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Can Christianity Inspire a Global Culture?

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In modern times society has often been built upon the values of liberty and tolerance, dialogue, equality, and the search for peace. Owing both to their intrinsic power as well as to a variety of other causes (historical, cultural, social, economic, etc.), these principles have engendered the universal appreciation of people from the most diverse countries, allowing them even to serve as the basis of a global culture.

In his discourse to the 'La Sapienza' University in Rome in 2008, Benedict XVI acknowledged that our understanding and recognition of human rights have increased thanks to the notable development of the sciences in the modern age. He added that this is an achievement for which we should indeed be thankful. Nevertheless, Pope Benedict also pointed out that this modern heritage is jeopardized if it forgets that its roots are grounded in the Christian faith: "if our culture seeks only to build itself on the basis of the circle of its own argumentation, on what convinces it at the time, and if – anxious to preserve its secularism – it detaches itself from its life-giving roots, then it will not become more reasonable or purer, but will fall apart and disintegrate."¹

The Pluralist Objection

Currently we can see that this is precisely what is occurring in many countries. Politicians, intellectuals, and a large part of public opinion promote a society without religion or, at best, a society in which religion is relegated to the private sphere and to the realm of individual choice. In either case, religious matters would remain sharply separated from public life and public discourse. There thus results an attempt to formulate new ways of grounding values that traditionally were based on a transcendent, religious view of human life. Modern democracy currently seems to be seeking its foundation in the principles of consent and majority rule, with the result that it is often power, and not reason, that decides which things are important in a society and which

¹ BENEDICTO XVI, *Discourse for the University of Rome, 'La Sapienza'*, January 17, 2008, this text is available at www.univforum.org.

are not.² Consequently, modern societies lose sight of a true hierarchy of goods: some goods are exaggerated while others, perhaps more fundamental ones, are underappreciated. Similarly, conflicts between goods are held to be resolvable by legislative congresses or parliaments, whose decisions in these matters simply reflect the current majority consensus.

In this political and cultural environment, religion (or even a strong notion of the truth as such) is viewed as something detrimental to a ‘diverse society’ insofar as it tends to impose its own convictions on others without respecting the reigning *pluralism*. Against this position, various thinkers argue that it is precisely the denial of the existence of ‘solid’ truths which in fact closes the door to dialogue and, indeed, makes true dialogue impossible.³ In a global world democracy cannot just be an agreement concerning a set of common *procedures*. It is rather a system sustained by certain contents. If these contents are good and just, a society that is worthy of man can be built upon them. This kind of society will in turn facilitate a communion of life which, ruled by justice, aspires for peace and liberty for all. A question that needs to be examined is whether a Christian conception of man and society can serve as a basis upon which this society can be constructed.

The Christian Roots of Modern Culture

In recent years, many of the debates about the role of religion with respect to the foundations of society have arisen in the context of widespread discussion concerning the identity of Europe. In this context many intellectuals and politicians have denied that Christianity has a central place in the definition of Europe’s identity. The debate over Europe’s indebtedness to Christianity, however, is actually part of a larger and more fundamental question, namely the question concerning the Christian foundations of modern culture.⁴ Although discussion of this latter theme has arisen in Europe and taken on a special importance there, it is increasingly clear that an examination of this issue is beneficial for all Western societies as well as for fostering reflection on society in general. While it is true that many contemporary cultures are historically indebted to Europe, Christianity is capable of renewing every existing culture.

Benedict XVI has shown a great interest in this discussion and has personally contributed to it on various occasions. The consistent goal of his interventions has been to show that *Christianity is a religion of the ‘logos’*, i.e., of reason, and that as such it is not opposed to anything that is rational or in conformity with reason.⁵ Thanks to the faith, which perfects and elevates reason, the Christian can more profoundly understand the meaning of things. While this elevation of reason by faith is certainly advantageous, it does not at all mitigate the Christian’s perennial responsibility of

² C.S. Lewis makes a similar argument in *The Abolition of Man*, HarperOne, New York: 2001.

³ Cfr. J. RATZINGER - J. HABERMAS, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, Ignatius, San Francisco: 2007.

