

Europe – Christian Origins

Excerpt

Introduction

The name „Europe”, as the notion „European culture”, can be understood in many ways. In the system of the United Nations, such as UNESCO, Europe is described as an area spreading from Vancouver to Vladivostok. One day I met a professor from Irkutsk who told me about the pride with which the citizens of the vicinities of the city call themselves Europeans. That is why so many Russians from this area stress that Polish blood runs in their veins – this ennobles them as Europeans. We tend to forget about this as, according to common knowledge, Siberia is situated in Asia, although the Ural Mountains were established to be the border of the continents as late as in the 19th century. Numerous European origins and cultural relations with Europe can be found in the United States and Canada, South and Latin America, Australia and also, to a certain extent, in Africa and Asia. The phenomenon of worldwide European culture surely exists and we must not forget about it while thinking of the range of the World’s great civilizations.

In a narrower sense, the history of Europe must be limited to the territory of Europe understood as a continent. Deep changes undergoing in the whole society of the Christian West in the 10th and 11th century were accompanied by Slavic-Hungarian-Scandinavian “new Christianity”, which entered the sphere of Latin culture. In this way, a new circle of civilisation was formed, the circle which can be called Europe. The period between the 10th and 11th century can be thus treated as the beginning of the truly European thousand-year long history. In this context, Carolingian times and the earlier history of the post-Roman territories can be treated as an overture to the proper history of Europe – Latin christianitas.

A problem arises, at least from the 19th century, when we attempt to situate Byzantium, which geographically belonged to Europe and which drifted towards it, especially towards the West. Byzantium itself, through the whole period until 1453, believed that it was indirectly continuing the Christian tradition of the Roman Empire. Broken relations and reciprocal curses put by the pope and the patriarch of Constantinople lasted, as far as we know, from the year 1054 for a prolonged time, although many attempts were made to create a union, at least until Constantinople was taken over by the Turks in 1453. The tradition of the third independent Rome was soon after that taken over by Moscow, the capital city of the biggest independent Eastern Christian state. Pressures and hostility between the Orthodox and Catholic religions interwove with doses of solidarity against the common enemy which was Islam. However, once the dynamic and the strength of the Western Christianity, which was becoming more and more self-assured, grew continuously, the Orthodox world enfeebled gradually and was pushed onto the fringes. I will touch upon this question later, in the chapter devoted to the Polish-Lithuanian Republic and its exceptionally and relatively durable peaceful meeting of the two Christian worlds, which were, despite all the differences, not always hostile towards each other.

Ancient heritage, both Judaic-Christian and classical - Greek and Roman, unquestionably has immense importance for Europe. Ancient heritage is so significant that lectures on the history of Europe often start with its Greek-Roman beginnings. There have always been lovers of Ancient Greece or Rome who perceive these places as their motherland and the cradle of Europe. A symbolic question could be asked, the question which is often in the centre of European debates, about the position of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome in European history and culture. Contrary to Byzantium, the Western Christianity displays no sense of treating any of its states as a direct successor of the Roman Empire (rather the monarchy of Charlemagne was mentioned), let alone Ancient Greece or Jerusalem. Jerusalem

was for a long time the only sacred town not to be compared with any other. The image of the earthly Jerusalem – the destination of pilgrimages and centre of crusades – is connected with the image of heavenly Jerusalem, as the place where everybody will await Judgment Day. Rome, which attracted tourists with the tomb of St. Peter in the Vatican, could be no more than the second Jerusalem. For the majority of Europeans, Rome was an important place because it was the seat of the most immediate successors of Christ - popes, and not because of the fact that once the city was the capital of an empire. After Rome was abandoned by the Empire, popes completely changed the character of the city, having transformed it into an important church centre. They decidedly turned from the emperors residing in Constantinople, seeking support in the West, in the Latin environment which was crystallizing at the time.

The Bible, which has been the greatest book for Europe for ages, a text without which it seems impossible to understand the culture and the phenomenon of Europe, through the Old Testament introduced many generations into the Jewish world, seen through the prism of Christ. The Psalms were used to teach reading and writing, and to learn how to see and perceive the reality. The basic weekly rhythm of work and rest – one day free of work to praise God - has its immediate beginning in Jewish culture, as well as many other notions and customs. Although sporadic attempts were made to remove it from the Christian Bible, the Old Testament played a very important role, creating, together with the New Testament, the complete vision of the world of Christians. The presence of God had fundamental importance – God gave mankind a special position on the earth ruled by people. The prophets of the Old Testament taught that a person's attitude to God was reflected in the way they led their lives. The world had its beginning (the Creation) and its end, which was completely different from the pagan tradition which perceived history as repeatable cycles.

