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Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion within the Context of Human Security and Authenticity in Vito Mancuso's Lay Secular Theology

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Summary: Vito Mancuso, one of Italy's most famous intellectuals and author of best-selling books on religion – such as *L'anima e il suo destino* [*The Soul and Its Destiny*] (2007) and *Io e Dio. Una guida dei perplessi* [*I and God. A Guide for the Perplexed*] (2011) – is a secular theologian and philosopher of religion who promotes an anti-traditional understanding of Christianity aimed at lay people influenced by contemporary secular ideas. Mancuso's influence appears to have reached a pinnacle since he is present in the media with various TV and internet interviews as well as articles published in famous Italian newspapers such as *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della sera*. Moreover, his book *The Soul and Its Destiny* (2007) has been sold in over two hundred thousand copies which is a record for a theological work by any standards. Since he is still unknown to the English-speaking world, this paper investigates Mancuso's notion of freedom, particularly freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, in the general context of his religious philosophy which focuses on the concept of soul. In Mancuso, a Catholic by (his own) confession, reality is essentially material, so everything which exists in the world and the universe is part of this material reality. The human being is no exception, thus its natural constitution is thoroughly material. Everything pertaining to the human being, including the idea of soul, is material. However, the fact that ideas, such as the soul, can be conceived within the materiality of the human being is indicative of the latter's capacity for spiritualization; consequently, spirituality is also part of and constitutive of materiality. Hence, Mancuso's belief that the soul is material, and so is everything traditionally accepted as spiritual, including ideas such as God and freedom. Since freedom can be connected to matter and materiality through the concept of soul, Mancuso argues that the reality of freedom is innate in every human being; men and women, however, must become aware of

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it and then live it out in their daily lives by promoting as well as defending freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. Both types of freedom are compulsory not only for the good of humankind in general, for peace, and security, but also for every particular human being who can lead an authentic life only by practicing freedom of conscience and freedom of religion without fearing repression of any sort.

Keywords: freedom, conscience, religion, security, authenticity

Zusammenfassung: Vito Mancuso, einer von Italiens bekanntesten Intellektuellen und Autor von Bestsellern über Religion – wie *L'anima e il suo destino* [Die Seele und ihr Schicksal] (2007) und *Io e Dio. Una guida dei perplessi* [Ich und Gott. Ein Führer für die Verwirrten] (2011) – ist ein säkularer Theologe und Religionsphilosoph, der ein traditionskritisches Verständnis des Christentums vertritt, das sich an von zeitgenössischen säkularen Ideen beeinflusste Laien richtet. Mancusos Einfluss scheint seinen Höhepunkt erreicht zu haben, seit er in den Medien durch verschiedene TV- und Internetinterviews präsent ist und seine Artikel in wichtigen italienischen Zeitungen wie *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della sera* veröffentlicht werden. Außerdem wurde sein Buch *The Soul and Its Destiny* (2007) über 200.000 Mal verkauft, was in jeder Hinsicht ein Rekord für ein theologisches Werk ist. Da er in der englischsprachigen Welt immer noch unbekannt ist, geht dieser Artikel Mancusos Verständnis von Freiheit nach, insbesondere der Gewissensfreiheit und der Religionsfreiheit im allgemeinen Kontext seiner Religionsphilosophie, die sich auf den Begriff der Seele konzentriert. Für Mancuso, einem bekennenden Katholiken, ist die Realität essentiell materiell, so dass alles, was in der Welt und im Universum existiert, Teil dieser materiellen Realität ist. Der Mensch ist keine Ausnahme, so dass seine natürliche Konstitution vollkommen materiell ist. Alles, was zum Menschen gehört, einschließlich der Idee einer Seele, ist materiell. Die Tatsache jedoch, dass Ideen wie die der Seele, im Rahmen der Materialität des Menschseins gedacht werden können, weist auf seine Fähigkeit zur Spiritualisierung hin, so dass Spiritualität ebenfalls ein konstitutives Element der Materialität ist. Daher rührt Mancusos Vorstellung, dass die Seele ebenso wie auch alles andere traditionell als spirituell Angenommene, einschließlich der Ideen von Gott und Freiheit. Weil Freiheit durch den Begriff der Seele mit Materie und Materialität verbunden werden kann, argumentiert Mancuso, dass die Realität der Freiheit jedem Menschen angeboren ist; Männer und Frauen müssen sich ihrer jedoch bewusst werden und sie dann in ihrem täglichen Leben ausleben sowohl durch Förderung als auch durch Verteidigung der Gewissensfreiheit und der Religionsfreiheit. Beide Arten der Freiheit sind nicht nur allgemein notwendig für die Menschheit, z.B. für Frieden und Sicherheit; sie sind auch zentral für jeden einzelnen Menschen, der nur durch den

Vollzug der Gewissens- und Religionsfreiheit ein authentisches Leben ohne Angst vor irgendeiner Art von Unterdrückung führen zu können.

