

Europe has almost never had a civic, political or historical unity. But, for centuries, it has had a civil, cultural and spiritual unity. The lodestar of reference and contrast has been Christianity, but also

There is a common language that overcomes divisions

VALUES & DISVALUES

by Gianfranco Ravasi

Greek philosophy, Roman law, liberal Enlightenment and the workers' movement, intended as the fight for social justice, have played their indisputable role.

The young people of Europe have invented an evocative play on words to commemorate the convergence of their religious origins: they speak of Eur-hope, a Europe to be built with hope and not just with the realism of economics and politics. A community that still aspires to ideals and higher planes of thought, stimulated by culture, by "politics" that reveal the noblest meaning of the term and by a spirituality that is not only characterised by religious confession, but also by the search for the ultimate meaning of existence and for moral and human values that transcend individual interests and needs. To achieve this, it is paradoxically necessary to travel back into the past, to rediscover our human and spiritual origins. Goethe expressed this with the striking remark "Europe's mother tongue is Christianity". Even Kant was convinced that "the Gospel is the source from which our civilisation sprang". Certainly, at first glance Europe reveals itself as a mosaic, a true archipelago of cultures: there is the Latin area, but also the Germanic-Baltic, there is the Slavic area and the Celtic. Europe has almost never had a civic, political or historical unity. Nonetheless, for centuries and centuries, it essentially had

a civil, cultural and spiritual unity. The spirit of this interior unity, often obscured, but never extinguished, has revealed many facets: one has only to think of the importance of Greek philosophy or the incidence of Roman law, but also, in more recent eras of the influence of the liberal Enlightenment or of the workers' movement, that is, the power of reason and the fight for social justice. Nonetheless, without a doubt the thing that bound together this multiplicity, that gave it a point of reference, was Christianity. Paul VI was right when he symbolically stated that Europe "was born from the cross, the book, and the plough". For very good reason it was a Pope, Nicholas V, who in 1453 revived the term Europe, which had fallen into disuse. Unfortunately, it was at a tragic time which, with the conquest of Constantinople, marked the schism between Western and Eastern Europe. Christianity, with its celebration of the

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individual and of human dignity, with the contemplation (*ora*) and social commitment (*labora*) of monasticism, the meditation of the Middle Ages and the glorious culture of Humanism and the Renaissance, constituted the ideal “great system” of Europe. In particular, it did so through the Bible, also involving, in this way, its Hebrew origins. For good reason, even Nietzsche in the preparatory materials for his work *The Dawn* had to recognise that “for us, Abraham means more than any other person in Greek or German history. Our experience of reading the Psalms in comparison with reading Pindarus and Petrarch is very much like comparing our homeland with a foreign country”. The painter Marc Chagall was convinced that for centuries painters had dipped their brushes in “the alphabet coloured by hope that is the Sacred Scriptures”, so much so that without knowledge of them it is impossible to decipher the iconography of European art. It is naturally now impossible to draw up a blueprint of this cultural history which has its “great lexicon” in Christianity, to use an expression of the French poet Paul Claudel. It is in fact a question of a very complex and often dialectic and conflicting relationship, which is crucial to our understanding of our own identity. Therefore, even when considering the present history of Europe, it is necessary to keep in mind the illuminating counterpoint that Christ proposes in his famous assertion, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (see Matthew 22, 15-22). Europe’s political, economic, “laic” sphere has its own dignity and its own autonomy emblematically represented by a common parliament and by its coin, the Euro. But, there is another distinct sphere, just as valid, that of the human being, of culture, of spirituality, in which the “image” of God, not Caesar, is represented. In fact, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created man” (Genesis 1, 27). The Europe of Caesar and the Europe of God, that is, immanence and transcendence, politics and religion, economy and culture, must weave themselves together, without abusing each other. In this light, Christianity is, as stated by Francesco De Sanctis, “laic” spirit of the 19th century, the root of our “religious sentiment that is



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also moral sentiment in its highest sense" (as written in his work *La giovinezza*).

It is on this trajectory, following the path of the Christian soul that pulsates beneath the surface of our civilisation, that we would like to propose an appeal to prevent the dissolution of our uniqueness, our authenticity, our glorious identity. It is a subject of infinite aspects: we have chosen – considering the limits of this contemplation which is only "provocative" and almost "impressionistic" – only three, composing them in an ideal triptych in which everyone is able to recognise himself and to engage himself, given that "we cannot not call ourselves Christians" for the reasons that Croce had already set out in his famous article in 1942 for *La Critica*.

