From Belgium

CHRISTIANITY'S CONTRIBUTION TO JUSTICE IN EUROPE

by Louis Dupré

What is Europe? What holds its many peoples together? Where lies their destiny? A committee headed by former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing has prepared a new European Union (EU) constitution designed to integrate the continent's social and political institutions. The committee's attempts to preface its legal prose with a fitting introduction have triggered an unprecedented controversy over the spiritual sources and identity of Europe. What sparked this dispute was the absence of any mention of the historic role Christianity played in educating and spiritually unifying the array of tribes and nations that invaded the continent between the third and the sixth centuries.

The proposed preamble to the constitution barely alludes to religion. From the Greeks and Romans the text's foreshortened history moves directly to the Enlightenment. The proposed preface remains mute about the longest period in the making of Europe; suggesting only that its present inhabitants may draw inspiration from their 'cultural, religious, and humanist patrimony'. Some delegates contested even this modest concession to an essential part of Europe's past, and preferred to replace the words 'religious patrimony' with 'spiritual élan'. In an address last spring in the historic St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, Pope John Paul II reminded the forgetful committee that Christianity, not some vague 'spiritual élan', has left its mark on the rich life and culture of Europe for almost two millennia. He added: 'The Christian roots of Europe are the main guarantee of its future'.

There's the rub. In neglecting Europe's Christian past, the committee was trying to shape its future. Such radical secularism is fundamentally at variance with the attitude of the great statesmen who, after World War II, dreamed of a social, economic, and political union: Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi, and the French Prime Minister Robert Schuman. All were professing Catholics. (Schuman is being considered for canonization, and I have seen people praying at de Gasperi's tomb in Rome!) Unsurprisingly,

the committee's anti- Christian bias did not remain unchallenged. Several member states, led by Spain and Poland, in addition to religious parties across the continent, protested against this attempt to rewrite history. Many prominent agnostics have joined the protests.

Who, then, is at the heart of this secularist drive? Mainly delegates of two countries: France and Belgium. The French tradition of *laicité* dates from the eighteenth century and was sealed in the revolutions of 1789 and 1848. It has been kept alive by the virulently anti-Christian 'Grand Orient' lodge of the French Freemasonry, to which a number of ministers in the current governments of France and Belgium belong. President Jacques Chirac's ban on headscarves, conspicuous crosses, and other religious symbols in public schools is symptomatic of this attitude.

On what ground can we speak of a European identity, and what entitles us to call it spiritual? Europe's identity has never been primarily geographical: its boundaries remain vague in antiquity, and even today they appear not quite settled. As late as 1958, Russian geographers extended Europe's eastern border to include the Ural Mountains, but Europe has always been more than a physical region. Ever since the Greeks, its name has referred to an ideal entity. That name first appears in the myth of Zeus who, disguised as a bull, abducted Europa, the daughter of the king of Tyre (or according to Hesiod, one of the daughters of Oceanus), and spirited her across the Mediterranean to his birthplace in Crete. The story elegantly symbolizes the migration of Near Eastern civilization to Greece. Greek and Roman poetic versions of this early myth endowed Europa with attributes characteristic of the Greek mind: scientific curiosity combined with aesthetic sensitivity, which together account for European culture's commitment to philosophical and scientific inquiry and also for its artistic and poetic creativity. Rome, which in less than four centuries progressed from a village to being the centre of an empire, possessed none of Greece's intellectual and aesthetic genius, but was anxious to absorb a culture that she recognized to be far superior to her own. Roman armies exported the Greek heritage over the Italian peninsula and across the Alps, thus converting Hellenic ideals into universal principles of Western culture.