Schlüsselwörter: Freiheit, Gewissen, Religion, Sicherheit, Authentizität

I Contextualizing Mancuso

Mancuso proposes a radical reassessment of Christian theology which entails a dramatic reinterpretation of its major doctrines from a perspective which comes “from below”, from what traditionally is known as creation or, in his non-traditional perspective, nature and its material constitution. Theologically, Mancuso found inspiration in peers far better known than himself, such as Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx, both theologians who believe that Christian traditional theology is utterly incapable of explaining the realities of the world in supernatural terms. Hence, in line with them, Mancuso no longer focuses on a theology “from above” which accepts supernaturalism, but rather chooses to delve into the materiality of this world and its realities “from below” in order to find some meaning for the human being’s existence. Thus, it can be said that following Küng and Schillebeeckx, Mancuso works theologically with a rationalistic and existentialist type of hermeneutics which transforms traditional theology into a modern philosophy deeply anchored in Hegel’s thought. It is therefore safe to say that philosophically, Mancuso is a (left) Hegelian theologian who openly uses Hegelian philosophy to search for spirituality in a material world and a material existence. His very first book, which is also a monograph based on his doctoral dissertation, is an attempt to “Christianize” Hegel by turning him into a theologian in search of spiritual meaning while dealing with the physical realities of the natural world. For Mancuso, the idea of the spirit points to God, but since God is a human concept, theology speaks more about human beings than about the supernatural God of traditional theology. Biblically, Mancuso is not much of a theologian; he uses the Bible very rarely and in the few instances when he does use it, his interpretations are rather odd, at least from the standpoint of traditional, pre-Enlightenment approaches specific to classical Christian theology. To give just one example, for Mancuso, the classical Christian image of the Lamb slain from the creation of the world, which traditionally points to the supernatural reality of Jesus’ death for human sins, is now used to depict the natural reality of children born with malformations as well as that of physical/psychological suffering.¹

¹ Vito MANCUSO, *Il dolore innocente. L’handicap, la natura, e Dio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2008), 157.

Mancuso's non-traditional credentials are evident not only in his use of a philosopher pertaining to the Protestant tradition like Hegel, but also in his conviction that physics is the "teacher" of theology, a conviction which points to his belief in the ultimate reality of the natural world over anything else. For instance, in Mancuso, theology must always be subject to physics and biology which both inform theology's most basic tenets, including the idea of freedom, seen by Mancuso not only in the chaotic movement of subatomic particles but also in its constant opposition to the equally physical reality of gravity, understood as anti-freedom, necessity, and death. Nevertheless, the force which sets in motion both the subatomic particles and gravity is what Mancuso calls "energy", the most fundamental principle running the physical reality of material nature; it is in this principle that one must find spiritual meaning and an explanation of human life, existence, and freedom.²

II Introduction

The starting point of Mancuso's definition of freedom is the concept of the soul, an idea of paramount importance in his thought because freedom itself cannot be defined without the soul. Thus, the soul is the capacity of the human being to experience its own existence or rather be aware of its own being in the world. In other words, the human being is capable of perceiving itself in a complex way to the point of understanding that it exists as a phenomenon. In Mancuso, therefore, it is the ability of the human being to see itself as a complex phenomenon which defines the soul and, by consequence, the notion of freedom. The soul, however, is a reality which exists within the human being or, more precisely, as part of the human body. Since the body exists in nature, it is logical to infer that in Mancuso, the soul is essentially natural – and it is not only the soul which is natural but, as Orlando Franceschelli correctly notices, also all "critical validity and terrestrial wisdom" originates "in naturalism".³ Taking this logic a bit further, one can argue that since nature is material, the soul itself should be defined in material terms. In short, for Mancuso the soul is material because it cannot be detached from the reality of the human being and the human being has no other contexts for its existence than nature and matter; in fact, Mancuso explains that matter is the mother of all things, the *materia mater* which produces *natura naturans*.⁴ The

² Vito MANCUSO, *Rifondazione della fede* (Milano: Mondadori, 2005), 45.

³ Orlando FRANCESCHELLI, *Darwin e l'anima. E'evoluzione dell'uomo e i suoi nemici* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2009), 102.

⁴ Vito MANCUSO, *L'anima e il suo destino* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2007), 13–14.

human being lives in the world, but it is the soul which singles it out in the world so that the human being has a specific existence and place in the world; in the end, even if it exists in the world the human being is different from the world due to the soul.⁵

