

CHRISTIANITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

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Abstract: The article explores the way in which the formative relationship between Christianity and national identity is questioned if not rejected in contemporary Europe. As the secularisation of this continent reaches a new phase in its western side, one by one nations seem to depart irreversibly from the Christian heritage. This paper argues that although secular, contemporary Europe ought not to be irreligious. The challenges for the societies today can be addressed efficiently by making use of the values of the Christian faith; moreover, separating national identity from Christianity could lead to a disturbing crisis of an already troubled continent.

Keywords: national identity, Christianity, secularization, contemporary Europe, Protestantism.

Although close to its 60th anniversary, European Union is not as integrated as some may have wished at the beginning or throughout the expansion of this challenging project. More than that, in a couple of months, the citizens of Great Britain will vote in order to decide whether their country will remain in the EU. A more thorough and stable integration will take a much longer time – one of the main reasons is the very deep sense of identity of the nations of the old continent. As the turbulent history of this part of the world shows, one might expect that factor which could play an integrative, uniting role is Christianity but that is not case any longer. Not only in what regards the whole continent, but the relationship between Christianity and national identity has been going through some significant changes.

This paper aims at exploring the way this formative relationship has lost its importance, being replaced by a wholly secular identity by most European countries mainly in the western part but gradually in the eastern too. We will look at how the relationship between Christianity and

national identity has developed from its start to its climax, then at its fall and in conclusion to consider ways Christianity could reconnect to the nations of the old continent.

The rise of the European nations and Christianity

The relationship between Christianity and European nations has a history which is determinative in understanding this complex issue. The starting point should probably be the fourth century when, at its beginning, Constantine ceased persecution against Christians, allowing them to freely worship and then he himself joining them, while towards the end of the century, under Theodosius, Christianity gained the status of the official religion of the Roman Empire. There is a growing awareness at least among historians (though that is the case with theologians too) that Constantine grasped the role that a religion such as Christianity could have to give the Empire a transcendent dimension, unity and purpose – apart from the second aspect, he was right. H.R. Patapievici makes a fine point when he develops the idea that the great seven ecumenical councils which took place between 325 and 787 shaped the ‘new mind’, the Christian one, which was replacing the ‘old one’, the Greek’s; so Greek philosophy made room to the Christian mind, which will produce the whole progress of the European world in the second millennium AD, culminating with the just state, rule of law and human rights. This leads Patapievici to make a bold assertion: ‘Europe is a gift of Christianity.’ (Patapievici, 2009)

Historically, this daring statement is not without support: the christianization of the Empire was well underway by the time of the fall of the Western part in 476; three centuries later, only thirteen years after the last great ecumenical council, Niceea II, in 800, Charlemagne, also called *Pater Europae*, becomes Holy Roman Emperor uniting the territories that had belonged to the Western Roman Empire. Some other nearly three centuries later, Pope Gregory VII imposes the authority of the church on the empire – it is not only in the East, where the Empire will fall as late as 1453, but also in the West that Christianity is the main and often time the sole religious authority. It is true that the ‘symphonia’ between the empire and the church in the Byzantine side was generally played on separate ‘tunes’, but in the West, the emperor and the pope often fighting to gain priority over the other; despite of these differences, Christendom was well in place throughout the Middle Ages, conferring Christianity an uniting and formative role in

affirming the etnies and shaping the nations within its territories. The strength of Christianity in Europe derived also from its uniqueness in what regards the commonness of the parts of the Empire and later the first nations on the continent: Christianity was only real bond between groups or nations that were separated by ethnicity, language and culture.

Modernity poses challenges that the church does not handle well; the disintegration of the Roman Empire, the social and cultural changes, the protestant movements create an environment in which nations start to be formed; the larger ones (France, England, Spain and later Russia) carry on the Christendom dream, perceiving themselves invested with the holy mission of protecting and promoting the ideal Christian state.

