Separation anxiety

By Matthew Weiner - International Herald Tribune
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For centuries now, the debate between public religion and secularism has been fierce. But with the newly perceived "problem" of Islam in "secular" Europe, George W. Bush's faith-based initiative, and the recent duel between Pope Benedict XVI and the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, it's safe to say that the level of "separation anxiety" has reached new heights.

The pope calls for a reassertion of Roman Catholicism's central place in our moral compass. Habermas, among the most influential of the West's social philosophers, has declared religion completely irrelevant in public debate. No one doubts either man's brilliance. And each has made surprising overtures to the other's camp. But these theological and philosophical champions could use a walk among ordinary religious communities that interact successfully with the secular sphere.

Under the nose of conservative Christians and secularists, there is a marvelous weave of small religious groups that work both for their community and the common good. They provide proof of successful faith-based projects. They go about their business, transforming communities, with little fanfare. And they are in deep partnership with the secular sphere - be it educational, social service, or civil. Attention should be drawn to this variegated and vital project.

First, a couple of American examples. Sheikh Drammeh is an African Muslim who came to New York as a businessman and later started a Muslim school in the Bronx. The school, which is open to non-Muslims, emphasizes reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also civic skills and Islamic morality. It also is involved in a joint friendship project with a Jewish school.

Chan Jamoona of Trinidad, a trained nurse, is the founder of a Hindu Senior Center in Queens. Jamoona worked for years as a community organizer with Christians, Muslims, and Jews to combat racism and unfair housing, and, more recently, to create a senior center for a growing Hindu community. She understands her work to be "as a citizen and as a Hindu."

These are examples of how religious communities foster civil society. Religious identity propels these people to social action. They help insure that America's public sphere is religiously, culturally, and

politically diverse. Each provides a community service that extends to other religions. They are not engaged in public dialogue about norms in the way that advocates for public religion and strict secularism are. And this is precisely the point. In fact, outside of the academy, seminaries, and a few dialogue groups, religious communities interact with one another and with secular partners over issues of common concern.

Pope Benedict is apparently less interested in "interfaith dialogue" than his predecessor, and yet wants to regain Christianity's guiding place at the discourse table. Habermas is interested in deliberation, but wants religion precisely controlled. They both argue for ideal governing principles and structures. But local religious leaders and their secular partners are less concerned with abstractions. Their job is to get down to work, and they do. That often requires creating partnerships, come as they may, and learning as they go.

Hard-liners on either side of the secular-religious divide often depict religion as either encroaching on rights or being silenced. But on the local level these very same adversarial spheres mix in mutually beneficial ways. They negotiate religious differences and the secular-religious divide as they work together.

This process, which tends to be informal, can be explained by an American understanding of secularism, which is built on the positive role religion plays in social culture. It presumes a strong sense of religious freedom that was the result of religious pluralism. Religious communities engaging one another create a kind of secularism, which is further defined by the lack of an established state church.

It is different from the story of secularism in Europe, in which Enlightenment rationality defeats religion and relegates it to the private sphere. Both conservative Christians and strict secularists follow this narrative. For the conservative Christian camp, religion's rightful place was stolen by a cold rationalism. For the secularist's camp, religion is safely removed from public intrusion.

And yet in Spain, for example, Unesco Catalonia recognizes a need for local urban administrations to engage religious communities as full members of civil society. It has helped create partnerships between communities of faith and the local authorities as well as between religious groups

themselves, using secular institutions as a nonpartisan umbrella. Perhaps the United Nations and its allies finally recognize that secularism doesn't mean remaining religiously illiterate.

So why do Benedict and Habermas get so hung up on religion's public place while apparently being unaware of local interaction? For strict secularists, the idea of an unprovable metaphysics guiding rational discourse just does not compute. For conservative religionists, their faith should be everyone's guiding principle. But in mixed religious and secular settings, few make such demands.

This is a point missed by religious liberals as well. Groups can be intolerant about one another's theology, yet work well together on shared public concerns.

Which leads to a final point missed by both camps: Both Benedict and Habermas characteristically forget that the real conversation must be between multiple religious groups as they engage secular partners. This is how religion actually engages the public on the ground, and democracy is better for it.

It may be that differing parties do not care about the possibility of compromise and partnership. But as polarized representatives, Benedict and Habermas themselves begin to show otherwise. Meanwhile, religious groups interact with one another and with secular partners. There is success and failure, friendship and argument. Our experts in both camps can learn from those below them.

Matthew Weiner is the director of program development at the Interfaith Center of New York, and a doctoral candidate at Union Theological Seminary.

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