The emerging European culture was fed by Christianity, whose intellectual strength stemmed from the great thinkers, called today the fathers of the Church, who lived in the 4th and 5th century, among whom St. Augustine of Hippo gained himself a special position in Western tradition. Due to the efforts of these thinkers it was possible to reconcile Christianity based on Jewish tradition with the output of the classical culture of Greece and Rome. The heritage of antiquity was carefully guarded and multiplied, especially in monasteries, and it became an essential element of European culture. Latin belonged to this heritage, and it constituted, until 18th or even 19th century, the common language of Europe. "Familiarizing" antiquity, whose messages were often in opposition to Christianity, denoted trust in human beings, forced to think, to make choices and to make creative efforts. That was the essence of the undisrupted, since Carolingian times, phenomenon of renaissances, which consisted in discovering anew the outputs of antiquity and in interpreting anew ancient works of art. Islam tended to forbid comparing the text of Koran with any other texts, even with those which were treated by adherents of other religions as revealed, and this added to the isolation of the world of Islam. The ability to absorb new values, the will to continue the Roman tradition of taking over Greek outputs, as well as the ability to adapt novelties, which all were characteristic of Latin Christianity, determined the character and dynamicity of European culture.

Roman law, Greek philosophy and science, the works of Cicero, Aristotle and many other authors, huge output of ancient culture gradually absorbed in the process of subsequent renaissances (especially since the 12th and 13th century) and incorporated in the cultures of European states, through unceasing debates and sometimes very heated disputes, became the element of the cultural identity of Europe. Arab culture was an intermediary medium in this process - it had absorbed the achievements of the Greeks and the Romans much earlier, hence its vital role, especially since 12th and 13th century. A vital role of Byzantium should be mentioned at this point, too.

All subsequent European renaissances, including Italian renaissance of the 14th and 15th century, were not returns to antiquity. Europeans, at least until the 17th century, believed that antiquity was the time when Christianity emerged, it was the time of Christ, Apostles and the fathers of the Church. Pagans living in antiquity were thought to be precursors, more or

less conscious of the fact that they were preparing for Christ's arrival. Future was also seen as an ideal antiquity when Christianity will be as perfect as at the time of the first Christians.

Communities

Charles Alexis de Tocqueville in his classical description of American democracy written 200 years ago noticed that Americans, facing a concrete need or threat, do not wait for the reaction of the government but they organise a team to solve the problem themselves. This observation can also refer to the European society which was so dynamically developing and transforming in the 10th and 11th century. Creating communities became a common response to the challenges posed at the time. Urban and rural communities, and also church and knightly or noble communities, which gathered almost all the members of the European society, functioned due to numerous initiatives taken to meet a concrete goal which public institutions could not meet or could meet only to a small degree. However, having met the goal the groups did not dissolve. What is more, they strove to reach the biggest possible degree of autonomy and to gain their own rights, e.g. to wear noticeable symbols, such as clothes or badges, to organize meetings or gatherings, to pray (at their own altars or in their own chapels).

An easier way to realise the initiative was to use the existing position of one of the prominent institutions, such as monasteries or parishes. Monasteries for ages gathered people of various social conditions, aristocracy and beggars alike, united by a common goal, which was not always religious. Parishes, especially in towns, dynamically developing since the 12th and 13th century, competed with monasteries. Thus, a gothic town consisted of hundreds of small communities which had their own altars or chapels in the town's churches.

The Church's supervision over communities became important since the second half of the 12th century, when the war against heresies was declared. It was principally all the war against the new religion which was the strong Church of Cathars. Nowadays we even tend to say that in the Middle Ages, the Western society was transformed into a society of persecutors. I will go back to this essential question later on, now I must just stress that religious orthodoxy became a social rule and was not limited to the Church only. The rulers of European kingdoms were not far behind the Church in their fight against heresies, which were treated as a threat for the existing social order.

