

**‘Religious Identity and National Heritage’  
- Empirical-Theological Perspectives -**

ISERT 2010 Conference Call

April 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Salesianum, Via della Pisana 1111, Roma.

Keynotes and responses:

- (1) Prof. Robert Cipriani (Rome)  
*Values heritage and diffused religion*  
Response by Prof. Chris Hermans (Nijmegen)
- (2) Prof. Francis-Vincent Anthony (Rome)  
*Christian Identity and Indian Heritage: Integration or Disintegration?*  
Response by Dr. William K. Kay (Bangor)
- (3) Johannes A. van der Ven (Nijmegen)  
*Life and Death: Some Religious and Juridical Implications in comparative research.*  
Response by Bishop David Walker (Dudley)
- (4) Dr. Andrew Village (York)  
*English Anglicanism: Individual religious identities in a national church*  
Response by Prof. Ulrich Riegel (Siegen)

*Introducing our topic*

One of the main challenges facing theology at the beginning of the second millennium concerns its public significance. We have addressed and elaborated this topic at the ISERT 2008 Conference in Würzburg. In some parts of our world, religion is declining and losing its doctrinal authority and communal bonds. In other regions however, it is gaining public significance as a powerful social, cultural and political force. Secularization theories are less successful in describing and explaining how and why these varieties emerge in the east and west, north and south. Other theories describe religion in terms of social capital to be invested whenever it offers certain personal, social or political benefits and market opportunities allow smart choice. Yet other theories simply hold that religion corresponds to an inborn need or stable disposition that guarantees a cultures’ identity and that reflects a natural equilibrium of social cohesion. On the other hand, there are also critical theories that point to the intrinsic relationship of religion with power and conflict and that identify it as a major force of tension and conflict. How is it that religion in some countries is regarded as an irrelevant museum relic at best, in some regions it represents a vital public cause that acts as an incentive for national cohesion or social innovation, and in other places religion represents a source of unrest and turmoil? In an answer to this question, our ISERT 2010 Conference aims to bring together two notions: religious identity and national heritage.

*Religious identity*

Religious identity refers to a religions’ self-interpretation as recognized by a supportive audience. Thus, we speak of a persons’ religious identity or a religious communities’ identity because of one’s recognition and appropriation of a religious concern. Certain beliefs and practices are deemed significant to the extent that one labels oneself as a religious individual or community. This identification may be absolute, but usually identity is a variable: it is

partial, contingent, temporary, relative or vague. The notion of recognition and appropriation reflects a dynamic process in which religious 'data' in the form of texts, rituals, events, values, norms, symbols, metaphors and the like are evaluated and related to the concerns of everyday life. There they are 'believed' and 'practised' as significant or insignificant ways of self-referral. Distinctions may depend on the agent or the issue at stake. Whom do we have in mind: a person, a group or an institution? Whatever the notion or underlying spectrum of theories is, one probably needs to discriminate the more objective aspects of a religion's self-definition and practised confession from the more subjective mental and social processes in which we evaluate these characteristics for the relevance they have in the day-to-day life-world. The flexible character of religious identity probably co-varies with what seems to be a discriminate aspect of religion, namely the normative or metaphysical markers that highlight one's identity and that turn it into something of ultimate concern, at least in a certain class of situations. Thus religious identity is marked by its valence, priority, centrality and coherence, obligation, and resistance to change within the overarching set of an identity(-system). What is more, its stretching over time gives religious identity a perennial credibility inclusive of both nature's origin and history's destiny, surpassing the contingencies that appertain to biographical, political or other immanent notions of identity. This strongly felt credibility may lend itself to emotional or ideological support for good or bad. In one way or the other, conceptual and empirical surveys of religious identity are a prerequisite to study its relationship with a nation's heritage.