The soul empowers the human being to assess not only its existence on its own but also its existence in the world; in doing so, the soul provides the human being with freedom. More precisely, because of the soul the human being has the power to be free from the world and in the world by exercising its ability to evaluate the world both materially and non-materially. In Mancuso, the soul enables the human being to investigate the world of nature and matter not only by resorting to material means but also by using instruments which transcend matter and can thus be called spiritual. Nevertheless, irrespective of whether one refers to material or spiritual issues, in Mancuso both matter and spirit, nature and soul make up the same reality; in the words of Corrado Marucci, the spirit derives from matter, so the soul is fundamentally material.⁶ One such means is the notion of morality which helps the human being evaluate what happens in the world with positives and negatives. Consequently, in practicing its freedom the material human being displays the spiritual capacity to understand that the things which happen in the world can be described by using concepts like good and evil. In Mancuso, human morality is the immediate result of human freedom which is capacitated by the soul to recognize the quality of nature and matter to be good and/or evil. One can conclude thus that, as far as Mancuso is concerned, human freedom is both material and spiritual because the human being has the ability to discern between the positives and negatives which define the reality of the material world of nature.⁷

In Mancuso, while freedom appears to be a feature of the human being, the complexity of the latter indicates that the former is first and foremost a result of its capacity to evaluate the world. To put it differently, the human being is characterized by freedom only because it can think about freedom and it is this natural capacity to reason about the notion of freedom which actually makes the human being a natural reality characterized by freedom; the human being is free because it can think about being free. Freedom is what detaches the human being from the material world despite the fact that the human being is a material reality, and the very aspect which allows for such a separation is the soul. For Mancuso, the soul makes the human being different from the world even though both

5 MANCUSO, *L'anima* (see above, n. 4), 51.

6 Corrado MARUCCI, "L'anima e il suo destino secondo Vito Mancuso", in *Civiltà cattolica* 159.1 (2007), 256–264, here: 260.

7 Vito MANCUSO, *Il dolore innocente. L'handicap, la natura, e Dio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2008), 137–8.

entities are essentially, naturally, and thoroughly material, which – clear as it is in Pietro Barcellona and Tomasso Garufi – is indicative of Mancuso’s conviction that nature, and especially living nature, is “a permanent expression” of divinity.⁸ It is the soul, Mancuso argues, which helps the human being transcend its own materiality as well as the materiality of the world by enabling the human being to want to go beyond it. This transcendence, however, is not material; the human being will always remain a material entity in and of the world but, at the same time, he will permanently be capable of asserting its detachment from the world by using his soul or his power to think of the world and of its own self in terms which are fundamentally non-material or spiritual.⁹

The connection between freedom and soul provides Mancuso with the perfect opportunity to criticize traditional theology. Since traditional theology sees reality as ontologically material and non-material, Mancuso believes that reality is exclusively material and only the human being’s perception of it is non-material or spiritual. In other words, while in traditional theology, the ontological difference between matter and spirit allows for the existence of a totally transcendent God as non-material being, in Mancuso this is impossible; thus, God must always be conceived in material terms even if God can be interpreted in a non-material way. If in traditional theology there is an ontological gap between God (as spirit) and nature (as matter), in Mancuso the two are consubstantial, so when traditional theology builds on this separation between God and nature, between the ontology of the spirit and that of matter such a distinction only exists because the human being has the capacity to resort to its soul and think about it in freedom. To be clear – as Giulio Giorello notices – in Mancuso, God and nature as well as soul and matter not only share the same substance, but they also come “from below”, from this world,¹⁰ even if the two can be distinguished in theory. Otherwise though there is no ontological distinction between God and nature, spirit and matter which means that, in Mancuso, God is the world and the human being, and such a realization is possible only as a result of the human being’s ability to use its soul in liberty. Freedom helps the human being understand that the world is not characterized by sin, so the world – and consequently the human being – is not in conflict with a transcendent God; the world is characterized only by caducity or transience, a reality disclosed by Christ, himself a human being, who used his freedom and spirituality to fight against the negativity of the natural

8 PIETRO BARCELLONA, TOMASSO GARUFI, *Il furto dell’anima. La narrazione post-umana* (Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 2008), 40.

9 MANCUSO, *L’anima* (see above, n. 4), 52.

10 GIULIO GIORELLO, *Libertà. Un manifesto per credenti e non credenti* (Milano: Bompiani, 2008), e-edition.

world by using the positivity of his soul and liberty; in a word, he used his conscience.¹¹

III Freedom and Conscience

Christ is for Mancuso the ultimate example which clarifies the reality of existence in all the aspects of the human being ranging from the material life in the world to the spiritual understanding of nature, including the religious notion of resurrection, the ultimate concept which explains human freedom. While it is quite clear that there is no physical resurrection in Mancuso, the notion of resurrection exemplifies how freedom should be put to use because the human being should always find freedom within itself to confer meaning to concepts which find no physical correspondence to the natural world. In other words, even if the resurrection cannot be explain in physical terms – Alessandro Gnocchi warns that Mancuso does not believe in the historical and physical resurrection of Jesus which he literally demolishes in his books¹² – nothing should stop the human being from understanding it in spiritual terms. This exercise whereby the human being confers meaning to spiritual notions and physical realities is the practical manifestation of freedom through conscience. This is why Mancuso writes about the preeminence of conscience as manifestation of “free life” which is the action whereby the human being ascribes reason or meaning to the phenomenon of life because it is the reality of life which expresses the reality of the soul, and thus the reality of freedom, in the totality of human cultures.¹³

In Mancuso, everything pertaining to the human being should be described in terms of materiality and evolution. These two concepts are connected beyond separation; matter is in a constant state of evolution which in turn is the physical manifestation of the concept of freedom. The human being should be explained in all its complexity with reference to his material and non-material aspects which are all part of his natural existence in the material world. This is why Mancuso explains that the human being should be understood both philogenetically (as species) and ontogenetically (as individual entities) as the result of constant and continuous cellular evolution and change which presents the hu-

¹¹ MANCUSO, *Il dolore* (see above, n. 7), 152.

