Challenges for the European Union in the new millennium: a crisis of identity?

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> „We are called to bethink ourselves of the Christian
> basics of Europe by forming a model of governance
> which through reconciliation develops into a community
> of peoples' in freedom, equality, solidarity and peace
> and which is deeply rooted in Christian basic values.'"
>
> Robert Schuman (1958)

Robert Schuman's call from 1958 for a *community of peoples in freedom, equality, solidarity and peace and which is deeply rooted in Christian basic values* comes to mind when looking at the contemporary European stage today, to the phases of changes and challenges Europe is going through. A paradoxical Europe may appear to one's sight, a civilization that lost track of itself and knows no longer what it stands for, swept in various crises, culminating with a crisis of identity manifesting itself at different levels, including the economic and political ones.

The question of the European identity seems to have aquired a more complex dimension with the efforts to formulate a Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (2004) but also in the context of the enlargement that

brought with itself new challenges and intensified the struggle to integrate different religious and secular communities. This reveals once again that providing an answer to the question 'What is Europe?' is still provocative for the 21st century Europe. A heir of the Greek, Roman and Judeo-Christian heritage, contemporary Europe seems to be in a state of confusion when it comes to recognizing its religious roots.

As José Casanova was observing in his article *Religion, European secular identities, and European integration*, 'the process of European integration, the eastward expansion of the European Union, and the drafting of a European constitution have triggered fundamental questions concerning European identity and the role of Christianity in that identity.'[1] Casanova continues by drawing attention to the interogations that make their way into political and academic discourses more often in these years of the beginning of the third millennium, when the question of the integration of Turkey into the EU structures has intensified, when the question mark on multiculturalism's failure is raised and highlighted[2], when the crisis of demography in Europe seems to be reaching allarming levels, parallel with a continuous increase of the number of muslim communities across Europe, and the integration of an *assertive Catholic Poland*: 'What constitutes 'Europe'? 'How and where should one draw the external territorial and the internal cultural boundaries of Europe?'[3] All these contexts mentioned above have added *unexpected 'religious' irritants to the debates over Europeanization,* Casanova claims.

The ever dynamic world arena, globalization, migrations, violence and fundamentalism, the economic and various political crises are all phenomena influencing the European space. In the metaphorical terms of J. T. Checkel and P. J. Katzenstein, 'the ship of European identity has entered uncharted waters. Its sails are flapping in a stiff breeze. Beyond the harbor, whitecaps are signaling stormy weather ahead.'[4]

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[1]   J. Casanova, 'Religion, European Secular Identities, and European Integration', in T. Byrnes and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 65.
[2]   Back in 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke about the failure of multiculturalism by stating that *the approach [to build] a multicultural [society] and to live side by side and to enjoy each other ... has failed, utterly failed,* and sharply stated that Germany needs more public discussion about the values that guide us (and) about our Judeo-Christian tradition: 'We have to stress this again with confidence, then we will also be able to bring about cohesion in our society. We don't have too much Islam, we have too little Christianity. We have too few discussions about the Christian view of mankind' (Tom Heneghan, 'Merkel urges Germans: Stand up for Christian values', *Reuters*, 16 Nov. 2010).
[3]   *Ibidem.*
[4]   J. T. Checkel and P. J. Katzenstein, 'The Politization of European Identities', in J. T. Checkel and P. J. Katzenstein (eds.), *European Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 1.

The 20th century's catastrophic wars and the disasters they caused may be now long left behind, however nowadays Europe is being confronted with other types of wars that may have profound negative consequences on the long run, unless responsibly addressed. The Old Continent, so traumatized during the 20th century, managed to reshape itself and to build a unique structure - the European Union, which from the six members establishing the Community developed gradually to now encompass 28 members and is still in a process of enlargement. As Neil Fligstein pointed in the introduction of his book, *Euroclash. The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe*:

> An observer from 1945 who returned today to the border between Germany and France would be astounded. Instead of devastation, army outposts, and checkpoints, they would simply observe a lack of borders. Cars and trucks pass freely and frequently. Everywhere are signs of prosperity. Opening a newspaper, our observer from 1945 would even be more perplexed. The main Western European actors in that war, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy have given up military competition and instead taken up political and economic cooperation. As a result, the people who live in Western Europe enjoy high levels of income and a good quality of life.[5]

