical ideas are shared and understood, but myths are believed in. And, as we have seen, believing is not an essentially rational act. Ethical ideas are explained, criticized and analyzed. Myths are imposed.

However, people have an innate mythical component that cannot be overlooked. I said earlier that actions and objects can possess magic. The fact that they do so does not mean they are magical in themselves, but that a specific person instills them with magic. It is a subjective evaluation. Myths, like magic objects, can give meaning to things, to life. And absolutely everybody has their own magic objects, which give meaning to their life and justify their behaviour. Myths are the things we believe in, with all the non-rational components that go with them. The personal myths that make up the beliefs of each individual determine the personality of those individuals. Thus, beliefs form part of the spiritual area of the person.

Nevertheless, each individual's myths are modified, shaped or even eliminated, depending on the influence that society, other people or life itself has on that individual. It is a private matter that occurs throughout life. Sometimes the external myth is imposed and people are forced to give in to immanent ideas, irrational thoughts and to allow others to think, live and feel for them. This is when they stop being free. And, what is worse is when they stop accepting the freedom of others and attempt to impose their own myths.

Clear examples can be found in certain sects, which are particularly significant because of the extremes to which they go. The books of Pepe Rodríguez have much to say about modern sects. In these sects, everything outside the sect is bad and everything inside is wonderful. Sect members breathe the rarefied air of a closed environment and reject anything that does not come directly from the sect, overlooking the very fact that they are people and are the only ones responsible for shaping their own personalities. They stop thinking and become fanatics. They are anything but free.

Laicity

I hope you will allow me to make an unconventional linguistic digression which I think will be useful to clarify ideas. In general, words ending in "*-ism*" express an ideological concept: Marxism, Catholicism, Populism. They have a nominal character - they define something, even something ideological.

However, words ending in "-ity" have an adjectival character because they qualify something without expressing the thing itself, such as in the word sensibility. I wanted to clarify this - and qualified linguists can criticize my distinction all they want - because we are talking about laicity, not about laicism. If we talk about laicism, we understand that there is an ideological doctrine on which lay associations are based. But it doesn't work that way. Laicity is an attitude adopted by all the members of an association. This is why laicity qualifies a group and has an adjectival character. Laicity is not a religion to be practiced. It is not a doctrine. It's a way of behaving, a style of coexistence. Escoltes Catalans has not adopted laicism, because this concept does not exist; Escoltes Catalans is a lay association.

Now it's time to clarify what laicity is. Firstly, it's the sharing of the right of all people to be free. Secondly, it implies accepting everybody exactly as they are, without discrimination. And thirdly, it means not imposing myths or beliefs.

Let's take this step by step. The scouting/guiding of Escoltes Catalans is a pedagogy based on freedom. Freedom is a heritage of the human being and we must all ensure that it is irreversible, that no one could ever believe they have the right to snatch it away from us. It must be preserved and defended against all threats. This must be done through a methodology that is created, accepted and shared by all. No members can be discriminated in any way because of their thoughts or beliefs, because of the teaching responsibilities they have or the position

they hold. All members must be respected exactly as they are. There is only one condition: that they accept these rules themselves.

This implies other things: it means that there is no need to hide what you are when you are with us. You need not keep anything to yourself: neither your thoughts nor your ideas. If the Association forced you to do so, that would destroy the atmosphere of freedom and all of us would stop being free. And that is something that cannot be destroyed.

This is an essential foundation for understanding our position with regard to the question of religion and personal beliefs. We have seen that the consolidation of personality is a long process, full of searching, doubts, adopting beliefs and attitudes. We do not want anyone's freedom to be restricted. And we do not want people to stop searching for their own meaning. In fact, discussions and the presence of other people with different perspectives are teaching elements that must be considered essential. This is why the Association does not impose beliefs or myths and does not adopt aesthetic ideas. In the Association, no idea is free from criticism, but, at the same time, the Association itself will adopt none as its own.