So despite the crumbling of the Christendom, Christianity remained the driving force in the new nation: 'Religion became a 'national' business conducted beneath the authority of the state.' (Coupland, 369)

In a sense Christendom was not disintegrated but broken into pieces that still wanted to affirm the common ground in their religion. By its principle *cuius regio, eius religio* Protestantism linked religion to territory, therefore to a state, implicitly to a nation; acknowledging the state, along family and church as the three God-ordained institutions, Protestantism affirmed in a very positive way the possibility, even the necessity, for the two concepts at stake to work together.

It is not surprising that Troeltsch insisted that the modern national identity of Germany was shaped by Lutheranism. For him, modern democracy is the outcome of the combination of the conservative democracy 'produced' by the Calvinist natural law and the rationalism of the Enlightenment. (Burant, 89)

In a way, it could be said that nationality was nurtured by Christianity as a new phase of the development of humanity in its strenuous journey to the Kingdom of God. Llywelyn is right when asserting the origin of the idea of nationality in the Christian thinking: 'Whether we consider them as substitutes for Christianity, as successors to it, as being in rivalry with the Church or in cahoots with it, modern concepts of nationality...originated in Christian contexts.' (Llywelyn, 76)

If the national identity of virtually of all European countries (most of which have been really

created starting early nineteenth century) is closely linked to Christianity, why isn't this aspect openly acknowledged but instead denied? A look at the contemporary situation in Europe will offer some explanations.

The Old continent with a new look

In 2007, in her first speech as President-in-office of the European Council, Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed the exhortation of Jacques Delors to 'give Europe a soul' by assuring the European Union citizens who were celebrating the 50th anniversary that Europe does indeed have a soul which is linked to its 'tremendous diversity', its freedom and its tolerance; stating her perspective from a Christian point of view, she emphasizes that acceptance between Christianity, Islam and Judaism "has always been and remains the great aim of European integration." (Merkel, 2007)

However, the religious integration which Merkel indicated as a preoccupation of the power players of the Union seems to be implemented from standpoint which many feel that denies the historical roots of the peoples of the old continent. At the end of the same year, the Treaty of Lisbon was signed by all EU member states though the party which opposed mentioning God or the Christian heritage of Europe won the battle with the countries which wanted that.

This indicates some fundamental changes that have taken place in the world of ideas, ethics and religion in Europe. What seems to have happened is that Christianity has lost its influence, its central place in the life of individuals and nations of the old continent, to the point that even a historical reference to it was vehemently opposed. How has Europe got to this point? Coupland reminds us that, in Catholic thinking, displacement of Christianity was the effect of the fragmentation of the church caused by the appearance of Protestantism corroborated with the surge of secular belief systems such as humanism and materialism. (Coupland, 373) While this thesis points to some of the factors, it is an unfair oversimplification to blame mainly the protestant movement.

Factors that led to the estrangement of Christianity from the European nations

The concept of the established state church, the essence of Christendom was one of the factors that contributed to the separation between religion and personal and ethnic or national identity.

In most European nations (of which Britain and Netherlands were notable exceptions) there was no actual possibility for a person to practice faith other than the one of the established church. To make a difference in that matter, one should have relocate to a territory where the preferable faith was promoted. The implication was that individuals opted to cease the relationship with the church of the land although they often held Christian convictions. (Kurth, 124)

Another factor was the development of protestant ideas into the concept of secularization. Protestantism did not take part in the break of the relationship between Christianity and nationality by separating itself from the other traditional churches. It was rather a reforming movement which the traditional churches resisted to accept, especially on the eve of the fundamental social, cultural and political changes of modernity. We could rather speak of a failure of magisterial protestant movements to implement the long waited and much needed reforms of the life of the church. The total separation between church and state was the contribution of reforming groups such as anabaptists and Baptists, who sought to take the protestant ideas to their logical outcome.