The new edifice was conceived so that it would make the possibility of a new devastating world war unthinkable, and hoping for a reconciled and peaceful Europe, with the foundations for a harmonious coexistence built on freedom, the rule of law, and social justice. Moreover, concepts such as unity, solidarity, and community remained central, and these architects were stressing the need for moral values and Christian ethos, a community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian basic values, as in Schuman's dream:

> Christianity teaches the natural equality of all men, who are children of the same God, redeemed by the same Christ, without distinction of race, colour, class or profession. It makes us recognise the dignity of work which it is the obligation of us all to accept. It recognises the primacy of the inner values which alone lend nobility to man. The universal law of love and charity makes all people our neighbours, since when all social relationships in the Christian world have been based on this law.[6]

However, 'history shows us that too often men act in ways contrary to all logic and reason', as Joseph Ratzinger was recalling in his essay *Europe: Today*

5   Neil Fligstein, Euroclash. The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 1.
6   Robert Schuman, Pour l'Europe, Editions Nagel, Paris 1963, pp. 57-58.

And Tomorrow: 'the fact that the politics of reconciliation (after World War II) triumphed is to the credit of a whole generation of politicians: let me recall the names of Adenauer, Schuman, De Gasperi, De Gaulle.'[7] Schuman's book *Pour l'Europe* stands for the way he envisioned the future of the European Union when strongly affirming that *democracy shall be Christian or not be at all*! , agreeing with Henri Bergson that 'democracy is essentially evangelical in that its source is love'[8], and relating democracy to Christianity:

> Democracy owes its existence to Christianity. It was born the day when man was brought to recognise the dignity of the human being in his temporal life, in individual freedom, in respect for each other's rights and by the practice of brotherly love towards all. Never before Christ had such ideas been expressed. Thus democracy is linked to Christianity, both in terms of doctrine and ideology. It took shape with it, gradually, after much trial and error, sometimes falling into serious mistakes and barbarism along the way.[9]

Moreover, 'in Europe in the late 1940s, Christian Democracy and Catholicism laid the foundations of the European integration movement. Europe was not merely a site for state bargains and profitable economic transactions. It was also the focus of a political movement seeking to implement a particular, religiously infused vision.'[10]

Today, however, there appears to be a contradictory approach, as J. Habermas was emphasizing in *Why Europe Needs a Constitution*. He righlty points that economic expectations alone *can hardly mobilise political support for the much riskier and more far-reaching project of a political union*. Habermas also observes that 'there is a remarkable contrast between the expectations and demands of those who pushed for European unification immediately after the Second World War, and those who contemplate the continuation of this project today at the very least, a striking difference in rhetoric and ostensible aim'[11]: 'While the first generation advocates of European integration did not hesitate to speak of the project they had in mind as a 'United States of Europe', evoking the example of the USA, current discussion has moved away from the model of a federal state, avoiding even the term 'federation'.'[12]

[7] J. Ratzinger, Europe: Today and Tomorrow. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007, p. 116.
[8] J. Ratzinger, Europe: Today and Tomorrow. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007, p.70.
[9] Ibidem, pp. 56-57.
[10] P.J. Katzenstein, 'Multiple modernities as limits to secular Europeanization?', in T. Byrnes and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), Religion in an Expanding Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 32.
[11] J. Habermas, 'Why Europe Needs a Constitution', in Rogowski R. and Turner, Ch. (eds), The Shape of the New Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 25.
[12] Ibidem.