In the context of the activities of the Association, the rules of play we have established and with the aim of performing our educational work during free time, the laicity of the Association guarantees that nobody will feel out of place among us because of beliefs or opinions, that everybody will find understanding and tolerance, and that they will not

be discriminated against for these reasons.

I have a few more comments to make on this subject. Laicity cannot be limited to the spiritual area or the area of religious beliefs. It is something which goes beyond that and affects other human areas. I refer specifically to political thought. I have mentioned that religions are ideological bodies which are the cultural heritage of man and are deeply interwoven in everyday, and not so everyday, life. We cannot deny that Christianity – and in our culture, more specifically Catholicism – has strongly influenced our society. For this reason, the most accepted religious options are Christian based, and Catholicism is the most widely accepted church. It is the proposal made by the culture itself. What I mean to say is that, for example, it would be unusual for somebody in Barcelona to choose Buddhism as an option.

In the same way that religions are present, the ideologies that attempt to structure the political life of the country are also present. Obviously, they don't have the strength of Catholicism, but they are present nonetheless. And, like religions, these ideologies offer people an option in their relationships with others. In politics, these options are also complex and their doctrinal content attempts to offer meanings to relationships and personal attitudes. They don't go as far as religions, but they help to shape the personality and are a source of beliefs, which are the seeds of the personality.

For this reason, the laicity of the Association forces us to be open in terms of politics without confusing

spirituality and politics, which are different areas that both play a part in shaping the personality. Do not discriminate because of beliefs or options: a simple sentence that must be read with its full meaning.

Developing Spirituality and Laicity

The last question is whether or not we should favour the spiritual development of the individual in the Scout/Guide movement. As Roger Barralet said in one of the meetings of the working group, this demand is contained in the Law and the Commitment. I would even go so far as to say it is in our principles. If educating young people in their free time involves those aspects that do not form part of the technical training provided at school, it is obvious that their spirituality is one of our responsibilities.

This means that we have to make our boys and girls aware of the spiritual area I mentioned at the beginning. Practicing solidarity, communicating through the arts, increasing one's own skills, developing sensitivity, thinking about facts and events, asking questions about oneself, loving nature and wanting to fight to preserve it are all ways of developing spirituality. Encouraging exchange, conversation, favouring personal opinions, raising doubts, being critical - all will help children and teenagers keep their heads out of the sand. They all form part of spiritual development.

But we must also favour tolerance, fight against ideological discrimination and subsequent personal attacks, make everybody feel comfortable among us, defend everybody's right to think the way they want or the way they can, encourage everybody to be who they are, without defining how they should think. This is how laicity is developed.

Now that I'm finishing, I remember Geneva. I remember Roger Barralet, a Catholic priest, Kate Dimaras, a Greek Orthodox, and myself standing in front of Calvin's bare and penetrating Chair, and how the three of us thought about the ways the Protestant Reform had fought against Mediterranean vitalistic attitudes. I remember how the entire working group took the stairs up to the 3rd floor office of the World Scout Bureau at 5 Rue du Pré-Jerôme instead of the elevator because it was Saturday and Evelyne Askenazy, who was Jewish, couldn't use machines on Saturdays. I remember Alton Varol, a Turkish Muslim, who didn't understand how anybody could leave Islamic Formalism without leaving Islam. And Eve Marie, a Lutheran, trying to explain her differences with the Swiss Calvinists and embracing the waters of the Mediterranean she had never seen before, on a Greek beach at night.

We said good bye at Ofir and we don't know if we'll continue in the working group. But, as the indispensable Patrick McLanglin commented, the work - at least on a personal level - was an unforgettable experience. It will be finished this November in Toledo. If I have succeeded in transmitting my own experience, the effort of

representing lay associations to a certain extent, then I have done what I promised myself I would do: throw a stone into the somewhat stagnant waters of the spiritual attitudes of Escoltes Catalans.

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