So the impact was not in the actual break-up, but in the ideas which Protestantism proposed: individualism and liberalism in the spiritual dimension and an uncritical acceptance of some of the ideas Enlightenment led to the understanding that secularization is ultimately the implication of the biblical story. In his classical book, *The Secular City*, Harvey Cox asserts, following theologians like Friedrich Gogarten, that secularization is determined by the Christian thinking: ‘Secularization arises in large measure from the formative influence of biblical faith on the world, an influence mediated first by the Cristian church and later by movements deriving partly from it.’ (Cox, 35)

This idea of secularization as a total separation of the spiritual from the temporal realm is rooted in the concept of the ‘citizenship in heaven’ of the followers of Christ – this idea which apostle Paul refers to in Filipians 3:20 is taken on in the writings of the apostolic fathers, namely Epistle of Diognetus and then becoming a classical way to express the allegiance of the Christian to the heavenly kingdom.

A third factor of the disconnection between Christianity and national identity in the countries of Europe is the wars that ravaged the continent – a pair of Thirty Years Wars: one (1618-1648) in

respect of Christianity, at least in the initial stage when it was a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, and the other one (1914-1945 – this one is called ‘the Second Thirty Years War’ by Kurth) irrespective of religion – it was an expression of the cynism of nations which had been sharing the dream as well as the divine mandate to spread Christianity on the whole earth. These wars triggered a chain of reactions against church and Christianity, as it became obvious that the latter did not offer any solution to the issues of a troubled continent.

Connected to these two latter factor is the last one that will be mentioned – the revolution of what in America was called ‘baby boomers’, the generation born after the second world, who grew up in a moral vacuum, as the source of personal and collective ethics, Christianity, seemed to have failed the test. Relativism and the demolition of any form of authority provided the fitting environment for a philosophy of leisure, entertainment, actually pure hedonism, with little concern for commitment to institutionalized religion.

If these were the factors which led to the separation of the two aspects discussed so far, what has been the outcome – how does Europe look like in terms of the relationship between Christianity and national identities in present times?

Christianity and Europe today

After the Second World War, the Western Europe has gone through a process of dechristianization – religious principles and practices have been rejected to make room to a non-religious worldview and way of life. This is not to say that spirituality has been denied as an essential part of the human existence, but that it was defined almost exclusively in non-Christian terms; also, it has become increasingly appropriate to speak of ‘believing but not belonging’ to the institutionalized forms of Christian community.

In what regards figures, the church attendance points to a significant crisis: in the traditionally Protestant-majority countries, the percentages hit record low levels: 15 percent in Britain, 12 percent in Germany, and below 5 percent in Scandinavia, while in the European Catholic majority countries the situation is mixt: while in Poland, Ireland, Slovakia church attendace is still high, in France it is only 12 percent and in Spain it is 18 percent. (Jenkins, 2009) More than that, when asked to name theier values, only 6% of the Europeans picked religion, compared to

human rights 47% - the first. (Standard Eurobarometer 74, 2011) As of the values which best represent the European Union, religion gets an the 12th place, with 3%, after self-fulfillment (4%), out of the fourteen places. These figures signal a dying tradition which needs a genuine revival in order to survive.

Another aspect of the contemporary Europe is that it has lost the initial ethos: as Ratzinger rightly observed, Europe now is more oriented towards economics than on ethics or religious aspects. He argues that the founding fathers of European Union saw a convergence of the moral legacy of Christianity and the moral legacy of the European enlightenment. Ratzinger makes a fine point saying that we are going through a second enlightenment, which promotes an irrational origin of the world without prescribed values and norms. (Ratzinger, 520-2) This approach leads to an irrationality which characterizes all aspects of thinking and life of the contemporary societies and which is exactly the opposite to the rationality which was the essence of the European culture.

