

Finally, from the part of other religions they too are rejected as followers of false belief systems, and there is a lack of willingness to see in them the vitality and present worth of their religion.

There is a strong need to re-evaluate and to rethink our whole Christian understanding of conversion (*metanoia*) in this respect. In the contemporary world, instead of being first of all a vertical movement towards God and a genuine renewal of life, conversion has falsely started to be understood as a horizontal movement of individuals or groups of people from one community to another.



In spite of this, a genuine role of religion is to draw attention to the transcendent centre, the ultimate mystery, the Truth of the truths, which is the source of all values and also the criterion to judge all human efforts.

We have to search for ways of liberation from “I”-consciousness, and for an interiorized relationship with the Transcendent Reality. Therefore, it would be important to emphasize conversion as the movement from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness—or, more precisely, to God-centeredness.

Eva VALVO

European Identity and Interreligious Dialogue

At a time when European or national identities are being questioned and challenged by the growing or lasting presence of migrants, religion is more and more often mentioned as a key element in this context.

In the first part of my article I will define some general concepts regarding identity and the perception of the “Other” in Europe, while in the second part I will specifically focus on the religious implications of the debate about European identity.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY?

Definitions of our identity may be related to different aspects of our lives, eg. occupation or role, political or religious belief, national or local background, belonging to a minority or a majority group, gender and sexuality, language, education, or even what we are not.

The list could be much longer, but even then it would never be complete. One’s identity is not only defined by one’s own perception, but also by others’ perception. Identity is many-sided and complex.

Some would put it: we have several levels of identity, like onions where each layer contains another one. But I would rather put it this way: identity is made of overlapping circles, where different or even contradictory elements can cohabit.

The conception of individual identity can also be applied to collective identity, such as the European one. If a single person cannot be defined by just one label, still less can be the continent of Europe, where several peoples, cultures, languages and religions live together.

In fact, some scholars talk of a multiple identity of Europe, but this concept should be a starting point rather than the end of the analysis. The concept of multiple iden-

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ty would imply tolerance and potential richness only in a perfect world.

Since we are not living in such an ideal place, though, we have to keep in mind that cultural differences are never neutral, but are subject to power relationships and often result in prejudice and fear, discrimination and oppression.

Throughout the history of the building of a united Europe — starting from the institution of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, up through the Enlargement by ten new countries in 2004 — uncertainty about a specific European identity has increased.

What is Europe? What does being European mean? It is difficult to define Europe on both the historical and geographical levels, especially regarding its Eastern borders. A part of Europe has become a single political entity only in recent times, but the concept of Europe is much older.

It can be tracked down to the conquest of America, when European powers started to “discover” and conquer extra-European peoples, thus becoming a political and cultural entity, not only a geographical one.

During the XVIIIth century the *Enlightenment* movement linked the idea of Europe with the concepts of liberty, progress and rights. In the same period, though, our continent exploited other countries through slave trade and colonialism. It is important to keep in mind this kind of contradictions while discussing European identity.

Europe defined itself as the centre of the world, as the only promoter of progress and civilisation, thus defining other cultures as primitive and inferior or fallen. Another contradiction is that the values promoted were claimed to be at the same time both universal and specifically European.

HEGEMONY AND DISENFRANCHISEMENT

The fact that we live in a post-colonial era has still a strong impact on identity issues, as far as both colonised and colonising peoples are concerned. Colonisation was based not only on military and economic power, but also on a strong cultural structure that aimed at legitimising and developing the Eurocentric system of exploitation.

The concept of post-colonialism involves the end of colonialism on one side and the durability of colonialist culture on the other. The identities of the oppressors and the oppressed cannot remain uncontaminated and independent from each other.

Some scholars even speak of “new ethnicities” that come along with the traditional ones and that correspond to new conflicts. The Eurocentric view has started to decline and to transform itself into a Western-centric vision, where the specifically European element has become almost insignificant.