¹² Alessandro GNOCCHI, “Vito Mancuso, il ‘teologo cattolico’ più amato dai consigli pastorali”, in *Cronache da Babele. Viaggio nella crisi della modernità*, ed. by Alessandro Gnocchi and Maria Palmaro (Verona: Fede e Cultura, 2010), e-edition.

¹³ Vito MANCUSO, *Obediencia e libert . Critica e rinnovamento della coscienza cristiana* (Roma: Fazi Editore, 2012), 86, 70–1.

man being as a complex reality endowed with *sōma* (body), *bios* (vegetative life), *zōē* (animal life), *psychē* (psychical life), *logos* (rational life), and *pneuma/nous* (spiritual life). The complexity of the human being reveals that its existence is energized by material and spiritual aspects to the point that, as far as Mancuso is concerned, the human being is a concrete and material manifestation of free energy – this is why, as he points out, human beings are considered to be animated living entities – which manifests itself through conscience; in this respect, Erica Francesca Poli indicates that, in Mancuso, conscience explains life as well as the soul as energy.¹⁴ It is conscience which makes the human being be free, first from the *sōma* as organism; through conscience, the human being is capable of moving beyond its own materiality into spirituality and creativity which not only belong to materiality but also shape it, regardless of whether one refers to the materiality of individual human beings or the materiality of the natural world.¹⁵

Whenever the human being is involved in the process of shaping matter, its own or that of nature, one should be aware that the reality of matter is always studied, interpreted, and acted upon. For instance, as Mancuso shows, by using its conscience the human being deals with matter in a moral way because conscience is the foundation of human morality. This is an indication that nature and implicitly the materiality of nature bears within it a certain ethical aspect which is not only immanent but also universal. In Mancuso therefore, human conscience is the very instrument which deciphers the ethics of material nature as clear manifestation of freedom. To be more precise, the human being has within it an inborn freedom which allows it to understand and confer meaning to the material world of nature based on its own conscience without any external support such as laws or other authorities. Marcello Veneziani captures this aspect when he points out that, in Mancuso, there is only one authority to which the human being should bow, and this is its own reason.¹⁶ The human being is free to deal with nature and it must always remain so because its freedom to act upon and in relationship with the materiality of nature is one of its most fundamental features which indicates that conscience is the ultimate manifestation of freedom as immanent and universal to every human individual. In other words, conscience is not only immanent and universal, but also profoundly personal; every human being in its material and spiritual constitutive nature is not only able to

¹⁴ Erica F. POLI, *Anatomia della guarigione. I sette principi della nuova medicina integrata* (Milano: Anima Edizioni, 2014), 106.

¹⁵ MANCUSO, *Obedienza* (see above, n. 13), 72–4.

¹⁶ Marcello VENEZIANI, *Dio, patria e famiglia dopo il declino* (Milano: Mondadori, 2012), e-edition.

but also authorized to use the “light of conscience”, as Mancuso puts it, to study, interpret, and act upon the materiality of the physical world of nature.¹⁷

Since conscience deals with the interpretation of nature with the specific purpose of finding the good in it, conscience not only belongs to the realm of morality and ethics but, in so doing, it deals with other fundamental human features such as love. It is only through love, activated by conscience, that the human being understands both the fact that its own existence and that of the world are ontologically and morally free. In Mancuso, freedom is the characteristic par excellence of reality and man’s capacity to interpret freedom through conscience and love points to the fact that life, as manifestation of materiality and spirituality in the natural world, must be characterized by dignity. Like the soul, however, Mancuso’s view of dignity is not theoretical but practical and concrete, which drives Giuseppe Lazzarini to conclude that dignity is not an abstract philosophical concept but a real necessity of the human being.¹⁸ As far as dignity is concerned, however, it always works with love and freedom; hence Mancuso’s conviction that, in life, physicality and freedom are not equally important. Since freedom is a feature of physicality or materiality in the sense that it is freedom which defines physicality and materiality not the other way around, freedom is superior to them to the point that the human being must always seek the prevalence of free life over physical life. Concretely, a human being should be allowed to freely use one’s conscience to end one’s life if afflicted by irremediable suffering and irreversible handicap because the purpose of life is freedom, not matter. In Mancuso, therefore, every human being should always pursue the ideal to live in the unlimited reality of freedom, not the limited physicality of matter because this is not only an expression of personal liberty but also the vision of religion, irrespective of whether one refers to Christianity in particular or to any other world religion in general.¹⁹

IV Freedom and Religion

Freedom of religion is the natural particularization of freedom of conscience, Mancuso argues, because belief in the tenets of a certain religion is, in the end, belief according to one’s conscience as manifested in the realm of religion. For Mancuso, however, there is no relevant discussion about the freedom of religion

¹⁷ MANCUSO, *Obedienza* (see above, n. 13, 15), 86–7.

