

Culture in Europe

We are living in a time of great dangers and great opportunities for man and the world; a time which is also of great responsibility for us all. During the past century man's possibilities and his dominion over matter grew by truly unthinkable measures. However, his power to dispose of the world has been such as to allow his capacity for destruction to reach dimensions which at times horrify us. In this connection, the threat of terrorism comes spontaneously to mind, this new war without boundaries or fronts.

The fear that it might soon get a hold of nuclear or biological weapons is not unfounded, and has made it necessary for lawful states to adopt internal security systems similar to those that previously existed only in dictatorships. The feeling remains, nevertheless, that, in reality, all these precautions are not enough, as a global control is neither possible nor desirable. Less visible, but no less disquieting, are the possibilities of self-manipulation that man has acquired. He has plumbed the depths of being, has deciphered the components of the human being, and is now capable, so to speak, of constructing man himself, who thus no longer comes into the world as a gift of the Creator, but as a product of our action, a product that, therefore, can also be selected according to the exigencies established by ourselves.

Thus, the splendor of being an image of God no longer shines over man, which is what confers on him his dignity and inviolability, and he is left only to the power of his own human capacities. He is no more than the image of man -- of what man?

To this are added the great global problems: inequality in the distribution of the goods of the earth, growing poverty, and the more threatening impoverishment and exhaustion of the earth and its resources, hunger, sicknesses that threaten the whole world and the clash of cultures. All this shows that the growth of our possibilities has not been matched by a comparable development of our moral energy. Moral strength has not grown together with the development of science; rather, it has diminished, because the technical mentality relegates morality to the subjective realm, while we have need, precisely, of a public morality, a morality that is able to respond to the threats that weigh down on the existence of us all. The real and gravest danger in these times lies, precisely, in this imbalance between technical possibilities and moral energy. The security we need as a precondition of our freedom and our dignity cannot come, in the last analysis, from technical systems of control, but can, specifically, spring only from man's moral strength: Whenever the latter is lacking or is insufficient, the power man has will be transformed increasingly into a power of destruction.

A new moralism

It is true that a new moralism exists today whose key words are justice, peace and conservation of creation -- words that call for essential moral values of which we are in real need. But this moralism remains vague and thus slides, almost inevitably, into the political-party sphere. It is above all a dictum addressed to others, and too little a personal duty of our daily life. In fact, what does justice mean? Who defines it? What serves towards peace?

Over the last decades we have amply seen in our streets and squares how pacifism can deviate toward a destructive anarchism and terrorism. The political moralism of the 70s, the roots of which are anything but dead, was a moralism that succeeded in attracting even young people full of ideals. But it was a moralism with a mistaken direction, in as much as it was deprived of serene rationality and because, in the last analysis, it placed the political utopia above the dignity of the individual man, showing itself even capable of arriving at contempt for man in the name of great objectives.

Political moralism, as we have lived it and are still living it, does not open the way to regeneration, and even more, also blocks it. The same is true, consequently, also for a Christianity and a theology that reduces the heart of Jesus' message, the "kingdom of God," to the "values of the kingdom," identifying these values with the great key words of political moralism, and proclaiming them, at the same time, as a synthesis of the religions.

Nonetheless, God is neglected in this way, notwithstanding the fact that it is precisely he who is the subject and cause of the kingdom of God. In his stead, great words (and values) remain, which lend themselves to all kinds of abuse.

This brief look at the situation of the world leads us to reflect on today's situation of Christianity and, therefore, on the foundations of Europe; that Europe which at one time, we can say, was the Christian continent, but which was also the starting point of that new scientific rationality which has given us great possibilities, as well as great threats. Christianity, it is true, did not start in Europe, and therefore it cannot even be classified as a European religion, the religion of the European cultural realm. But it received precisely in Europe its most effective cultural and intellectual imprint and remains, therefore, identified in a special way with Europe.

Furthermore, it is also true that this Europe, since the time of the Renaissance, and in a fuller sense since the time of the Enlightenment, has developed precisely that scientific rationality which not only in the era of the discoveries led to the geographic unity of the world, to the meeting of continents and cultures, but which today, much more profoundly, thanks to the technical culture made possible by science, imprints itself on the whole world, and even more than that, in a certain

sense, gives it uniformity.