This is due to the end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet regime, the economic globalisation centring on the United States of America (USA), and finally the cultural revolution of the new communication technologies.

Acknowledging the perspective of non-hegemonic groups, i.e. considering a perception unfamiliar to the dominant culture, is crucial in order to build a culture of dialogue, since it shows very clearly that one’s view is always limited and that any understanding of reality is observer-dependent.

The Eurocentric perspective not only involves neglecting the so-called “Other” coming from outside, but also an internal “Other”: we might just as well think of disadvantaged areas within Europe such as Northern Ireland, East Germany, the former Yugoslavia or Southern Italy.

Among the external Others, one can mention migrants, formerly colonised people, and black Europeans, while internal Others might be women, European migrants (especially second-generation migrants), Roma and Jews.

The case for European Muslims is more complex, since they can be considered both as external and internal Others, if we take into account both Muslim-majority European regions like Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania; and Muslim migrants of the first and second generations in Christian-majority European countries.

EUROPEAN RELIGIONS: HISTORICAL TENSIONS ...

Focusing particularly on a religious perspective, one can say that — alongside a prevailing understanding of Europe as Christian and white — both Judaism and Islam have long served as Europe’s Others, and (despite their countless contributions to European culture) they are still often perceived as symbols of a different, non-European culture.

In this article I will limit my analysis to Abrahamic religions, while stressing that religious diversity in Europe is also represented by many other minority religions or visions, which can be outshined by a Christian-centric representation of Europe.

A positive approach to European identity should be based on inclusion and respect for diversity. A culture of healing and reconciliation should be achieved through the memory of our past, entailing not only memorial days and monuments, but also a careful reflection upon history.

To give just one example, Jews represent a crucial part of our collective memory. Someone says that concentration camps are in opposition with the “European spirit”,

but it would be more constructive and responsible to accept that European history cannot be divided from its inner contradictions.

At least since the times of the French Revolution, Europe has experienced a shocking intertwining of emancipation and terror. Therefore, we cannot get rid of the European totalitarianisms or the Shoah (the Hebrew word for “catastrophe”, referring to the Holocaust, an expression introduced by Elie WIESEL but less common among Jews) by simply considering them horrific deviations from a truly European tradition.

German Protestant theologian Rolf RENDTORFF says that Jewish-Christian dialogue is only possible if we keep a living memory of the Shoah: as Christians, our prayer of confession shall be a starting point for a radical transformation of ourselves and a deep reflection on our self-understanding and our identity.

RENTORFF’S analysis of Jewish-Christian dialogue can be applied to a broader level: when thinking of European identity, it would not be appropriate to remove Europe’s “dark heart” from our memory, so that religiously justified wars or witch hunts shall always be remembered as a warning and admonition for our future.

Another point where a Jewish perspective can enrich our vision on European identity relates to the principle of double loyalty: Jews may feel they belong at the same time to the country they live in and to Israel, the “people of God” (a fact often regarded with suspicion and fear by Anti-Semitic propaganda).

This Jewish experience of double belonging reveals a precious clue for reflection on new quests for European identity and citizenship represented by non-hegemonic groups (like the “Others” mentioned above, especially second-generation migrants).

Such non-hegemonic groups refuse the alternative between two mutually exclusive identities, and in fact represent a new and original identity, which cannot completely correspond to traditional ones.

... AND DEVELOPING TENSIONS

Islam, on the other hand, has been a European religion for more than a thousand years, even if — after the Christian “Reconquista” of Spain in the XVth century and the setting of European borders with the Ottoman Empire in the XIXth century — European Muslims have mainly been confined to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania.

During the last half century, though, emigration from Muslim-majority countries has made Islam the second largest religion on our continent. Contemporary history, from the Iranian revolution of 1979 to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 has not helped give a positive image of Islam.

“Islamophobia” is a relatively new word that has been used for the past decade and has become more and more familiar in daily language and mass media. In general, we are experiencing a transformation of racism from a pseudo-biological phenomenon into a cultural one; and an extension of xenophobia into religious hatred, which seems to most severely affect Muslims in Western societies.