¹⁸ Giuseppe LAZZARINI, *L’educatore professionale* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2013), 156–7.

¹⁹ MANCUSO, *Obedienza* (see above, n. 13, 15, 17), 114–16.

without references to established forms of Christianity, regardless of whether he points to Roman-Catholicism, which he criticizes repeatedly and rather harshly, or Calvinism, which does not escape his sharp criticism either because – Maria Rita Mottola argues – they both limited religion to a transcendent God and in doing so they kept it theoretical, speculative, and philosophical.²⁰ Mancuso thus accuses the Christian church, irrespective of its confessional background, that much too often throughout its history it did whatever it could to repress any manifestation of religious freedom which was not in full accordance with a certain confessional establishment. Concretely, following centuries of persecution at the beginning of its historical journey, the early church started to persecute those holding different views, especially heretics and pagans, such as Hypathia, the foremost female philosopher of Alexandria, killed by a group of monks in 415 AD. This is just one example highlighted by Mancuso to prove that established forms of religion tend to suppress religious freedom when their influence is combined with political power and social control.²¹

Mancuso also makes sure to insist on the sins of the Roman-Catholic church which persecuted various groups of heretics during the Middle Ages and the Protestants in early modernity²² but also the Reformed church of Geneva, and particularly Jean Calvin, which condoned the execution of Michel Servet for believing in a non-trinitarian divinity.²³ In all these cases, the church – of Catholic or Protestant confession – was politically and socially potent, influential, and very much in control; hence its tendency to quench doctrines of different origin and thus suppress freedom of religion. When in late modern and even contemporary times the church(es) became more open towards opposing belief systems, religious or not, with the evident result that freedom of religion began to flourish within and beyond all Christian confessions, this particular situation – Mancuso explains – is most definitely not the result of the church’s emancipation but rather the consequence of the enormous pressure exerted upon the church by what Mancuso calls “lay forces”.²⁴ In Mancuso, therefore, laity is much better than theology, a principle which was correctly noticed by Joseph M. Kraus.²⁵ In other

20 Maria R. MOTTOLA, “La libertà religiosa”, in *Trattato dei nuovi danni*, volume secondo: Malpractice medica, prerogative della presona, voci emergenti della responsabilità, ed. by Paolo Cendon (Padova: Casa Editrice Dottore Antonio Milani, 2011), 147–74, here: 157.

21 Vito MANCUSO, *Io e Dio. Una guida dei perplessi* (Milano: Garzanti Libri, 2011), 205–6.

22 MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21), 210–12.

23 MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22), 218–19; IDEM, *Obediencia* (see above, n. 13, 15, 17, 19), 55–6.

24 MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22, 23a), 210.

25 Joseph M. KRAUS (2013) *Il perché di una scelta. Le parole di Benedetto XVI* (Roma: Moralia/Fanucci Editore), e-edition.

words, had it not been for the non-religious and even atheistic people, freedom of religion would have remained anything but a concrete reality even for Christian believers; so, if one follows Mancuso's logic, it was laity and atheism which led to the well-being and progress of religion, especially of the Christian religion in all its confessional complexity.²⁶

One of the causes, if not the only cause of religious persecution which renders freedom of religion non-existent is, according to Mancuso, the conviction that the purpose of nature – creation for believers – is obedience, not freedom. Such a belief is, in Mancuso, an ethical fallacy because the very essence of the human soul is to posit the existence and manifestation of freedom in all its forms, including freedom of religion. This is why going against such belief in freedom is ethically wrong; when such convictions are entertained in the realm of religion the good of society is no longer what really matters but rather being permanently, uncritically, and even violently obedient. While he does not insist on the faults of religions other than Christianity, Mancuso does nevertheless mention – in an extremely brief but poignant phrase – that “Islam is the perfection of this paradigm”, namely that the ultimate purpose of religion is obedience, not freedom.²⁷ This paradigm, as Mancuso dubs it, afflicts every religion which is not fundamentally concerned with the good of the world but rather with the purity of its teachings to the detriment of any other beliefs, convictions, or opinions. For Mancuso, however, this is what defines established religion, Christian or not: the desire to promote its own doctrines – the traditional Christian, for instance, believes that his faith is the truth²⁸ – and demolish religious freedom for the sake of control and obedience. The only solution which can put a definitive end to such autocratic manifestations is the Enlightenment or similar cultural movements which, as Mancuso has already pointed out, are steered not by religious people and theologians but rather by non-religious individuals or atheists with a rational agenda promoted by jurists and the modern state.²⁹

Leaving aside that Mancuso says nothing about the persecutions unleashed by the modern state against religion in France when laity, jurists, and modern law were taking over political power from the Catholic establishment at the end of the eighteenth century by resorting to public humiliation and rapid decapitation of whoever was against the absolute reign of reason and anti-religious politics, it is fair to list Mancuso's solutions for the preservation of religious freedom through

²⁶ MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22, 23a, 24), 210.