But Rome's armies also spread another ideal: Christian faith. Inspired by its Hebrew mother religion, Christianity added a spiritual dimension to the young culture and fundamentally transformed its moral values. With the decline of the Roman Empire came the demise of the political unity it had

brought too much to Europe. Although Christianity had begun to shape the minds of the 'barbarian' invaders who defeated Rome, the collapse of the empire left few political structures to support this new spiritual bond. No common law or authority held the shifting tribes together. Ironically, it was the invasion of Europe by Islam in the eighth century that made the new occupants of the former Roman territories aware of their common spiritual identity. As much as Europe owes its cultural foundations to Hellas and its moral vocabulary to Christianity, it quite literally owes its political unity to Islam. With some qualifications we may still assert what Denis de Rougemont wrote in '*The Idea of Europe (1966):*

> *From the moment of its birth, Europe has fulfilled a function not only universal but in fact universalizing. It has furthered the one-world concept, first by exploring the world, and then by supplying the intellectual, technical, and political means for achieving the eventual unity of the human race.*

What the writer does not mention is that Europe itself was hopelessly divided during most of its history. Moreover, by the time of de Rougemont's writing, European civilization's technical superiority had long moved to another continent. Still it remains true that the Greeks, the Romans, the Christian apostles, and indirectly the invading Muslims – each in a different way – gradually induced a sense of European unity that surpassed the ancient tribal loyalties.

With the emergence of the nation-state in the fifteenth century, that still-fragile unity began to come apart. The exclusiveness with which the nation-states asserted their sovereignty led to brutal wars fought for political and economic supremacy. In the sixteenth century the conflict between Reformation Protestantism and Counter – Reformation Catholicism led to even more terrible and bloody conflicts. Europeans eventually realized they needed to agree on some principles of political coexistence and religious tolerance if they were to survive at all. Enlightenment thinkers attempted to provide those principles. They streamlined political institutions, subordinated all statutory law to a common natural law, and argued that confessional differences mattered less than a common Christian or philosophical faith. Voltaire optimistically described Europe as 'a kind of great republic, embracing several states… but all in relationship with one another, all having one and the same religious basis, the same principles of public law, the same political ideas, all of them unknown in other parts of the world'

(Le siecle de Louis XIV). Edmund Burke, for once in agreement with the spokesman of the French Enlightenment he fundamentally detested, also referred to the continent as 'virtually one great state, having the same basis of general law and the same Christian religion'. Unfortunately, those descriptions in no way corresponded to the existing reality.

The young German romantic Friederich Novalis likewise saw European unity as essentially spiritual, yet, in contrast to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, he felt that it had been shattered by the division among Christians and, even more, by the rationalism of the eighteenth century. Still, in his famous tract, *Europe or Christendom (1789)*, Novalis expressed hope for a return of spiritual unity. This hope proved futile. Even during his lifetime the armies of the French Revolution were spreading secularizing ideology across Europe. Napoleon, more realistically, attempted a military unification. But Napoleon's defeat soon brought the centrifugal forces of nationalism back in full force. Still, Novalis had been right in part. Even though Enlightenment thinkers opposed divisive nationalism, most of them were instinctively hostile to the traditional notion of a European unity built on a Christian basis. They proposed to unify Europe on the basis of the abstract idea of a common humanity. In doing so, they disregarded existing traditions, customary rights, and divisive cultural identities. Few European nations were prepared to accept such a radical overthrow of the past. After Napoleon, the ideologies of undifferentiated unity and divisive nationalism once again confronted each other. Their hostile standoff ended in the cataclysmic collision between the Nazi or Fascist movements and communism of the twentieth century.

Where does Europe, chastened by these lacerations, stand now? Since World War II it has grown weary of the grand ideologies of the past, and has set itself to the modest tasks of preserving peace among its states, building an integrated economy, and promoting cultural exchanges. The ideas that supported the earlier union of European states – Greek culture, Roman law, Christian faith, and Enlightenment universalism – have, as yet, not played a primary role in the political and economic construction of a new Europe. None of the past models seems suitable for the future. At present, any attempt to impose the model that had lasted longest and had most effectively contributed to the unification of Europe, namely, that of a Christian commonwealth grounded in a common faith and shared educational ideals, would only cause division. Although the majority of Europeans, in contrast

to the writers of the new EU constitution, do fully recognize their debt to the Christian tradition, many no longer consider themselves believers. Moreover, those who regret the disappearance of the commonwealth ought to face the fact that the medieval *res publica Christiana* had never been hospitable to outsiders, such as Jews and Muslims, who now constitute a sizable segment of Europe's population.

