

A Christian Europe? Europe and Christianity: rules of commitment

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Abstract The author demonstrates how European integration policy can gain by a proper understanding of the doctrine of *Redemptoris Missio*. The Catholic teachings expressed in this encyclical are concerned with tolerance, respect and inclusion, concepts inextricably connected with freedom. The author invites us to reflect on both a political and an individual level.

Keywords European integration · Respect · Tolerance · Freedom · Catholic Church · *Redemptoris Missio* · European Constitution

Does a Christian ghetto exist today in Europe? Christian thinking and European integration seem to exist in two mutually exclusive spheres. Christianity does not enter into the debate around European integration, and Europe, it seems, does not enter Christian thinking in any significant way. The walls between the two are dangerous; they prevent us from seeing the situation clearly.¹

What would happen if the walls of the ghetto were torn down? There are doubtlessly several answers to this question. Some appear quite simply inadmissible to me, at a pragmatic, conceptual and moral level. A plea to make Christianity the official religion of the Union would quite simply be ridiculous on any of these three levels. In my opinion, the church itself would not be in favour of this. Any vision that would reduce Europe to a Christian state also seems unacceptable. It is rather comical (or perhaps tragic) to see those most opposed to any mention of religion or Christianity in the draft constitution battling in the front line against Turkey's accession to the European Union.

I have defended the thesis that from the point of view of constitutional law there is no obstacle—apart from lay sensitivity—to recognising Christian historical and cultural identity in the symbolism of the preamble to the European Constitution. On the contrary, there are good reasons for doing so. I would like to explore now two other areas in which

¹ This is the first English translation of the article by Tobias Teuscher and Catherine Vierling.

the relation between Europe and Christianity appears. The first concerns Christian writings on the history of European integration. A major part of human history has no significance in itself. It is we who, as subjects or objects of history, attach significance to events. History has shown nothing else than trying to attach significance to the facts, understanding this significance and interpreting it. Retracing the history of European integration has not always been the work of professional historians; on the contrary, a number of politicians have also attempted to do this.

Christian writings on the history of European integration have a double value. For practising Christians, they represent an invitation towards a more integrated vision, one in which personal accounts, historical accounts and political accounts converge into one and the same religious perspective. Christian writings on the history of European integration do not necessarily have to make political accounts and religious norms coincide. They can also be critical writings on history and have, in any case, the merit of avoiding one of the idiosyncrasies of modernity, namely the compartmentalisation of existence. For non-Christians, this interpretation also represents an enrichment; an additional way of reading about the same events, making it possible to gain a more complete and detailed understanding of the European project.

In order to provide a historiographical illustration of this reasoning, one must look back at the real history of the Union, to the first steps in the modern history of integration, the time of Jean Monnet and the famous statement by Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950. There is no better rendering of this objective than in the words so often quoted from Schuman's statement:

World peace cannot be safeguarded without creative efforts commensurate with the dangers that threaten it ... The gathering of European nations requires above all that the secular opposition of France and Germany be eliminated: the action undertaken has primarily to affect France and Germany ... [The goal of this] solidarity...is that that any war between France and Germany will become not only unthinkable, but also materially impossible.

His statement also included a request, not only a request for peace between nations—such as is found, for example, in the United Nations Charter—but also a request for internal peace, for forgiveness; a challenge aiming to overcome a quite comprehensible hatred. In this individual historical context, the European idea of peace represented an echo and a return to the distinct concept of Christian love, of compassion towards every human being and his or her values; a vision of harmony which, I think, does not really occasion surprise when the personal background of the founding fathers is considered: Adenauer, De Gasperi, Schumann and Monnet.

Redemptoris Missio: Truth, otherness and the discipline of tolerance

The second dimension of the intellectual meeting point between Europe and the Christian world is not historiographical but conceptual. As is the case in historical accounts, Europe can be the object of various interpretations at a conceptual level. Understanding the genuine nature of Europe is not a pastime for intellectuals and scholars: it also entails political and ethical consequences. The implicit objectives of European integration and the European Union have an enormous influence on constitutional choices, on its institutional architecture and on the material policies of the Union.