Godless society

And in the wake of this form of rationality, Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner unknown before now to humanity, excludes God from the public conscience, either by denying him altogether, or by judging that his existence is not demonstrable, uncertain and, therefore, belonging to the realm of subjective choices, something, in any case, irrelevant to public life. This purely functional rationality, so to speak, has implied a disorder of the moral conscience altogether new for cultures existing up to now, as it deems rational only that which can be proved with experiments. As morality belongs to an altogether different sphere, it disappears as a category unto itself and must be identified in another way, in as much as it must be admitted, in any case, that morality is essential.

In a world based on calculation, it is the calculation of consequences that determines what must or must not be considered moral. And thus the category of the good, as was clearly pointed out by Kant, disappears. Nothing is good or bad in itself, everything depends on the consequences that an action allows one to foresee.

If Christianity, on one hand, has found its most effective form in Europe, it is necessary, on the other hand, to say that in Europe a culture has developed that constitutes the absolutely most radical contradiction not only of Christianity, but of the religious and moral traditions of humanity. From this, one understands that Europe is experiencing a true and proper "test of tension"; from this, one also understands the radicalism of the tensions that our continent must face. However from this emerges also, and above all, the responsibility that we Europeans must assume at this historical moment -- in the debate on the definition of Europe, on its new political shape. It is not a question of a nostalgic rearguard battle of history being played out, but rather a great responsibility for today's humanity.

Let us take a closer look at this opposition between the two cultures that have characterized Europe. In the debate on the Preamble of the European Constitution, this opposition was seen in two controversial points: the question of the reference to God in the Constitution and the mention of the Christian roots of Europe. Given that in article 52 of the Constitution the institutional rights of Churches are guaranteed, we can be at peace, it is said.

But this means that in the life of Europe, the Churches find a place in the realm of the political commitment, while, in the realm of the foundations of Europe, the imprint of their content has no place. The reasons that are given in the public debate for this clear "no" are superficial, and it is obvious that more than indicating the real motivation, they conceal it. The affirmation that the mention of the Christian roots of Europe injures the sentiments of many non-Christians who are in Europe, is not very convincing, given that it relates, first of all, to an historical fact that no one can seriously deny. Naturally, this historical mention has a reference to the present. To mention the roots implies indicating as well the residual sources of moral orientation, which is a factor of Europe's identity. Who would be offended? Whose identity is threatened?

The Muslims, who in this respect are often and willingly brought in, do not feel threatened by our Christian moral foundations, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations. Neither are our Jewish fellow citizens offended by the reference to the Christian roots of Europe, in as much as these roots go back to Mount Sinai: They bear the sign of the voice that made itself heard on the mountain of God and unite with us in the great fundamental orientations that the Decalogue has given humanity. The same is true for the reference to God: It is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions, but rather the attempt to build the human community absolutely without God.

The motivations of this twofold "no" are more profound than one would think from the reasons offered. They presuppose the idea that only the radical Enlightenment culture, which has reached its full development in our time, could be constitutive for European identity. Next to this culture, then, different religious cultures can coexist with their respective rights, on the condition and to the degree in which they respect the criteria of the Enlightenment culture, and are subordinated to it.

Culture of rights

This Enlightenment culture is essentially defined by the rights of freedom; it stems from freedom as a fundamental value that measures everything: the freedom of religious choice, which includes the religious neutrality of the state; freedom to express one's own opinion, as long as it does not cast doubt specifically on this canon; the democratic ordering of the state, that is, parliamentary control on state organisms; the free formation of parties; the independence of the judiciary; and, finally, the safeguarding of the rights of man and the prohibition of discriminations. Here the canon is still in the process of formation, given that there are also rights of man that are in opposition, as for example, in the case of the conflict between a woman's desire for freedom and the right of the unborn to live.

The concept of discrimination is ever more extended, and so the prohibition of discrimination can be increasingly transformed into a limitation of the freedom of opinion and religious liberty. Very soon it will not be possible to state that homosexuality, as the Catholic Church teaches, is an objective disorder in the structuring of human existence. And the fact that the Church is convinced of not having the right to confer priestly ordination on women is considered by some up to now as something irreconcilable with the spirit of the European Constitution.