²⁷ MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 13, 15, 17, 19, 23b), 115.

²⁸ CORNELIU C. SIMUȚ, *Traditionalism and Radicalism in the History of Christian Thought* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2010), 121.

²⁹ MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22, 23a, 24, 26), 216.

measures which focus on laity and secularism. Thus, the very first aspect which ensures that freedom of religion becomes a cultural reality in modern states is the separation of church and state – the latter, however, must always remain secular and decisively non-religious. Second, the state must make sure that it abolishes every form of slavery – and especially the slavery of the soul³⁰ – so that freedom of conscience is matched by freedom of religion and the other way around. Third, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue must be not only encouraged but also entertained to the point that, as recommended by Mario Di Stefano, all religions, and especially the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – should admit their belief in the one and same God.³¹ Consequently, freedom of religion should become manifest in all its doctrinal complexity to the point that all religions are recognized of possessing equal value – in the case of Christians, for instance, this means that they must not only stop blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus but also cease to consider them treacherous and unfaithful,³² so that both groups of believers should live in peace while enjoying a genuine sense of security.

V Freedom and Security

It stands to reason that, in Mancuso, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are the two aspects of the idea of freedom which must not only be considered theoretically but also implemented practically in society and particularly in a modern state characterized by laity and secularism. Mancuso, however, appears to be painfully aware that while freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are indeed values which must, should, and can be applied at all the levels of society – and he refers primarily to Western society although any human society can benefit from their impartation since the material constitution of the human being is the same throughout mankind – the reality of daily living indicates that such values are not always easy to cultivate, disseminate, and appropriate. It therefore goes without saying that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion do not automatically bring with them – personally and collectively – social peace and security although, as stated by David E. Klemm and William Schweiker, this should be the aim of contemporary politics.³³ While it is quite clear that the lack of

30 Vito MANCUSO, *Rifondazione della fede* (Milano: Mondadori, 2005), 249.

31 MARIO DI STEFANO, *Una perla dai mille riflessi. Il Vangelo nella storia con le parole nuove di papa Francesco* (Tricase: Youcanprint, 2015), 56–7.

32 MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22, 23a, 24, 26, 29), 240–1.

33 David E. KLEMM, William SCHWEIKER, *Religion and the Human Future. An Essay on Theological Humanism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 118.

freedom in the realm of personal conscience and religion leads unavoidably to social unrest and conflict – which almost without exception ends in personal and collective injury and death – its formal endorsement, either by secular governments or social leaders of any sort, do not guarantee social peace, personal safety, and collective security. This is why Mancuso enriches his perspective on freedom with the concept of vigilance, an aspect which should at least provide some improvement towards a society dominated by peace and security.³⁴

For Mancuso, theory must always find implementation into practice, so theoretical discussions about freedom of conscience and religion are pointless without concrete attempts to have such models of liberty applied for the benefit of the whole of society; in other words, freedom without social accommodation with a view to the good of society is of no use to anybody while, at the same time, the application of freedom into society without constant vigilance, attention, and care for the improvement of human life is also rather useless. This is because the reality of evil which dominates the human mind and behavior needs to be matched by equal compensation; the first step in this direction is becoming aware of the need to supervise and watch over the daily and concrete application of freedom in the people's lives by using, as Lanfranco Rosati reads in Mancuso, "the light of conscience".³⁵ To use Mancuso's imagery, fruits do not mature on their own; they need to be carefully watched over and kept from various external as well as internal perils. The same is true for the human soul, the very origin and cradle of freedom. Unless nurtured and cultivated with constant and consistent care, the human soul becomes depleted and ends up devoid of the resources it needs for the creation, dissemination, and implementation of freedom. In Mancuso's view, the soul needs attention; it must be vigilantly watched over so that its natural energies are firmly focused towards what is crucially important, namely the promotion of freedom for the common good.³⁶

This is why Mancuso suggests that vigilance must be set against imagination, which he believes to be the very factor which dissipates the soul's energy and leads it astray as well as away from freedom, goodness, and security. Every human being must be vigilant on a daily and constant basis so that men and women are permanently made aware of the necessity that freedom should be promoted and defended for the sake of the whole humankind. Thus, Ernesto Baroni and Giorgio Rivolta use Mancuso's perspective on good to argue that as many people as possible should decide to be practitioners of doing good in order

34 MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30), 247.

35 LANFRANCO ROSATI, *La fine di un'illusione. Le scienze dell'educazione ai bivio* (Perugia: Morlacchi Editore, 2008), 198.