The problem remains that these objectives are hardly ever discussed, or if they are, only in a general and non-specific manner. It is absolutely necessary to discuss the objectives of and not only the means to European integration. It is precisely in this context that I regret the absence of Christian thought in specific discussions on European integration. In fundamental debates on Europe, there has been no explicit and articulated expression of Christian thought and teaching, and this continues to be lacking. In the debate on the European decision process, there has been no end of talk about a lack of democracy. Regarding the European intellectual process, which should present the various options for the future of Europe, it is fitting to talk about a Christian deficit. Christian thought is part of Europe's heritage, both for believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians. A voice that one can dispute, undoubtedly; that can be discussed, of course; that one can reject, certainly. After all, we live in a democracy. But its absence impoverishes us all.

In this context too I would merely like to open a door and reflect on some elements of Christian doctrine and their essential character within the framework of a debate on European values. At first glance, the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of Pope Jean Paul II²—which addresses the validity of the missionary mandate of the Church of 1990—seems to be, for a multitude of reasons, the text least able to enrich the discussion on the nature and objectives of European integration. There are encyclicals and documents of the Christian Magisterium that directly address the social and human condition in general. They employ a certain number of ideas and concepts easily accessible to believers and non-believers alike, to Christians and non-Christians, and broach questions which already form part of the political agenda and which are on the agenda in discussions on society. *Redemptoris Missio*, on the contrary, given the priority it gives to the problem of the crisis of vocations to ensure the missionary duty of the Church, seems, at least on the first reading, to concentrate on strictly theological questions. Its aim seems above all to lie in the definition and deepening of religious priorities within the institutional limits of the Church. Nothing seems further removed from the concerns of Europe.

Redemptoris Missio, just as the more recent encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, is explicitly Catholic and strongly oriented towards the Church. This also contributes to the impression that it is not particularly important for a general discussion on the future of society. One could find it both too Catholic and not Christian enough. Furthermore, religion is often considered, in today's consumer society, as a hobby to be pursued during our leisure time rather than a genuine way of life suitable for directing and for fulfilling our existence. This is why an excess of religion is not welcome, because it competes, obviously, with other leisure activities. *Redemptoris Missio* deals expressly with the activities that apply *ad gentes*, to all nations. This attitude also irritates European sensitivity. This excess would be perceived as a religious version of European (and Western) colonialism. It is held as unacceptable, not only due to intolerance and the lack of respect that seem to emerge with respect to others in the 'internal' version of the missionary mandate, but also owing to a perceived racist colouring that all too often overshadows any real or presumed manifestation of superiority in the 'external' dialogue with non-Europeans. The association of Christianity and the 'Occident' (and the deep implication of Christianity in colonialism), in the eyes of those who criticise it, takes the missionary mandate *ad gentes* back to a past from which Europe wants to escape: "Elsewhere the obstacles are of a cultural nature: passing on the Gospel message seems irrelevant or incomprehensible, and conversion is seen as a rejection of one's own people and culture" (Sect. 35).

² Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html.

There are excellent reasons for examining *Redemptoris Missio* in detail. First, the encyclical is in perfect harmony with the *telos* of European integration. One of the most widespread stories concerning the construction of Europe is that it started as an exclusively economic project and that it was transformed, in more recent times, into a political project. Europe, from the beginning, was a political project *par excellence*, the continuation of which was enabled by economic instruments. This is confirmed again in the preamble to the current draft of the Constitution, in which no mention is made of any kind of market, common or otherwise. The *telos* which underpins the foundation of Europe does not refer therefore to the creation of a common market likely to increase our common well-being. The creation of a common market is an instrument, a means. The ‘aim’, the objective for which these means are implemented, is ‘integration’.

What should we understand by ‘integration’? At a trans-national level, it means—according to the new preamble—that different people, “proud of their identity and of their national history”, including their relentless conflicts, learn “to put behind them what once separated them”. Integration is the European ideal of redefining the way in which each one of our national societies enters into relations with the others, with other nations with which we share the hope “of building our destiny together”. That inevitably means redefining the way we treat others within our national societies, and also the way in which we collectively, as a Union, enter into relations with others outside of the Union. Nothing in our ethical conscience, in our moral sensitivity and in our social practices more effectively determines what we are than our attitude towards what the Bible calls the foreigner—who, in current parlance, and in my opinion much less beautifully, is called the Other. *Redemptoris Missio* undoubtedly addresses the relationship of one community with others (*ad gentes*). If this is the case, it is worth asking the same question again: given its manifestly hegemonic *telos* and its non-comprising ethos (“we are right and you are wrong”), should we not take a more profound look at the value of its contribution to the reflections on the ‘European question’?