Two moments are relevant to be mentioned in this context of the relationship between religion and integration: the announcement made in 2004 by the Vatican regarding the final stage of the 'beatification of Robert Schuman, the French politician, devout Catholic, first president of the European Parliament, and founding father of European political unity'[13], then only a few weeks later, the one in which 'German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder praised Pope John Paul II for consolidating and extending the process of European integration, bridging Europe's East and West, and contributing decisively to the peaceful unification of the continent'.[14]

The struggle over mentioning Christianity or God in the Preamble of the European Constitutional Treaty (2004), a draft limited to mentioning the spiritual and moral, cultural, religious, and humanistic heritage, has been regarded by many critics as a clear symptom of an *identity crisis*, a Europe facing a *Christophobic* wave, incapabale of affirming its roots and thus vulnerable. In this sense, Casanova agrees with Bronislaw Geremek's clear-cut argument that 'any genealogical reconstruction of the idea or social imaginary of Europe that makes reference to Greco-Roman antiquity and the Enlightenment while erasing any memory of the role of medieval Christendom in the very constitution of Europe as a civilization evinces either historical ignorance or repressive amnesia.'[15] A Europe facing a *crisis of civilizational morale* was the diagnosis formulated by George Weigel in *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America and the Politics Without God*.[16] Weigel claims that by *abandoning* its spiritual roots Europe is also raising question marks about democracy itself in all parts of the globe, and mentions that 'the amnesiacs who wish to rewrite European history by eliminating Christianity from the historical equation are doing so in service to a thin, indeed anorexic, idea of procedural democracy.'[17]

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[13] Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, 'Faith, freedom, and federation: the role of religious ideas and institutions in European political convergence', in T. Byrnes and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), Religion in an Expanding Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 51.

[14] Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, 'Faith, freedom, and federation: the role of religious ideas and institutions in European political convergence', in T. Byrnes and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), Religion in an Expanding Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[15] J. Casanova, 'Religion, European Secular Identities, and European Integration', in T. Byrnes and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), Religion in an Expanding Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 82.

[16] These arguments were previously elaborated in the articles: Merutiu, M., 'Christian Heritage of Europe and Democracy', published in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Interfaith Dialogue*, Vol. XXI, No. 1/2, USA (September 2009), pp. 51-65, and Merutiu, M., 'Religious Identity and Secularization in Europe', in Branislav Radeljic (ed.), *Debating European Identity*, Peter Lang: Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien, 2014, pp. 295-316.

[17] George Weigel, 'Europe's Problem- and Ours', *First Things* 140 (February2004): 18-25.

At his turn, M. Pera believes that secularism[18] *has devastating effects on Europe*:

> In the absence of any deep belief, strong faith, spiritual bond, what can we hang on to and how can we justify all those noble values-freedom, democracy, tolerance, respect, fraternity, solidarity etc. that are nonetheless professed by Europeans? If the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is dead and we want to live as though God did not exist, how can we believe in, and devote our destiny to, anything deserving commitment and sacrifice?[19]

The literature on Europe's secularism is vaste and diverse, from Peter Berger to Joseph Ratzinger, Marcello Pera, George Weigel, Jürgen Habermas, to succintly name a few whose diagnoses speak of the *exceptionalism* of Western Europe, seen as the secular exception in a progressively more religious world (Berger), of a Europe that often *voices an almost visceral denial of any possible public dimension for Christian values* (Ratzinger and Pera), of a *European problem* described as a divergence of European views on democracy, the world, and politics (Weigel), and stressing the need to *recognize our Judeo-Christian roots more clearly* and naming the Judeo-Christian tradition the *key foundation of Western civilization, relating the ideas of liberty and human rights to Christianity* (Habermas).

At the same time we notice how '*Secular*' and '*Christian*' *cultural identities are intertwined in complex and rarely verbalized modes among most Europeans* (Casanova), however the wave of secularism seems to be more profound in the name of modernity and Enlightenment, although the projection of a comp-letely *disenchanted* world, a time when religion would no longer be needed, replaced by either philosophy, anthropology, social progress, science, techni-que and the re-evaluation of all values (Küng, 1980), has proved to be simply utopia when an unexpected *renaissance* of religion manifested itself with the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. This religious resurgence and vitality raised question marks on the interactions with secularism and demands 'new terms of coexistence'.[20] In an age that experiences *pathologies*

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[18] Elaborating more on the differentiation between *secularism* and *secularity*, Pera indicates that 'the *secularity* of the state, which is a juridical regime, does not imply the *sec-ularism* of the society, which is an ideological phi-losophy. It is one thing to separate State and Church; it is quite a different thing to separate reli-gion from the lives of the people' ('Europe, America and the Continental Drift', *Heritage Lectures* 978 (November 30, 2006): pp. 1-7.)