36 MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34), 247.

to become good themselves to the point that they are enabled to choose the good “as their own nature”.³⁷ As Mancuso puts it, “vigilance is the exam of conscience”,³⁸ a test which nobody should fail if society is to be truly free and secure. Vigilance is keen awareness of human limitations which instead of giving in to imagination should be cultivated in such a way that the human soul not only understands the meaning of freedom but also wants to see it applied in society both at the level of personal conscience and the reality of communitarian religion. This task, however, is anything but simple, so Mancuso is careful to point out that the fight of the soul against imagination, really the battle of reason against ideology, is a very long process which takes constant and demanding efforts throughout days and years of vigilance. In Mancuso’s opinion, one way to promote vigilance so that the human soul is watched over effectively consists of finding the proper nourishment for the soul: “good journals, good books, good music, good movies” – these are supposed, Mancuso believes, to counter the effect of so many “damaging toxins” which affect the daily existence of human beings.³⁹

If left only to journals, books, music, and movies, society seems to be already doomed and Mancuso is not unaware of it. This is why he takes his defense of freedom and vigilance a little further towards finding a concrete model which can be followed by human beings in as well as despite the rather complex situation of our contemporary society. Mancuso’s model is most certainly not a piece of novelty as he finds it in the communal life of the very early Christians. Long before the church became institutionalized and vigorously grasped the political power of the state but also long before the emergence of various antisocial attitudes resulting in monastic movements, Christians used to live based on what Mancuso calls “their own interior energy”⁴⁰ which was used to enrich relationships with oneself and others. Christians saw themselves as people of freedom; they were free from abstaining from foods, sex, or social relationships with other people. These types of human interaction were regulated by their freedom based on the model provided by Jesus himself, so Christian life meant, Mancuso explains, “liberation, communion, and true fraternity”,⁴¹ all values which – Faustino De Gregorio believes – should be pursued today for the benefit of everybody, includ-

37 ERNESTO BARONI, Giorgio RIVOLTA, *Libertà personale e bene comune. Cinque rivoluzioni per cambiare se stessi e il mondo* (Milano: IPOC di Pietro Condemi, 2011), 110.

38 MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34, 36), 247.

39 MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34, 36, 38), 247–8.

40 MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34, 36, 38, 39), 249.

41 MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34, 36, 38, 39, 40), 249.

ing the people who divorced and remarried.⁴² The freedom of the first Christians was aimed at transforming the world, a task which Mancuso describes as “celestial physics” and “the rigorous science of the soul” [1] (p. 251).⁴³ The first Christians were deeply concerned with incarnation or the acute awareness of the need to practice their beliefs by following the example of Jesus; if Jesus took his cross, then they must also take their own crosses for the good of the world. For Mancuso, this is the foundation of true freedom in conscience and religion; whenever one takes his cross for the good of others in an effort which Mancuso presents rather beautifully as “evangelical mathematics”.⁴⁴

VI Concluding Remarks: Freedom and Authenticity

Doing good for the sake of others – so that society experiences freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and a real manifestation of personal as well as communitarian security – not only reflects one’s freedom but also points to the fact that life has acquired meaning which Mancuso identifies as authenticity or, in the words of Daniele Callini, “existential plenitude”.⁴⁵ Human life can never be truly authentic without freedom, so it is freedom which gives life authenticity. In the end, for Mancuso freedom is the human being’s capacity to understand the idea of difference; seeing and being aware of the minor of differences, such as the differences between various colors, is a sign of freedom. In positing this acknowledgment, Mancuso intends to show that it is the human being who sees and perceives such differences, not anything or anybody else. To be more precise, Mancuso underlines that the very fact of being free places the human being in a position of total independence in relation to anything or anybody else. In other words, there is nothing or nobody who can impose a certain meaning of life upon the human being; there is no such truth which comes from outside the human being and is then forced upon it, regardless of this supposed truth can be another human being or the God of traditional theology,⁴⁶ whose posited ontological reality makes it/him different from the human being.

⁴² Faustino DE GREGORIO, *La Chiesa cattolica e lo Stato italiano nella società multireligiosa e multietnica del terzo millennio. La strada percorsa e quella da percorrere* (Torino: Giappichelli Editore, 2009), 112.

⁴³ MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41), 251.

⁴⁴ MANCUSO, *Rifondazione* (see above, n. 30, 34, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43), 252.

⁴⁵ DANIELLE CALLINI, *Complessità creativa. Cultura post-industriale e risorse generative* (Padova: Webster, 2014), 69.

⁴⁶ VITO MANCUSO, *La vita autentica* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2009), 44.