It is evident that this canon of the Enlightenment culture, less than definitive, contains important values which we, precisely as Christians, do not want and cannot renounce; however, it is also obvious that the ill-defined or undefined concept of freedom, which is at the base of this culture, inevitably entails contradictions; and it is obvious that precisely because of its use (a use that seems radical) it has implied limitations of freedom that a generation ago we could not even imagine. A confused ideology of freedom leads to dogmatism, which is showing itself increasingly hostile to freedom.

We must, without a doubt, focus again on the question of the internal contradictions of the present form of the Enlightenment culture. But we must first finish describing it. It is part of its nature, in so far as culture of a reason that, finally, has complete awareness of itself, to boast a universal pretence and conceive itself as complete in itself, not in need of some completion through other cultural factors.

Both these characteristics are clearly seen when the question is posed about who can become a member of the European community and, above all, in the debate about Turkey's entry into this community. It is a question of a state, or perhaps better, of a cultural realm, which does not have Christian roots, but which was influenced by the Islamic culture. Then, Atatürk tried to transform Turkey into a secular state, attempting to implant in Muslim terrain the secularism that had matured in the Christian world of Europe.

Universal culture?

We can ask ourselves if that is possible. According to the thesis of the Enlightenment and secular culture of Europe, only the norms and contents of the Enlightenment culture will be able to determine Europe's identity and, consequently, every state that makes these criteria its own, will be able to belong to Europe. It does not matter, in the end, on what plot of roots this culture of freedom and democracy is implanted. And, precisely because of this, it is affirmed, that the roots cannot enter into the definition of the foundations of Europe, it being a question of dead roots that are not part of the present identity. As a consequence, this new identity, determined exclusively by the Enlightenment culture, also implies that God does not come in at all into public life and the foundations of the state.

Thus everything becomes logical and also, in some sense, plausible. In fact, what could we desire as being more beautiful than knowing that everywhere democracy and human rights are respected? Nevertheless, the question must be asked, if this secular Enlightenment culture is really the culture, finally proposed as universal, that can give a common cause to all men; a culture that should have access from everywhere, even though it is on a humus that is historically and culturally differentiated. And we also ask ourselves if it is really complete in itself, to the degree that it has no need of a root outside itself.

Let us address these last two questions. To the first, that is, to the question as to whether a universally valid philosophy has been reached which is finally wholly scientifically rational, which expresses the cause common to all men, we must respond that undoubtedly we have arrived at important acquisitions which can pretend to a universal validity. These include: the acquisition that religion cannot be imposed by the state, but that it can only be accepted in freedom; respect of the fundamental rights of man equal for all; the separation of powers and control of power.

It cannot be thought, however, that these fundamental values, recognized by us as generally valid, can be realized in the same way in every historical context. Not all societies have the sociological assumptions for a democracy based on parties, as occurs in the West; therefore, the total religious neutrality of the state, in the majority of historical contexts, has to be considered an illusion.

And so we come to the problems raised by the second question. But let us clarify first if the modern Enlightenment philosophies, considered as a whole, can contain the last word of the cause common to all men. These philosophies are characterized by the fact that they are positivist and, therefore, anti-metaphysical, so much so that, in the end, God cannot have any place in them. They are based on the self-limitation of rational positivism, which can be applied in the technical realm, but which when it is generalized, entails instead a mutilation of man. It succeeds in having man no longer admit any moral claim beyond his calculations and, as we saw, the concept of freedom, which at first glance would seem to extend in an unlimited manner, in the end leads to the self-destruction of freedom.

It is true that the positivist philosophies contain important elements of truth. However, these are based on imposed limitations of reason, characteristic of a specific cultural situation -- that of the modern West -- and therefore not the last word of reason. Nevertheless though they might seem totally rational, they are not the voice of reason itself, but are also identified culturally with the present situation in the West.

For this reason they are in no way that philosophy which one day could be valid throughout the world. But, above all, it

must be said that this Enlightenment philosophy, and its respective culture, is incomplete. It consciously severs its own historical roots depriving itself of the regenerating forces from which it sprang, from that fundamental memory of humanity, so to speak, without which reason loses its orientation.