Taking up the concepts devised by Noam Chomsky, the surface language of *Redemptoris Missio* may give the impression of intolerance and lack of respect. But its underlying structure reflects exactly the opposite: it is a lesson about profound self-respect and respect for others. In fact, it is more than a lesson. It is a genuine exercise in tolerance and patience. It cannot serve as a ‘model’ for Europe. I have said this many times: Europe is not a religion that can or must be modelled on Christianity or any other faith. Nonetheless, Christian thought offers us a range of instruments, conceptual challenges, ideas, which—handled with the right care—can be extremely useful in our attempts to define the specifically European modality of relations *ad gentes*, within and outside of the Community.

How do we get from the surface language to the structure lying beneath? The first step consists of becoming conscious of the marvellous polarity that exists in *Redemptoris Missio*. On the one hand, the clear and categorical affirmation of certain truths is formulated frequently and distinctly in this encyclical. Not only the obligation of the missionary mandate but also its content is derived from these truths. On the other hand, we find at the core of this encyclical, in a structural and equally central position, the dynamic and efficient expression of the way in which these truths must be conceived and transmitted.

On her part the Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. *The Church proposes; she imposes nothing*. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honours the sanctuary of conscience. (Sect. 39)

The categorical affirmation of this truth is not only a religious affirmation per se. Being a Christian means believing that salvation can come only from Jesus Christ. Consequently, it is also an affirmation of Christian identity. Banal? Maybe. But this passage from truth to identity, in the process of establishing a relationship with the Other, is very important, because, first of all, this places the relationship on the level of truth: "It is what I am". But more than this, there is an uncomfortable truth in the phenomenon surrounding the understanding of the definition of identity: I can only grasp the uniqueness of my identity, whether individual or collective, in the way I draw a line that acts like a border, including me and excluding you. The Other is not simply a social reality, but ontologically indispensable so that I can exist. If there is no Other, there is no distinguishable 'Me'. Just as the categorical affirmation of the truth, of that truth, might seem offensive, it is also indispensable for the uniqueness of my identity. However, it is also a confirmation of the otherness of the Other. It is the recognition of the Other's otherness and identity. In this sense, it shows a deep respect for the Other, it is exactly that which allows the Other to exist, and allows me to exist.

Let us follow an experimental line of thought. Let us look at a different encounter between Christians and others, for example, Jews or Muslims. The Christians could say: "We are all the same, at least with regard to what counts the most; ultimately, we all believe in the same God, etc." Would this perhaps be less offensive to Jews or Muslims? I can imagine that in the face of such an affirmation the Jews or the Muslims would feel humiliated and ill at ease. "Do you not believe," they would ask hesitantly, "that salvation can only come from Jesus Christ?" Their discomfort would be caused not only by the fact that they are disconcerted by a way of entering into relations that tends to avoid offensive facts. That could incite suspicion, resentment or contempt: suspicion due to the lack of good faith inherent in this way of entering into relations; resentment due to the paternalistic attitude of someone who believes that uncomfortable truths have to be hidden from an inferior interlocutor, as if from a child; and contempt towards someone who is afraid to affirm the very foundations of his own credo: "If he does not respect his own identity, how can he respect mine?" It is fitting that Jews or Muslims do not believe that salvation can come only from Jesus Christ. In fact, denying this affirmation may constitute an essential part of their identity. In my opinion, Jews and Muslims would feel marginalised or offended if this negation were denied or concealed. I would also add that if this affirmation by the Church inflicts pain on others, it also bears the risk of provoking its own suffering: by saying to Jews or Muslims that salvation can come only from Jesus Christ, the Church risks suffering from the negation it provokes in them.

Postmodern sensitivity does not offer any greater consolation. Religion is concerned with truth, *the* Truth. In their interaction, truths often collide with each other and mutually exclude each other. A fascinating element in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* is indeed the fact that it represents an encounter, a manner and a way of entering into relations with an Other, an Other who represents the biggest challenge because his otherness may be the negation of what is central to my own identity. The epistemological scepticism and the relativisation of truth that are typical of postmodernism seem like a tempting way to enter into such relations: there is no authentic truth, everyone has their own. Let us therefore live together in love and understanding. Yes, we all live together in love and understanding, but this would no longer be the case if I denied the Other. Not only in the sense that I would be denying the uniqueness of their identity, which is based in her claim to truth, but also that I would be denying her (and my) ability to possess such a truth. We see again that what presents itself as an attitude of respect can have the opposite effect.