[19] M. Pera, 'Europe, America and the Continental Drift', Heritage Lectures 978 (November 30, 2006): pp. 1-7.

[20] P.J. Katzenstein, 'Multiple modernities as limits to secular Europeanization?', in T. Byrnes and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), Religion in an Expanding Europe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 2.

of reason and *pathologies of faith* (Habermas and Ratzinger, 2004) the complementarity and *interdependence* between reason and religion inside a democratic, liberal state is needed, and therefore reason and religion should *learn from each other's arguments and reasons.*

Despite this unexpected resurgence of religion, Europe is still the 'exception', facing a continuous decrease in the number of traditional church members, parallel with the increased number of different sects, and the rise of Islam, a secular space, where any religious voices are banned from the public space. As Marcello Pera emphasized 'the separation between State and Church, sets limits to the legislation of them both, in the sense that one is forbidden to pass norms over the domain of the other, but it does *not* imply that religion must be expelled from social life, or that it should be considered only a private affair.'[21] Former President of the Italian Senate, Pera's analysis on secularism is that *it is no harmless philosophy,* and he analyzes what he identifies to be *three serious consequences.* The first consequence relates to the fact 'that it deprives Europe of its religious history, its identity and even its boundaries'[22], in other words 'it transforms Europe into a sort of container which can be filled with any ingredient whatsoever but with no real amalgamation'[23], and therefore 'in absence of an European identity no political unification is then possible, let alone an European Constitution.'[24] Pera relates the second consequence of European secularism to the difficulties faced regarding the integration of immigrants, which he sees as *one of the major challenges Europe is facing today*:

> Integration does not mean merely adding up or setting side by side or putting together different people. It means absorbing them within a common and shared framework, transforming them from a collective unity into a moral unity. But if secularism denies the main element for creating a common European framework, i.e. the Europeans' historical religion, then it hinders integration. It produces, at the most, a rainbow' society continually at risk of ethnic and religious conflicts.[25]

Finally, the third consequence of secularism in Pera's opinion 'deals with the favourite intellectual and political entertainment of European elites, that is, dialogue', in the sense that 'religious views cannot be the subject of dialogue', because *they are true by faith,* and thus 'no inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue in the technical sense can ever be possible'.[26]

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[21] Pera, op. cit.
[22] Ibidem.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibidem.
[25] Ibidem.
[26] Ibidem.

For Pera it is evident that Europe is the victim of a *moral and spiritual crisis of identity,* and relates this crisis to both the *economic weakness and the political failure of the European Union.*

The solution proposed *requires cultural answers,* and Pera sustains the thesis that 'the most powerful glue of society does not come from blood ties, material interests, common histories or narratives, shared economic and political goals, it comes from identity, in particular an identity of principles and values.'[27] Here we connect with the words of historian Ch. Dawson who in *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (1950) conceived religion as vital for the formation of Western culture and the historical basis of European unity,[28] strongly believing that a civilization which cannot find a place for its religion condemns itself to sterility and decadence. For Dawson, religion was the *key* of history and the *formations* and *transformations* of the European culture and civilization to only be understood from a religious perspective.

'In these difficult first years of the twenty-first century' that George Weigel believes 'have taught us the importance of reading world politics in new ways', and 'while there are many lenses through which history can be read, theological lenses help us to see deeper, farther, and more truly', we hold that Europe needs to rediscover the *binding forces* (Böckenforde) that have gradually eroded with the first waves of secularization, and to *formulate a vision on human life capable of motivating the citizens* (Habermas), to express and cherish its cultural dimension in order to avoid division and be able to offer genuine solutions to the crises it faces.

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[27] Pera, op. cit.

[28] This argument was previously elaborated in the article: Merutiu, M., 'Christian Heritage of Europe and Democracy', published in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Interfaith Dialogue*, Vol. XXI, No. 1/2, USA (September 2009), pp. 51-65.

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