Knowing is doing

In fact, the principle is now valid, according to which, man's capacity is measured by his action. What one knows how to do, may also be done. There no longer exists a knowing how to do separated from a being able to do, because it would be against freedom, which is the absolute supreme value. But man knows how to do many things, and knows increasingly how to do more things; and if this knowing how to do does not find its measure in a moral norm, it becomes, as we can already see, a power of destruction.

Man knows how to clone men, and so he does it. Man knows how to use men as a store of organs for other men, and so he does it; he does it because this seems to be an exigency of his freedom. Man knows how to construct atomic bombs and so he makes them, being, in line of principle, also disposed to use them. In the end, terrorism is also based on this modality of man's self-authorization, and not on the teachings of the Koran.

The radical detachment of the Enlightenment philosophy from its roots becomes, in the last analysis, contempt for man. Man, deep down, has no freedom, we are told by the spokesmen of the natural sciences, in total contradiction with the starting point of the whole question. Man must not think that he is something more than all other living beings and, therefore, should also be treated like them, we are told by even the most advanced spokesmen of a philosophy clearly separated from the roots of humanity's historical memory.

We asked ourselves two questions: if rationalist (positivist) philosophy is strictly rational and, consequently, if it is universally valid, and if it is complete. Is it self-sufficient? Can it, or more directly must it, relegate its historical roots to the realm of the pure past and, therefore, to the realm of what can only be valid subjectively?

We must respond to both questions with a definitive "no." This philosophy does not express man's complete reason, but only a part of it, and because of this mutilation of reason it cannot be considered entirely rational. For this reason it is incomplete, and can only be fulfilled by re-establishing contact with its roots. A tree without roots dries up.

Removing God

By stating this, one does not deny all that is positive and important of this philosophy, but one affirms rather its need to complete itself, its profound deficiency. And so we must again address the two controversial points of the Preamble of the European Constitution. The banishment of Christian roots does not reveal itself as the expression of a higher tolerance, which respects all cultures in the same way, not wishing to privilege any, but rather as the absolutizing of a pattern of thought and of life that are radically opposed, among other things, to the other historical cultures of humanity.

The real opposition that characterizes today's world is not that between various religious cultures, but that between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on one hand, and from the great religious cultures on the other. If there were to be a clash of cultures, it would not be because of a clash of the great religions -- which have always struggled against one another, but which, in the end, have also always known how to live with one another -- but it will be because of the clash between this radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures.

Thus, even the rejection of the reference to God, is not the expression of a tolerance that desires to protect the non-theistic religions and the dignity of atheists and agnostics, but rather the expression of a conscience that would like to see God cancelled definitively from the public life of humanity, and relegated to the subjective realm of residual cultures of the past. Relativism, which is the starting point of all this, thus becomes a dogmatism which believes itself to be in possession of the definitive scope of reason, and with the right to regard all the rest only as a stage of humanity, in the end surmounted, and that can be appropriately relativized. In reality, this means that we have need of roots to survive, and that we must not lose sight of God, if we do not want human dignity to disappear.

The Permanent Significance of the Christian Faith

Is this a simple rejection of the Enlightenment and of modernity? Absolutely not. From the beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the "Logos," as the religion according to reason. In the first place, it has not identified its precursors in the other religions, but in that philosophical enlightenment which has cleared the path of traditions to turn to the search of the truth and towards the good, toward the one God who is above all gods.

In so far as religion of the persecuted, in so far as universal religion, beyond the different states and peoples, it has denied the state the right to regard religion as a part of state ordering, thus postulating the freedom of faith. It has always defined men, all men without distinction, as creatures and images of God, proclaiming for them, in terms of principle,

although within the imperative limits of social ordering, the same dignity.

In this connection, the Enlightenment is of Christian origin and it is no accident that it was born precisely and exclusively in the realm of the Christian faith, whenever Christianity, against its nature and unfortunately, had become tradition and religion of the state. Notwithstanding the philosophy, in so far as search for rationality -- also of our faith --, was always a prerogative of Christianity, the voice of reason had been too domesticated. It was and is the merit of the Enlightenment to have again proposed these original values of Christianity and of having given back to reason its own voice. In the pastoral constitution, *On the Church in the Modern World*, Vatican Council II underlined again this profound correspondence between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking to come to a true conciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great heritage that both sides must defend.