It is, above all, necessary to fight against the forgetfulness of Europe's roots, its founding values and its true identity. The French writer Georges Bernanos, in his analysis of the emptiness of our society's soul, elaborated in the essay *La France contre les robots*, declared, "A civilisation does not collapse like a building; to be more precise, it gradually empties itself of its substance until nothing is left but its husk." There is a risk of Europe being reduced to its husk, an empty vessel, its essential Christian essence having drained away, that is having desiccated the sap of its



deep Christian roots, dedicated only to “the virtual” (the “robots” which appeared on the European panorama of the 1940’s in which Bernanos lived), based on extrinsic models like those in the America of the time. The cathedrals and glorious monuments are then transformed, as the German poet Wilhelm Willms said, into “empty shells”, passed through only by distracted swarms of tourists, without a heart, life, songs, voices, faith. The noble emblems of our culture are reduced, in this way, to shells without the echo of the sea of the past. One becomes accustomed to this poverty and emptiness to the point of not perceiving them as such, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger warned in his *Holzwege*, “the dark time of the world is a time of poverty, because the world is becoming increasingly impoverished. It has already become so deprived as to be unable to recognise the absence of God as an absence”. To fight this forgetfulness it is necessary to rediscover memory in its true etymological sense of “returning to the

heart”, that is, to our awareness of our humanity and the basic values of our civilisation.

A second battle, consequent and connected to the first, must be waged against superficiality, banality, vacuity, vulgarity and ugliness. A return must be made to the ethics and beauty that were the fixed stars in the sky of European civilisation over the centuries, faking inspiration from the Christian ethos, a message of justice and beauty, truth and light, love and harmony. Benedetto Croce was right when in his 1935 treatise *Orientamenti* he warned, “Do not concern yourself with where the world is going, but with your own course, so as not to trample cynically over your conscience, and to evade the shame of your betrayed past.” We need a moral shake-up, more soul, to be purified by the springs of beauty; Europe has always been emblematic of these principles to the peoples of the world.

People often cite the apologue recorded in the diary of the Danish Christian philosopher Soeren Kierkegaard: “The ship under the cook’s control and the captain’s megaphone does not announce the ship’s course, but what will be on tomorrow’s menu”. Television is increasingly becoming a kind of Moloch of modern communication, that dictates to the surrendering and adoring masses what they

_ Europe is a true mosaic of cultures, its soul is the meeting place for Greek philosophy, influences of liberal Enlightenment or the worker’s movement (on the other page, the Commune of Paris and, below, the famous painting “The Fourth State”).



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should eat and wear, the fashions to follow and the lifestyle to lead. What is missing is a voice that indicates our course, the meaning of life, that questions us about good and evil, about right and wrong, about true and false, about existence and death.

Lastly, we should evoke the final commitment needed to rediscover our authenticity as Europeans: to fight against extremes, excesses, the vortex of pure antitheses. In ancient Greek culture a wise man was a *meth'orios*, one on the ridge, able to proceed with intelligence and caution along the jagged crest of a mountain, which falls away steeply on either side (thus the Alexandrian Jew Philo in *De Somniis*). On

one side there is the danger of falling down the slope of syncretism and then dreary relativism, a process which dissolves and eradicates our unique identity. Dostoevsky vehemently asserted: "Europe has denied Christ. For this reason, and this reason only, he is dying".

On the other side, there is the risk of falling down the slope of fundamentalism which becomes fiercely exclusive and which wipes out any respect and ignores the values of others in a kind of iconoclastic ardour, fiercely against and, at the same time, frightened of all that is different. Instead, it is essential that we rediscover the great tradition of dialogue between cultures and religions, in the genuine spirit of Christianity – often betrayed – which in the diversity of the human quest saw the *semina Verbi*, the "seeds of the divine Word". Aware of their own identity, people do not become all-embracing, but are capable of comparison, able to "Consider everything, and keep that which is good", as Paul suggested to the Christian Greeks of Thessalonica (I, 5, 21).

Therefore, it is by going back to the origins of European history that we are able to propose a Europe that is not just defined by geography or economy. The importance of this pilgrimage of ideals, essential for both believers and agnostics, is captured in the suggestive words of one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, Thomas Stearns Eliot, an American who chose Europe as his homeland: "A European citizen can choose not to believe in Christianity, yet all he says and does has its roots in Christian culture. Without Christianity Voltaire or Nietzsche could not have existed. If Christianity dies, then so does our culture, and our true identity".

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