> *Europe's political and economic unification must be accompanied by a strong awareness of a distinctive cultural and spiritual identity. This is the reason why the dispute over Europe's Christian heritage is so important. In writing the preamble to the EU constitution, the most significant element in the European tradition must not be erased.*

The foundation of the new Europe needs a more inclusive base. Yet if Europe's spiritual identity is to be preserved, it must remain firmly attached to the principal values of its tradition. What are they? The Czech philosopher Jan Patocka, in a memorable essay titled 'Europe and the European Heritage', presented a spiritual model at once comprehensive and specific. He described the characteristic quality of Europe throughout the ages as *le souci de l'âme* (the care of the soul), which in his interpretation, consisted primarily of a high respect for the inner life. In cultivating the life of the mind, Plato and Aristotle claimed we share the life of the gods. Christians also considered themselves called to a godlike *theoria* or contemplation.

The Church Fathers of Alexandria identified their faith with a higher king of *gnosis* that surpassed the wisdom of the Greeks. In so doing, they followed the lead of the influential Jewish thinker, Philo, who in the same city had compared the Mosaic Law to that kind of wisdom. For Christians, to acquire divine *insight* through faith was not a privilege reserved to a few, but a gift open to all believers. That desire inspired the founding of the numerous monasteries and universities that preserved Europe's spiritual heritage during good and bad times. Even the ideal of the Enlightenment – *sapere aude* (dare to think) – though often used as a war cry against the preceding Christian ages, remains anchored in Greek, Jewish, and Christian thought. Thus a continuous spiritual thread links the successive sources of Europe's unity.

Still, on one crucial issue the tradition underwent a basic modification in the early modern age. The term *theoria*, whether understood as contemplation or as pursuit of learning, always had, despite the efforts

involved, a passive connotation. Knowledge was regarded as the self-disclosure of the *real*. For the great philosophers of the seventeenth century, though, the acquisition of knowledge occurred in an *act*, whereby the mind itself framed the *object* of thought within rules set up by the human mind. In other words, an object now came to be conceived as constituted more by the mind than received from a reality outside the mind. This shift towards a new method of knowing opened the way to the remarkable achievements of modern science. Eventually it came to be adopted for investigating the life of the mind itself, as if that were part of the objective universe. Here lies the beginning of rationalism as an ideology. o one understood the social and spiritual implications of this intellectual transformation more acutely than Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenological philosophy. In a famous address delivered at the University of Prague in 1935, on the eve of the darkest period in modern Europe's history, the Jewish thinker claimed: 'I am quite sure that the European crisis has its roots in a mistaken rationalism'. The objectivist conception of reason reduces the world and its inhabitants to mere 'objects' and reason to an instrument for manipulating them. This critique by no means implied 'that rationality as such is an evil or that in the totality of human existence it is of minor importance'. The original concept of reason, discovered by the Greeks and maintained for almost two millennia, Husserl qualified, 'set Europe upon its spiritual destiny: it controlled its intellectual development, directing it toward an ideal image of life and being'. Modern rationalism, however, had deformed this original concept of reason.

We may think that Husserl's critique no longer applies to our intellectual condition. Post-modern theories have rejected the primacy of reason, which had ruled Western thought since the Greeks. Precisely the belief in that primacy, together with a common faith, had been one of the spiritual foundations of Europe. Husserl would have considered this post-modern devaluation of reason a more serious departure from the tradition than the rationalism he was criticizing.

It it still possible to revive the ideals behind Europe's spiritual identity? If this requires returning to a common faith and to a premodern concept of reason, obviously not. Science demands a more differentiated notion of reason than the one inherent in ancient and medieval thought. As for the common Christian faith that forged such a strong bond among Europe's peoples, many Europeans have lost it and most recent immigrants never had it. Does that mean Europe

must be satisfied with a merely political, technical, scientific and economic integration? Such a spiritually 'neutral' union might appear to avoid the conflicts of the past. Furthermore, many Europeans today think that social and cultural differences obstruct or slow down the process of economic growth and social progress. Why, then, don't all Europeans adopt English as the common language for science, business, and technology, leaving French, German, Dutch and Scandinavian to private life?