Given all this, it is necessary that both sides engage in self-reflection and be willing to correct themselves. Christianity must always remember that it is the religion of the "Logos." It is faith in the "Creator Spiritus," in the Creator Spirit, from which proceeds everything that exists. Today, this should be precisely its philosophical strength, in so far as the problem is whether the world comes from the irrational, and reason is not, therefore, other than a "sub-product," on occasion even harmful of its development -- or whether the world comes from reason, and is, as a consequence, its criterion and goal. The Christian faith inclines toward this second thesis, thus having, from the purely philosophical point of view, really good cards to play, despite the fact that many today consider only the first thesis as the only modern and rational one par excellence. However, a reason that springs from the irrational, and that is, in the final analysis, itself irrational, does not constitute a solution for our problems. Only creative reason, which in the crucified God is manifested as love, can really show us the way. In the so necessary dialogue between secularists and Catholics, we Christians must be very careful to remain faithful to this fundamental line: to live a faith that comes from the "Logos," from creative reason, and that, because of this, is also open to all that is truly rational.

"As if God existed"

But at this point, in my capacity as believer, I would like to make a proposal to the secularists. At the time of the Enlightenment there was an attempt to understand and define the essential moral norms, saying that they would be valid "etsi Deus non daretur," even in the case that God did not exist. In the opposition of the confessions and in the pending crisis of the image of God, an attempt was made to keep the essential values of morality outside the contradictions and to seek for them an evidence that would render them independent of the many divisions and uncertainties of the different philosophies and confessions. In this way, they wanted to ensure the basis of coexistence and, in general, the foundations of humanity. At that time, it was thought to be possible, as the great deep convictions created by Christianity to a large extent remained. But this is no longer the case.

The search for such a reassuring certainty, which could remain uncontested beyond all differences, failed. Not even the truly grandiose effort of Kant was able to create the necessary shared certainty. Kant had denied that God could be known in the realm of pure reason, but at the same time he had represented God, freedom and immortality as postulates of practical reason, without which, coherently, for him no moral behavior was possible.

Does not today's situation of the world make us think perhaps that he might have been right? I would like to express it in a different way: The attempt, carried to the extreme, to manage human affairs disdaining God completely leads us increasingly to the edge of the abyss, to man's ever greater isolation from reality. We must reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment and say: Even one who does not succeed in finding the way of accepting God, should, nevertheless, seek to live and to direct his life "veluti si Deus daretur," as if God existed. This is the advice Pascal gave to his friends who did not believe. In this way, no one is limited in his freedom, but all our affairs find the support and criterion of which they are in urgent need.

Above all, that of which we are in need at this moment in history are men who, through an enlightened and lived faith, render God credible in this world. The negative testimony of Christians who speak about God and live against him, has darkened God's image and opened the door to disbelief. We need men who have their gaze directed to God, to understand true humanity. We need men whose intellects are enlightened by the light of God, and whose hearts God opens, so that their intellects can speak to the intellects of others, and so that their hearts are able to open up to the hearts of others.

Only through men who have been touched by God, can God come near to men. We need men like Benedict of Norcia, who at a time of dissipation and decadence, plunged into the most profound solitude, succeeding, after all the purifications he had to suffer, to ascend again to the light, to return and to found Montecasino, the city on the mountain that, with so many ruins, gathered together the forces from which a new world was formed.

In this way Benedict, like Abraham, became the father of many nations. The recommendations to his monks presented at the end of his "Rule" are guidelines that show us also the way that leads on high, beyond the crisis and the ruins.

"Just as there is a bitter zeal that removes one from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal that removes one from vices and leads to God and to eternal life. It is in this zeal that monks must exercise themselves with most ardent love: May they outdo one another in rendering each other honor, may they support, in turn, with utmost patience their physical and moral infirmities ... May they love one another with fraternal affection ... Fear God in love ... Put absolutely nothing before Christ who will be able to lead all to eternal life" (Chapter 72