In Mancuso, the human being reigns supreme in the material world of nature; nothing stands above it, not even God who is nothing but a way to describe the human being itself. Life must have a meaning, writes Mancuso, but this meaning is not connected to a reality beyond the human being. On the contrary, it is the very human being who constitutes the essence of the meaning of life even if – as one can read in Pia De Silvestris and Adamo Vergine – Mancuso concisely defines the very meaning of life by using the word “God”.⁴⁷ Life must be characterized by freedom in order to have meaning and when freedom and meaning meet in a person’s life then that life is truly and genuinely authentic. In fact, the meaning of life results from the “laborious exercise of freedom”; the meaning of life is, for Mancuso, this very “laborious exercise of freedom”.⁴⁸ The meaning of life cannot be imposed on anybody; every human being must discover it on its own by growing aware of its own freedom and then by using this freedom for the good of others in order for its life as well as the life of others to acquire the veracity of authenticity. A particular example of freedom and authenticity is one’s decision about how to end one’s life; Mancuso thus defends the right of every human life to die based on one’s personal decision. How to die, in other words, should and must be an expression of one’s own ability to make informed choices.⁴⁹

Life is full of contradictions, Mancuso notices, but true freedom is achieved only when these contradictions are accepted as such. The reality of contradiction is a fundamental principle which the human being must understand in order for freedom to exist and be manifest genuinely. For instance, regardless of whether one sees the birth of a child as the result of a wide and complex range of biological, physical, and chemical process or as the decision and providence of a superior being – the ontologically real, transcendent, and eternal God of traditional theology – these contradictory perspectives must coexist in society should freedom be truly displayed and authenticity be consequently lived by as many human beings as possible. This is why Mancuso insists that freedom is an exercise; a doing which entails respecting the principle of contradiction, an active awareness which allows different and contradictory opinions to coexist; otherwise – insists Piero Schiantarelli – if seen as mutually exclusive, these contradictory views not only represent a serious weakness but also stand against the modernization of the church and society.⁵⁰ The very exercise of embracing contradictions lies at the heart of freedom and, according to Mancuso, is “the best way

⁴⁷ Pia DE SILVESTRIS, Adamo VERGINE, *Dio, l'inconscio, l'evoluzione* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2010), 43.

⁴⁸ MANCUSO, *La vita* (see above, n. 46), 44.

⁴⁹ MANCUSO, *La vita* (see above, n. 46, 48), 44–6.

⁵⁰ Pietro SCHIANTARELLI, *Dogmi e potere* (Milano: StreetLib, 2016), e-edition.

to respect life”.⁵¹ Life, and human life in particular, should be synonymous to freedom; the very existence of human life is indication and proof of freedom, so quenching freedom is nothing but an attempt to eradicate life itself. Freedom or the capacity to distinguish oneself from other forms of life is what makes the human being human. Freedom, therefore, is what elevates the human being beyond any sort of necessity, be it biological, psychological or of a different sort.⁵²

This elevation, however – which can be experienced by every human being – must always be followed by facts or by actions that are performed, as indicated by Giorgio Ridolfi in his assessment of Mancuso’s thought, for the good and benefit of others.⁵³ Early Christianity and the very first Christians have the answer for such a way of life, Mancuso believes, and their example can be appropriated by everybody. Thus, the true follower of Jesus and his teachings is the human heart which, warns Mancuso, must find a way to live in freedom of conscience and freedom of religion otherwise life is deprived of meaning and authenticity. Every human being must consequently act to prove that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are not merely concepts of the mind, but also realities of daily life. Mancuso is convinced that every person who lives according to these convictions, namely believes and practices freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, can be considered “a grown up Christian”,⁵⁴ a faithful and mature follower not of the church but of the truth which finds its accomplishment in doing good and pursuing justice. It is not the external authority of the church but rather the internal authority of the mind and heart which decides that the concept of freedom – as applied to conscience and religion – should be practically incarnated in one’s own life as well as in the life of others⁵⁵ for the benefit of humankind and its authentic existence in the material world of nature.⁵⁶

51 MANCUSO, *La vita* (see above, n. 46, 48, 49), 45.

52 MANCUSO, *La vita* (see above, n. 46, 48, 49, 51), 45–6.

53 GIORGIO RIDOLFI, “Libertà come necessità e libertà come autonomia. Riflessioni su *La vita autentica* di Vito Mancuso”, in *Sociologia. Rivista Quadrimestrale di Scienze Storiche e Sociali* 44.2 (2010), 85–94, here: 86.

54 MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22, 23a, 24, 26, 29), 243–4.

55 MANCUSO, *Io e Dio* (see above, n. 21, 22, 23a, 24, 26, 29, 54), 244.

56 This is an expanded version of Corneliu C. SIMUȚ, “Freedom of Conscience and Religion in Contemporary Secular Theology. The Case of Vito Mancuso and His Lay Understanding of Religion”, in *Jurnalul libertății de conștiință / Journal for Freedom of Conscience* 4 (2016): 798–816.