### *National heritage*

National heritage is a country's framework of traditions that it deems crucial for its socio-cultural cohesion and political autonomy. The national heritage is a country's mindset composed of products of thought, morality and art. This is not so much an exhibition showcase but it first and foremost reflects an ethos or lifestyle of a people according to which they practise, protect and transmit their national traditions with a keen interest to subsequent generations. More specifically a national heritage both has a descriptive side in a country's diverse customs and ways of life (the practised culture), and a prescriptive side as reflected in a country's morality, its do's and don'ts, its norms and taboos (the envisaged culture). These two sides connect in an implicit or explicit order, a canon, code or structure that represents the function or authority base of a nation's heritage. There is a vivid dynamic according to which this actual way of life and prescribed morality interact and that influences its monolithic or plural expressions of national identity. Cultural or religious majorities may dominate over minorities, or they may be successful at reaching consensus or promote forms of peaceful coexistence. Whereas national history simply points at significant events in the past, a heritage connects the past to the present in symbolic ceremonies, education programmes, museums, music, etcetera. This heritage may be employed for good or for bad. It may integrate (ethnic, family, religious, local, folk) subcultures, group traditions into a whole, and thereby overcome cultural fragmentation, or it may act as a dominant source of severe conflict between social subpopulations that each cherish their own cultural or ethnic memories.

### *Interplay*

The relationship of religious identity and national heritage can be described at levels of the state, civil society and the person.

First of all, at the macro level of national institutions, religious identity can be a crucial dimension to a national heritage in several ways, for instance: in national religions (Lutheran tradition in Sweden, Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia); in sharp distinctions between heritage and religion ('laicité' tradition in France, Atatürk's reform in Turkey); or in typical mixtures (pillar and polder traditions in the Netherlands, Hindu pluralism in India). Apart from these national varieties of state-church relationships there is the religious expression of national

identities as can be observed in liberal civil religion ('Bushism' and 'Obamaism' in the United States) or in the types of full-blown conservative identification in religious fundamentalism (Shia theocracy in Iran). Against these mergers of religion and national heritage the conception of 'enlightened neutrality' holds an ideology of mutual independence as it expels religion from the public to the private domain. Questions can be put regarding the globalization: does it accept this ideology of neutrality or does it further religious pluralism and national interest?

Secondly, a religious identity can be observed at the meso-level of group culture, that is of shared ethnic descent, shared language, shared tradition, shared history and shared habits and lifestyles. The globalization, migration and communication processes have broken the traditional link between religion and national heritage. Thus, the populations of countries increasingly transform into multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic audiences that profile themselves socially or that lose touch with religion or national heritage altogether. The global villages of internet communities, tourist travel, or migration settlements illustrate a growing interaction of national culture and religious profile. Depending on the origin of these groups, questions may arise regarding multiple nationalities and multiple loyalties. This is not only a question of descent but also of socio-cultural tactics: governments, political parties and interest groups may cherish inclusive or exclusive policies in order to deal with cultural plurality. Here, a complex mixture of politics, juridical legislation, cultural prescriptions and social tact interacts in the relationship of religion and national heritage.

Thirdly, at the micro level a personal religious identity interacts with a nation's heritage. Here, identity-building and socialization processes can be studied from various interpretative perspectives that take the individual as the focus, among which constructionist theory is a likely candidate. What are the processes according to which individuals acculturate to a nation's heritage and how do indigenous or foreign religious beliefs and practices intervene? What are the consequences of globalization in terms of a 'de-territorialized identity'? Which beliefs and practices prevail and which are lost in the process? What are the typical identity problems and to what extent do they need professional care? Can socialization-strategies maintain or develop a sense of social cohesion that offers a robust sense of identity?

### *Invitation*

Now that we observe shifts in the characteristics and perception of national heritages, question arises regarding how religion in its familiar and unfamiliar expressions intervenes. What are the positive and negative functions of religion in losing or appropriating one's national heritage? We invite you to present papers at our next ISERT Conference in Rome to address this problem area both conceptually and empirically.