Examples of various activities undertaken by communities could be multiplied: building and later guarding a bridge, maintenance of regular guardians to protect a given district or broadly understood social welfare. These activities were often aimed to add to the activities of monasteries. A fundamental question in a religious society, deeply believing in the afterlife was to provide, "good death" and redemption. Assistance was provided not only to old people, to those terminally ill, to lepers or those unable to work, but also to pilgrims, travellers, etc. Shelters were built for them which also served as hospitals. Ill people were treated in a traditional way because academic medicine, which started to develop in Europe as late as in the 12th century, as well as all other novelties, were slowly popularized. For lepers, who were numerous in Europe in the 12th and 13th century, hospitals outside towns were built. People feared lepers, and overcoming the fear was perceived as an act of heroism, therefore helping lepers was stressed in biographies of the great saints (such as St. Francis of Assisi or St. Elizabeth of Hungary). Hospitals (*hospicia*, *xenodochia*, *scholae*) were usually built near sources of water, often in the vicinity of bridges or near towns' gates. Hospitals consisted of rooms for patients, a room for the members of the brotherhood which took care of the ill, a chapel and a cemetery. Patients in hospitals were attended both by healthy people and lepers themselves.

For many brotherhoods, the most important were religious goals, but what also counted was the possibility to attend worship in community (common prayers) or the certainty that the sisters and brothers would help them in every situation. This was extremely important

because it made it easier to face everyday challenges. Freedom of choice was of high importance as well as the possibility to change environment when desired. In the perspective of afterlife and eternal redemption, the fact that existence in a brotherhood assured a suitable burial and a prayer for the dead was also of high importance. Belief in purgatory, the place where souls are punished for sins before they enter heaven, became common, especially since the 13th century. It was believed that the time to be spent in purgatory could be shortened thanks to those still alive, to their prayers, and also thanks to the Church, which could grant indulgence. Caring for the dead and a person's own fate was in such a situation especially important. It encouraged giving money to monasteries and parishes, organising holy masses for the dead and also involvement in the lives of communities, whose prayers were thought exceptionally helpful.

Many people: women, men, even whole families, deeply moved by Christian teachings, sometimes – especially in the threat of group misfortunes – awaiting the end of the world and the imminent arrival of Christ, decided to live in rigid conditions in special brotherhoods in order to beg mercy for themselves and for the whole world. Depending on the colour of the clothes they wore, they were called the black, the white or the grey. They did not carry weapons, they did not do military service and they were often exempt of various public duties. In this way their efforts made in order to smooth God's anger through their living were appreciated.

One of the important brotherhoods worked out a special liturgy, actually a quasi-liturgy, adjusted to the needs of laymen. Instead of Christian psalms sung by monks, they prayed for many times Our Father and Hail Mary. This current later developed in the very popular tradition of reciting the rosary. Songs in vernacular languages were also sung, and religious dramas were staged. This tradition was implemented in Poland and it developed into the popular tradition of carol singing.

Contemporary studies show the wide range of brotherhoods which at the close of the Middle Ages developed not only in towns but also in rural areas. We are getting closer to the credible assessment of their importance.

Christian humanism

The old question by Socrates "Do you know yourself?" served as the title of one of the philosophical treatises by Abelard which was frequently quoted in the 12th century. For Bernard de Clairvaux getting to know oneself was the basis of the educational program in Cistercian monasteries. Many contemporary historians claim that the notion of an individual was discovered in the 12th century (other historians think it was a century later). An important and difficult debate in historiography is still open, and differences in opinions remain enormous. The question posed by Socrates revolves around the whole period of antiquity. Confessions written by St. Augustine, which should be treated as a monument of Christian self-knowledge and self-analysis, were read throughout centuries and were an inspiration for many intellectuals.

Undoubtedly, the interest in the internal life of a man appeared at the end of the 11th century, not later. The history of autobiography is an important trace in this field. If we compare classical and medieval texts written by the end of the 12th century, it will turn out that more than half of them were created in the 11th and 12th century, especially in the 12th century. An important position is occupied by the autobiography of Abelard which reveals the dramatic lot of his relationship with Heloise and their love.

Simultaneously with the growing importance of a human being as an individual, communities also grew in strength. That is why many historians claim that the life of an individual melted with communities and we cannot speak of the independence of an individual human being. However, we must not forget that belonging to communities was guaranteed by the laws. It gave people self-confidence and the feeling of dignity which were

of course determined by the person's position in the social hierarchy but, still, were much greater than in the societies based on slavery, such as for example Ancient Greece or Rome. Members of urban and rural communities were in the 13th century called citizens, certain sources even call them civil societies (*societas civilis*). It was closely connected with the feeling of personal responsibility of a free human being who was no longer a tool in the hands of other people.