If the European Union were reduced to a means for smoothing out political and economic transactions among its member states, not only would the states more and more lose their identity, they would also be doomed to play a very subordinate role on the world stage in the future. Even today, only half a century after the United States has economically and politically come to dominate the world, its powerful media and commercial enterprises have deeply affected the languages, the communications, and the cultural patterns of Europe. The effect is most visible in the smaller nations. Thus in the Low Countries the language of the news media has become infected with American idioms, bookstores are filled with American publications or translation thereof, television and cinema compete for the most recent American shows or films – all this at the expense of linguistic purity and respect for indigenous literature. The result is a general decline of native creativity.

Whoever controls the economy of another country is likely to control its culture as well. Building a strong economy of one's own, as Europe is doing at present, is a necessary step to resisting such domination. But that alone is not sufficient. If the European Union were to be reduced to an economic union, its levelling effect on European culture would in the end be comparable to the one the United States has begun to exercise. Europe's political and economic unification must be accompanied by a strong awareness of a distinctive cultural and spiritual identity. This is the reason why the dispute over Europe's Christian heritage is so important. In writing the preamble to the EU constitution, the most significant element in the European tradition must not be erased.

The American techno-economic model of a political union is not suitable for Europe. Being a new country, with immigrants from various traditions, the United States had no choice but to build on a spiritually and culturally neutral foundation. This base enabled the United States to integrate the economy and the social institution of its states into a strong and coherent

unity that made the most powerful nation in history. Such unity is accomplished by a social and cultural uniformity undesirable in Europe. American cities and towns, with the exception of those in its oldest inhabited regions, grew with a similar pattern, usually aimed at maximum efficiency in production and exchange. Their products look remarkably similar, and so do the tastes of their consumers. Most of the immigrants during the past two centuries were fleeing the failures of their own societies and had little desire to see them revived in their adoptive country. But the U.S. model is wholly inappropriate for Europe. Contemporary Europeans have preserved their diverse languages, customs, and histories. Today Europe needs a strong spiritual reintegration as well as a politicaleconomic one. The former requires that it assimilate essential parts of its spiritual heritage: the Greek sense of order and measure, the Roman respect for law, the biblical and Christian care for the other person, the *humanitas* of Renaissance humanism, the ideals of political equality and individual rights of the Enlightenment. The values left by each of these episodes of Western culture are not as transient as the cultures in which they matured. They belong permanently to Europe's spiritual patrimony and ought to remain constitutive of its unity. None can be imposed. Yet none may be neglected, the theoretical no more than the practical, the spiritual no less than the aesthetic.

In recent times Europeans, discouraged by the self-made disasters of two world wars, have been too easily inclined to turn their backs on the past, to dismiss it as no longer usable, and to move toward a different future. In the years after World War II, the model of that future was America. In recent years, Europeans have become more conscious of their specific identity. That identity stems from a unique past, created by the hundreds of millions of men and women who for almost two millennia have lived on 'that little cape on the continent of Asia' (Paul Valéry) between the North Sea and the Mediterranean, between Ireland's west coast and the Ural Mountains. It has given Europeans, in all their variety, a distinct communal face. The new awareness of this identity makes Europeans view the *entire* continent and its many islands, not only their country of origin, as a common homeland. The European emigrant misses the variety of this culture, which, he feels, constitutes his very essence. Bach and Mozart,Virgil and Dante, Balzac and Dostoyevsky,Van Eyck and Rembrandt, Michelangelo and Moore, but also Plato and Aristotle, Benedict and Francis, Galileo and Einstein, all display different facets of

a single cultural body. Europeans consider them all as their own, regardless of their place of origin and regardless of their worldview. This unity of spirit in a variety of expressions must be remembered in forging the new European unity and ought to be mentioned in the EU's constitution.

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