Since it is no longer commonly acceptable to refer to skin colour as a natural marker of difference between people, culture and faith more and more often serve this end: religion and culture tend, indeed, to be perceived merely as synonymous — or maybe one could say that faith has become a symbol of ethnicity.

This approach is particularly evident in the debate about Turkey’s accession to the EU. The very fact, though, that there are Muslims defining themselves as Europeans does call into question the identity issues, because it has an impact on both the European identity and the Muslim one.

Limiting our vision of Islam to a human rights-violating and aggressive religion would mean to disregard a plural and diversified European Islam and its hopefully positive relationship with mainstream Arabic Islam.

CITIZENSHIP VS. IDENTITY

Summing up, a multireligious perspective and interreligious dialogue can have a crucial impact on European identity issues, but religious discrimination can find a real solution only in equal rights.

It is therefore useful to consider the concept of *citizenship* as juridical and political recognition of civil rights, whose main contradiction concerning European citizenship is that it is not connected with European people, while national citizenships are.

What is, then, the meaning and the use of European citizenship? How can a single person be a European citizen and a national citizen without being a citizen of the other member-States? One possible solution lies in the separa-

tion and distinction between the concepts of citizenship and identity.

This means that citizenship rights should not only be allocated to those who were born in a certain place and share its majority language, traditions and religion. Europe could become a place where citizenship will be flexible and based upon participation in society rather than on identity.

We could imagine European identity as a dynamic and open process of identification, and we could dream of Europe as an inclusive place whose inner contradictions can turn into spaces for critical reflection and dialogue among diversities.

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Liturgical Revolution of Interreligious Encounters

The question of interreligious dialogue and relations came into the focus of Christianity mainly in the XXth century. Interreligious wars as modes of relations started to play a less and less important role.

Immigration urged us to take seriously the questions of coexistence in every part of the world, as religiously mixed and pluralistic territories started to spread. For the Church, dialogue, and in it the cooperation in social service and sharing of spirituality in prayer services, posed the greatest challenges.

CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Realizing that the situation was getting more acute, the churches from Asia — especially from India and Sri Lanka — put a lot of effort into the re-evaluation of their previous statements, as well as their theological doctrines.

They led the thinking and research in the theological domain, both in the systematic and practical fields. First, they acknowledged the failure of Western missionary behaviour that failed to spread the Good News and created a hostile atmosphere with its intolerant and ignorant attitude towards other religions in the region.

Then, using the Trinitarian formula, they rearranged the Christian dogmatic emphases by taking into account their own contexts. They were faced with the fact that the meaningfulness of every interreligious encounter, and especially of prayer, depends on the recognition of the reality of the presence and experience of God among all the participants.

The *Father* was identified as Creator of all humanity and the whole universe. *Human beings* were seen as ones created in God’s own image, which means a common task, the responsibility of every person given from God; and also a common desire to seek, serve, and praise the Creator of all. This essential recognition provided the basis for every spiritual encounter between religions.

Nevertheless, they could not stop at this stage, since the specialism of Christian theology claimed its own precious place, and answers had to be formulated to questions concerning the basics of Christian identity. Indian theology did not see *Christ* only as the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but also as the Cosmic Christ, who got special attention in the Bible by John the Apostle.

The recognition of the whole world as being created through Christ and being redeemed by His death and resurrection implied hope for the salvation of non-Christians, but also challenge for the role of Christianity in the world.

The *Holy Spirit* was seen as the One Who is present everywhere, being uncontrollable by humanity or by the Church in Her work. Her inspirational attitude for leading creation into a closer and more mature relationship with God gives hope that every person and religion have glimpses of God, although maybe not to the same degree.

The purpose of this dogmatic work was to recognize Christianity on its pilgrimage towards God, together with all other religions, though clearly recognizing that Christianity has its own special gifts, vocation and responsibility given by God.

