

# Ways Out Of The Ghetto

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By **Joseph Weiler**, *European Union Jean Monnet Chair at New York University Law School*

***And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy,  
And to walk humbly with your God*** (Micah VI:8)

***Et quid Dominus requirat a te: Utique facere iudicium, et diligere misericordiam, et sollicitum ambulare cum Deo tuo*** (Michea 6:8)

It is with fear and trembling that I write these words. A lion in a den of Daniels, a Jew, who ontologically remains faithful to the Old Testament as the Only Testament and must refuse the invitation of all others, is invited to reflect on how Christians may break out of their self imposed Ghetto in today's Europe. I pray to the God of Israel with the words of the Psalmist: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

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Walk humbly with your God – should be the guiding light in any consideration of 'breaking the walls of the Ghetto.' This is not a manifesto for militancy but for internal liberation and external maturation.

There are, in my view, three dimensions to the internal walls built by the communities of Christian faith in Europe.

The first concerns the (false) reason-faith dichotomy – the notion that religion and faith stand apart from the universe and vocabulary of reason and rationality. That the 'I believe' and the life of faith, the aspiration for *imitatio dei* that follows from it, take the believer outside the epistemic community of scientific knowledge and the vocabulary of reason, or at a minimum, take the be-

liever's world of faith outside that vocabulary. This view of religion has been normalized. Consider the very first two paragraphs of the Preamble to the original Constitution proposed by the European Convention – a capacious document reflecting a common and ubiquitous self-understanding:

*Conscious that Europe is a continent that has brought forth civilization; that its inhabitants, arriving in successive waves from earliest times, have gradually developed the values underlying humanism: equality of persons, freedom, respect for reason,*

*Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, the values of which, still present in its heritage, have embedded within the life of society the central role of the human person and his or her inviolable and inalienable rights, and respect for law,*

Read carefully: The values of humanism are: Equality of persons, freedom, respect for reason. This humanist tradition is then contrasted with the religious inheritance. It is a common place. It is certainly how many in the secular world, innocently or otherwise, see religion and religious faith – as spiritual, as “faith”, as inspiring or laughable but in any event as outside the realm which has respect for reason. The response of *homo religiosus* is internalization and compartmentalization. Many a religious person themselves have come to understand their religious universe exclusively within the vocabulary of faith. Since ‘mystery’ is inherent to that universe, does reason not dictate that it, mystery, is by definition, outside the discipline of reason – so they reason (as if mystery is not present and inherent even in a perfectly materialist view of the world). So entrenched has this view become that many have lost the ability to explain their faith using reason. To the enquiring questions of their children – the only response is an anemic ‘That is what we believe.’ Of course, if the same child were to tell his parents ‘ $4 + 4 = 9$  this is what I believe,’ they would explain to him or her that belief is not epistemically acceptable in this case.

The second dimension of the internal walls follows from the first, is the obverse side of the same coin: Religion is a private affair, outside the public square, a matter for individual conscience. It follows from the first, because there is, indeed, a strong case that the public square should be a place where people interact with the discipline of reason – a notion running from Rawls to Habermas. So, *homo religiosus* dutifully arranges his life accordingly:

Sunday is for faith, the remaining week for science. The world of work, of public encounter, of affairs of State is the world of reason. In private, with the family, we can garden, collect stamps, be fond of fairies (or vampire) stories and, if we wish, be religious too.

The consequences in public discourse are equally clear. If a feminist organization were to protest that, say, the new government did not have enough female ministers, that would be *normale amministrazione*. If the Greens were to complain that there are not sufficient ecologists among the new governments ministers that too would be regular politics. If the Church were to complain that there not enough Christians, that would be gross interference, the illegitimate encroachment of the private into the public, of the world of faith and unreason in the world of rational discourse and reason.

The third and most insidious wall is constructed when these views affect the world of faith itself. When faith, such as Christianity is stripped from its ritual artifact, from its awe in the presence of the ineffable, where ecclesiology is considered outside peel, and the kernel is reduced to ethics with no more. Where the content of one's religious life is no more than (the hugely important) commitment to an ethical life. Since I cannot explain, and hence justify anything beyond ethics, since natural law is just that, natural, and hence not dependent on religious faith, my community of faith becomes indistinguishable from an ethical community. It is not ethics which distinguishes the believer from the non-believer. Ethics is a universal idiom and it is the height of arrogance for the person of faith to claim any monopoly in this respect. The category which is

uniquely religious, that has no equivalent, indeed is incomprehensible in a secular world, is holiness. Ethics may be a necessary condition in the vocabulary of holiness but certainly not sufficient. A Christian is always indispensably part of an ethical community, but that surely does not exhaust the ontology of and experience of Christianity?