In this new European context, the Christian feels alienated – he does not belong to a society which rejects anything that bears the label ‘Christian’. It seems that Europe is not contempt to deny its Christian heritage but it also actively fights against it. An evidence of that is the case of Rocco Buttiglione, the Italian cabinet minister and a papal confidant who eventually withdrew his candidacy for a post as Justice Commissioner because he voiced convictions what were negative to a sexual minority. Analyzing this case, the Romanian philosopher H.R.Patapievici asserts that, in contemporary Europe, it is a disadvantage to be a professing Christian. (Patapievici, 2009)

Reconnecting Christianity to the nations of contemporary and future Europe

The rejection of Christian heritage by current european nations will work against themselves – not coming to terms with oneself’s origin and history generates an existential crisis. The threat of disappearance of Europe at least as we know it is there: ‘The supremacy of the secular identity has been for only a short moment in the long history of Europe, but if it continues, its effect will be to abolish Europe’s future and therefore to bring its long history to an early end.’ (Kurth, 2007) Kurth is right when asserting that the period of time of a dominant secular approach needs

not be too long before fundamental changes take place in the very identity of the peoples of Europe.

What could Christianity do in order to reconnect itself to the nations of the old continent?

It is now obvious that waiting for Europe to reconsider its position towards Christianity can be useless; Pope John Paul II vigorously addressed this issue during the process of the making of the European Constitution, but with no effect; in favor of mentioning the word God in the European Constitution, the pope stated “It is indispensable that the Europe of today safeguard its patrimony

of values, and recognize that it was above all the force of Christianity that was capable of promoting, conciliating and consolidating them. (Pope John Paul II, 2003)

Another option for Europe is to wait for a more favorable context for itself to be acknowledged as source of meaning and of strength; ‘Recent studies confirm that beliefs about the role of religion in public life often fluctuate in response to historic events.’ (Straughn and Feld, 2010)

During ‘unsettled times’, Christianity could regain some of the force that it once had in terms of influence, but this would be only circumstantial – as soon as the crisis disappeared, religion is pushed aside. However, in what regards contemporary situation, the crisis is sparked by the growing presence of Muslims in Europe. The reconnection might be temporary and driven only by solving the crisis.

So what could Christianity do for a reconnection to the nations of Europe for a genuine and efficient result?

European Christian churches have an imperative to give individual conversion a central place; in a sense, the model proposed by the movements that followed protestant reformation is relevant and effective: the strength of the church flows out of the personal relationship between church member and Christ. Nominal Christians will severely decrease in numbers and this will end the ‘cultural-christianity.’ Connected to this aspect is the surge of the charismatic movement, as this offers answers to the needs of contemporary man: miracles, healing, vision. Jenkins considers this as a ‘possible bridge’ in the relationship between what he calls ‘the new Christians’ and the European nations. (Jenkins, 96)

Another thing that Christian faith could contribute with is continuing to promote the values these countries have had and which are profoundly Christian; Van De Poll reminds us that most values that the European nations affirm have Christian origin: freedom of speech and of religion, equal worth among citizens, pursuit of happiness, tolerance, supremacy of life, solidarity with the poor, personal dignity etc. These values are claimed as the outcome of more recent secular development: 'They (the values) have become part and parcel of our culture, so we take them for granted...But many people forget that they have been forged over a long period of time, in Christianised Europe.' (Van De Poll, 226) This does not mean that Christianity should have a primitive approach, in the sense of being oriented towards the beginnings, but by raising voices that could speak up for the biblical stand.

Because of the formative relationship between the Christianity and the European nations, it is essential that the former finds ways to address the challenges of more recent times. In order to do that, Christianity needs to reinvent itself: listening to the voices around it, Christianity realizes that the world has gone through some fundamental changes, which require a more sophisticated approach. This creates an opportunity for the church to reconnect to the nations by a grass-roots movement of promoting genuine conversion and to advocate for the values produced by the Christian cultural and spiritual system. Should Christianity fail in this enterprise, the crisis that Europe will go through will be profound and it will trigger a total reshaping of the continent.

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