⁴ Among others, see the classic works of H. BELLOC, *Europe and the Fatih*, TAN: Rockford Ill., 1992, and R. GUARDINI, *The End of the Modern World*, ISI Books: Wilmington, De., 2001.

⁵ Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Faith, Reason, and the University. Memories and Reflections*, Discourse at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.

searching for the best ways of organizing society and indeed all human environments. The faith does not contribute to this search by proposing specific economic or social models. It rather enables the Christian to be more profoundly open and sensitive to all that is truly human and noble.

The Christian Identity

If we would like to argue that Christianity can validly serve as the basis of a global culture, it is first necessary to reflect on the ‘Christian identity.’ This consists in asking ourselves what constitutes the essence of Christianity and then seeing what consequences this will have both on individual behaviour and on the organization of the various levels of society. The affirmation that Christianity is a *religion of the ‘logos’* is part of the very heart of the Christian message. The essence of this message, however, does not consist so much in a theoretical doctrine but rather in a person, Jesus Christ.⁶ Christianity affirms that the same divine *Logos* that causes and underlies the world’s intelligibility became man and died for us, thereby revealing the profound meaning of human life in all of its aspects, from work, family and friendship to sickness, pain and suffering.⁷ Jesus Christ invites us to identify ourselves with him and it is precisely this identification which constitutes the goal of Christian life.

The Christian identity has various constitutive elements. Perhaps the foremost of these is a *commitment to search for the truth (both natural and supernatural) about man, his activities, his social nature, etc.* Another related element is *a conception of the nature of man and of society.* Only in the light of the mystery of Christ can one fully understand the value of each and every person as well as the corresponding duty to foster an attitude of love and service towards our fellow men.⁸

Can Christianity Inspire a Global Culture?

Serious reflection on ways in which Christianity can inspire a global culture requires one not to lose sight of the twofold nature of the Christian identity. On the one hand, this identity is something that needs to be *studied rigorously and thus known profoundly.* On the other, it is something that needs *to be lived by each individual.* Moreover, these two dimensions are intrinsically linked and inseparable. It follows that a Christian who wishes to participate personally in the reality of Christ and in the evangelizing work of the Church should first of all *learn the fundamentals of Christian theology and thus work with a “Christian mind.”*⁹

⁶ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Würzburg, 1938.

⁷ Cfr. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n.22: “Christ ... fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”

⁸ Cfr. (in Spanish) A. ARANDA (ed.), *Identidad cristiana. Coloquios universitarios*, Eunsa: Pamplona 2007.

⁹ At times there appears to be a significant gap between present day technological capacities and the theological and moral formation of Christians. Fostering a balanced and complementary relation between the two is essential to the task of allowing the light of the faith to penetrate all human activities.

The Christian should also be capable of showing how the Christian identity influences all the fields of human activity—from the physical sciences to political policies, from business ethics to the world of art and entertainment. Christian inspiration removes nothing that is truly valuable—or truly *rational*—from these various activities. It rather integrates the good things found in each distinct field within a wider and more profound conception of the human good and of the truth. In this way *Christianity will never function as a factor which limits* the authentic development of any science, trade, or other field of human endeavour.

If we take seriously Christianity's claim that the divine *Logos* became man and thereby revealed the truth about man to man himself, it follows that we should be capable of establishing—with rational *arguments*—that *a Christian vision of reality is the best basis upon which all human activities can be developed*. Such a Christian vision will respect the intrinsic intelligibility and the true nature of things, will offer the highest motives for improving them, and will be capable of integrating distinct fields of human knowledge and activity within a wider context.

Abstract arguments alone, however, are incapable of convincing our contemporaries. Reference should thus be made to the many historical and contemporary examples of the positive contribution that a Christian outlook has made in solving problems of various kinds. Among other fields, this contribution can be seen in politics and the ordering of society in general, in medicine and the sciences, in the economic and business world, and in the study of the liberal arts. Given that presently many people want to construct a *liquid* global culture *without roots*, grounded only on the common consent of its citizens, the time may be right to rethink the *constructive role* that the Christian *roots* of modern society can play. As part of this effort, we should bring to light precisely the concrete benefits Christianity that *is already contributing* in addressing the problems posed by the emergence of a global culture.