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It will be seen, then, the foundational move for exiting the self-imposed ghetto does not involve marches to the public squares but making inroads within the Self and within the Community of faith. The most pressing challenge remains that which it has been always – education. And the most pressing educational challenge is eradication of the compartmentalized *homo religiosus*. Believers who are not simply secure in their faith, but secure in the reason of their faith and in their faith in reason. When I say that the challenge is education I mean this in the strict sense. It is not about the content. It is not about the ‘What to teach’ but the ‘How to teach.’ The content of the message and its intellectual contours are clear enough. For Catholics this has been, after all, the leitmotiv of the current Pontiff. And the other Christian denominations do not differ. The challenge is that of transmission; of the institutions, structures and processes in the life of communities of faith that will normalize and centralize that message. This would require effort, commitment, resources and will not be achieved quickly. But if I am asked for strategies of breaking the walls down, there are no ‘silver bullets’. Internal revolutions are always more difficult than external ones. Critically, it cannot be left to others to do – it must be a top down, and bottom up process, demand and response. There must be plenty of individual introspection – Do I lead a compartmentalized life? Can I give myself answers with a modicum of competence? Can I teach my children, educate them? To have faith, and faith in the reason of faith? Is it too Jewish to insist that study, learning and teaching must be a daily, integral part of religious life?

In similar vein, holiness must be recognized as the distinguishing idiom of religiosity, and understood as not being at odds with or alien to the life of rea-

soned faith even when a component of mystery is folded therein. The Italian Catholic theologian Luigi Giussani, himself a consummate educator and a teacher till his last day, understood this double challenge better than most, and spent a life time insisting on, and showing some ways towards meeting the educational challenge and re-integrating holiness into the life of faith. But there is surely not a single way – just a single commitment of objective.

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I know that in inviting a reflection on breaking out from the walls of the self imposed Ghetto there is a certain yearning for a robust presence in the public space. Action! Christian Pride! There is place for all of that but it will be a chimaera if the internal walls remain intact. It is not a 'feel good' one is after and not a militant confrontation. Just as one should hearken for the integrated holistic self, one should hearken for the integrated holistic social space. Not holy, holistic, one that accepts the religious as normal and legitimate artifacts of our public space.

John Paul II liked to say that Religious Freedom is the most fundamental of freedoms. One typically understood that as a corporatist statement – as if the head of a Trade Union Movement would claim that the freedom to strike is the most fundamental right. Freedom of religion, as Benedict XVI famously explicated in his Regensburg Lectures, includes essentially the freedom to say No to God. Put differently, freedom from religion is in and of itself a religious proposition. A profound religious proposition. Coerced *imitatio dei* is an oxymoron. Simply put, God is not interested in such. It is for this reason that freedom of religion is the most profound and fundamental for it affirms more than any other the essential liberty and dignity of the human person. Even a confirmed atheist can understand the significance of someone who believes in an Almighty Creator insisting on the right and liberty to say No to the Creator. It also imposes on *homo religiosus* a unique discipline not shared by others in the public space.

It is precisely here that breaking the internal and external coalesce. Message number one, explicit or implicit, when *homo religiosus* enters the public space, is that of human dignity and liberty, the most fundamental of which is religious liberty which includes freedom of religion but also, as a religious proposition too, freedom from religion – the right to say no to God.

Message number two is of the religious commitment to equality of human dignity – *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Gen. 1:23)*

Message number three is that the idiom of Caesar is the language of persuasion and reason and democratic politics in which the Christian is no less fluent than any one else.

Message number four is to explode again and again the canard that the doctrine of *laïcité* according to which religion is a private matter which has no place in the public square is a guarantee of “neutrality.” It is no such thing. It is no more than a political doctrine which may appropriately be called the Religiously Cleansed Public Square. Marxism yes, Socialism yes, Capitalism yes, Liberalism yes, Religion (which uniquely will not use even democracy to impose its core beliefs since such imposition negates its self-understanding of what God wishes), no?

Message number five is to insist that the Dutch or British models of public education which treat with the same dignity and equality (and resources) the religious and the secular are not only legitimate but the best expressions of Europe’s commitment to *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. But Micah expressed this better: ***And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God (Micah VI:8)***. Walk humbly.

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There is one last issue in the break out from the Ghetto, consistent with my view that the process is not revolutionary but starts with the self and the family and the community and is a matter of self-education – a project for a generation. The politics of “life” have dominated the cleavage between the religious

and secular in contemporary politics. Abortion, euthanasia and more recently the meaning of marriage. All important issues with a remarkable feature: A positive politics with a negative message: No to this and this and that. The stuff of Politics. There is an additional way, The Way, in which faith in the Almighty and his goodness can find its most expressive affirmation; in which the pro-vita world view can find its best and visible and joyous manifestation; in which holiness in its most direct form, sharing with the Almighty, the Holy One Blessed be He, in the very act of continuous creation may take place; in which the materialist seduction at its most invidious and narcissistic can be resisted; a way which is open to each and everyone of us, in celebration of our autonomy liberty and dignity. Pro-life? Make life! It is giving birth with abundance and finding joy in the large family and struggling to raise our children worthy of the gift of life. If you were to ask me for a sign that the walls have come down, that will be it, more important than anything else – hundreds of strollers before every place of worship.