In conclusion, as regards this extremely vital point, the apparent categorical rigidity of the *Redemptoris Missio* reveals itself as the most scrupulous way of assuring respect for one's identity, for my own uniqueness and that of the Other.

Now let us look at the opposite pole and remind ourselves of the solemn affirmation: "the Church proposes, she imposes nothing". If we were to focus on the evolution of the Catholic Church, we would want to comment on this historically surprising dimension of the self-understanding shown by Catholics; a dimension that is also welcome to non-believers who, through the past, have dealt with a Church with a very different self-image. But our aim is completely different: we want to try and reconstitute an argumentative structure, a conceptual tool for determining the relationship with the Other. The most striking fact is that the Church, despite its insistent and intransigent position with respect to the truth, has no interest in taking such a position in its mission *ad gentes*. In this regard, *Redemptoris Missio* refers directly to a statement by the Vatican II Council relating to the concept of religious freedom:

The human person has a right to religious freedom ... All should have such immunity from coercion by individuals, or by groups, or by any human power, that no one should be forced to act against his conscience in religious matters, nor prevented from acting according to his conscience, whether in private or in public, whether alone or associated with others, within due limits. (Sect. 8)

But it is not only about this. The principle, "the Church proposes, she imposes nothing" also concerns the nature of truth and how it relates to freedom. A manifestation of this relationship can be found in the encyclical: "Man is free. He can say 'no' to God" (Sect. 7). It is precisely the freedom to say 'no' that gives 'yes' its significance. In the Jewish tradition, this lesson is rendered very effectively and admirably in the words, "Everything is in the hands of God except the fear of God".

As regards values and metaphysical truths, the expression "the Church proposes, she imposes nothing" is an affirmation of the truth about truth itself. This point deserves to be highlighted. It is not that there is a truth, according to which salvation can come only from Jesus Christ, and then a rule of courtesy or good education, which has nothing to do with the former, and which prescribes that this truth must not be imposed by force. The importance of the freedom to say 'no' (and which gives 'yes' its significance) is an integral component of the affirmed truth. The negation of the one deprives the other of its significance.

The relationship between freedom and truth in the human condition allows us to take the last step towards understanding the discipline of tolerance that is expressed in *Redemptoris Missio*. It is not simply the recognition of religious freedom. It is a discipline of tolerance. This expression makes me think of a serious and motivated education about tolerance through the purification of the souls of those who practise it. To acquire this discipline, we now have to bring together these two poles of freedom and tolerance and regard them as an organic whole.

Why tolerance? First, let us ask ourselves what tolerance is. When am I tolerant? When I accept something that offends me. When I resist the temptation to impose my convictions on others. If I do not have convictions, if I am not tempted to impose my convictions, if I am indifferent to the Other, then I do not need this virtue. The more important the truth, the more absolute, the more vital it becomes, and the greater the temptation is to impose it on everyone. As far as we are concerned, Isaiah Berlin has already taught us what a fatal danger arises from a truth considered as absolute and universal. Since time began, the most terrible suffering has not been inflicted by those who acted out of greed or with ambitions

for power, but rather by the idealists who believed they were in possession of such a truth. One can acquire tolerance when one questions some truth and the very notion of truth. Berlin rightly informs us that even the teachings of Plato on universal truth can lead to such results. But the teachings of Berlin, for his part, run the risk of being interpreted as an invitation to acquire tolerance at the price of truth—an invitation to indulge in epistemological scepticism and moral relativism. *Redemptoris Missio* proclaims from the beginning the most absolute truth, revealed for believing Christians. The believer could ask himself this question: “How can I resist the temptation to impose on somebody a truth that in my eyes is so important and which I am convinced is essential and beneficial for all?” Over the past centuries, Christians have not always resisted, and sometimes with bloody consequences. John Paul II takes on a strict tone: resist temptation, control temptation. The Church proposes, she imposes nothing!

Why a discipline of tolerance? Because the believer can sidestep temptation, hide away and avoid the Other who defies his truths. On this question, *Redemptoris Missio* again appears very strict. It does not give the believer the option of hiding away, of fleeing from the Other and, by doing so, avoiding temptation. It is a call to confront those who might not see or share what we understand as being the truth; to debate in a manner that allows us to affirm our own identity and which therefore precisely confirms the identity of the Other. It recognises its otherness. Important and absolute as only the Truth can be—a component of this very truth, of this statement according to which salvation can only come from Jesus Christ—the truth is also above the truth: understanding that humans are free to refute it; and that imposing it means denying it. The Christian therefore not only recognises the otherness of the Other, but also accepts and internalises the necessary freedom of the Other to say ‘no’. Considerable value lies in this discipline of freedom and tolerance.

Europe proposes ...!

“Europe still proposes” has another meaning. European constitutional specificity finds a significant echo within the political organisation of the Community, which defies the customary premise of constitutionalism. Normally in a democracy, democratic discipline is required: the authority of the majority over the minority is only acceptable in a political system that would be the expression of single people, whatever its identity. Conversely, if a majority calls for obedience on the part of a minority that does not feel it belongs to the same people, one is confronted with a situation understood as that of submission. This dilemma becomes even worse in relation to constitutional discipline. And yet, each European of the Union is subject to constitutional discipline which is not simply and exclusively its own, but which is the product and the reflection of a number of different peoples. It is a significant example of civic tolerance to agree to be subjected to regulations which were not drawn up by ‘my people’ but by a community formed from various political communities—people of Others, one could say. Thus, my self-determination is subject to compromise and expresses the model of tolerance mentioned above, internally with respect to myself and externally in respect of others.

From a constitutional perspective, this tolerance implies a form of discipline that finds an original and admirable expression in the institutional makeup of the European Union, a constitutional discipline that is not, however, based on a constitution of the state. Constitutional subjects within the various Member States by no means accept European constitutional discipline as a legal principle by virtue of which, as in federal states, they would be subjected to sovereignty and to a higher authority enforcing norms adopted by

federal people, that is by the constitutional *demos*. The acceptance of this discipline in the sphere of the competencies of the Community is a voluntary and autonomous act, constantly renewed, of subordination to a rule expressing the manifestation of other wills, political identities and communities.

Proceeding in this way means in itself the creation of another type of political community, the prominent feature of which is precisely a provision to accept a binding discipline born and originating, in a community of Others. One is accustomed to say to the inhabitants of Quebec: you must obey in the name of the Canadian people. To the French, Italians or the Germans, on the other hand, one would say: we propose that you obey in the name of the peoples of Europe. In both cases, constitutional obedience is called for. When acceptance and submission to a discipline are voluntary and sustainable, one finds oneself in the presence of an authentic act of freedom, of emancipation vis-à-vis the arrogance of the collective 'me' and of constitutional fanaticism. Europe proposes but does not impose.³

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³ The original of J. H. H. Weiler's study on "A Christian Europe" was first published in Italy in *Un'Europa cristiana: Un saggio esplorativo*, ed. M. Zanichelli (Milan: BUR Saggi, 2003). It has been translated into Spanish: *Una Europa cristiana: Ensayo exploratorio*, trans. J. M. Oriol (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro, 2003); Portuguese: *Uma Europa Cristã: Contributo para uma reflexão sobre a identidade europeia*, trans. A. Pereira (S. João do Estoril: Principia, 2003); Polish: *Chrzescijanska Europa: Konstytucyjny imperializm czy wielokulturowosc?* trans. W. Mechera (Poznan: W drodze, 2003); German: *Ein Christliches Europa: Erkundungsgänge*, trans. F. Reimer (Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 2004); Dutch: *Een christelijk Europa: Een verkennend essay*, trans L. Besselink and T. Mertens (Nijmegen: Kluwer, 2004); Slovene: *Krščanska Europa: Raziskovalna razprava*, trans. M. Ožbot (Ljubljana: Claritas, 2005); Hungarian: *A keresztény Európa*, trans. Szent István Társulat (Budapest: Pázmány Könyvek, 2006); French: *Une Europe chrétienne?* trans. (from German) Tobias Teuscher, Catherine Vierling (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007). A Slovak translation is in preparation and will be published.