The growing importance of a small family as a separate part of a big community was characteristic of all social classes. It created favourable conditions for individualization, for education and shaping people as early as in their childhood. In this perspective, turning attention to children became an important phenomenon that can be observed since the 12th century. It was reflected in the cult of the Infant Jesus, which was gradually growing in popularity and which developed mostly thanks to the Franciscans. Abelard pointed to the fact that Jesus was happier than a king because he was fed by his own mother. The importance of the relations of a child and a mother was also mentioned by the first biographer of Bernard de Clairvaux.

The evolution of the notion of sin, which is the key notion for a Christian, played an important role in the process of shaping the mentality of people in the 12th century. In the Carolingian times, there were special books issued containing descriptions of punishments for committed sins. We can say that these were codes for confessors. In the 12th century both theological and psychological aspects of a human life were reflected on. While analysing the deeds of a person, attention was paid to the intentions and circumstances. A prominent position in this kind of considerations is occupied by Abelard who in his ethical treatises analysed sins stressing the awareness and intentions of a person. He also stressed the importance of the free choice and responsibility. Subsequent generations often referred to this attitude. St. Thomas Aquinas, who represented the current of mature scholasticism, which included the thoughts of Aristotle, perceived sin as an individual choice of a person. He assumed that people are able to understand and distinguish good from evil, and to decide what to do, and in this sense they are entirely responsible for their deeds. This assumption was essential in the discussion over the nature of sin: sin is in this context a breach of the laws of God, an offence against God.

Such an attitude adds value to the importance of a human being and human conscience perceiving the laws of God as the basic criteria determining their deeds. St. Thomas Aquinas claimed that even people who are threatened with excommunication should act in accordance with their conscience and attitudes.

The transformation of mentality briefly presented above, has various essential practical consequences. The attitude of those who lived in the 12th century towards penance, one of the seven sacraments, can serve as an example here. Remission of sins had been so far connected with penance, which could be for instance a pilgrimage. Through the 12th century, especially in the emerging circles of academic scholasticism in Paris, theological reflection over the nature of this sacrament led to the clear formulation of the rule which stated that the basis for softening all sins confessed to a priest, on the condition that the latter granted absolution, was the manifestation of true sorrow, regret, contrition and a promise to satisfy for the same. In this way in the Western Christianity oral confessions became the main act of expiation and penance. All internal acts of penance, even the most spectacular, were, in this perspective, of secondary importance. Personal responsibility for the deepest, the most difficult and most intimate feelings and attitudes was stressed in this stance. It assumed that all adult Christians were able to ask themselves the question posed by Socrates: "Do you know yourself?" and to do an honest self-examination. Confessors were helpful at this point because they asked questions which had to be answered clearly.

Pope Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made this kind of confession spread throughout Europe. Every believer was supposed to confess the sins to the parish-priest. Thus it can be stated that this rule, which seemed revolutionary at the time

regarding the relations that existed then, although it anticipated the preparation of believers, greatly influenced the shape of the Western Christianity.

Reflexive education for everybody

On the pages of textbooks, the 14th and 15th century often appear as a series of catastrophes and wars and as the period of the decline of the Papal administration which was forced to abandon Rome. It needs to be stressed that the latest studies show this period as the time when Christianisation spread – it was the time when Christianity entered almost every home, it penetrated both urban and rural culture. Some historians even talk about the eruption of piety, for instance in France in the 15th century, and about flourishing brotherhoods. Of course it resulted from the Christianisation which had been conducted for hundreds years and from educational activities undertaken by the Council in the year 1215.

Contemporary religious historical anthropology introduces essential corrections into the traditional picture drawn in old-fashioned textbooks which situate the climax of Christianity in the 13th century and which treat the renaissance of the 14th and 15th century as the beginning of gradual secularisation of the society. Nowadays, when we have more information on the Middle Ages, we can speak of the intensification of religiousness which took place at the time. Frequently, it was very individual religiousness which stressed the importance of an individual attitude of a concrete person towards God and a person's individual perception of God. Self-examination and confession of sins gained in importance. It manifested clearly in the development of mysticism or so called modern piety (*devotion moderna*) which encouraged people to study teachings, to read and to think.

Today we know that both the Protestant reform of the 16th century and the Catholic reform, which in traditional historiography is called counter-reformation, originated from the debates and reformatory attempts undertaken by the Church in the 15th century. These two great fractions of Christianity, competing with each other or fighting against each other, in the 17th century continued the process of intensification of religiousness of believers which has begun as early as in the 13th century. The processes which took place between the 13th and 15th century, and between the 16th and 18th century had an impact on the evolution of the religious culture in Europe and as such these processes should be, and in fact they are, the subject of historical studies. Continuity and similarity, despite various differences, of these great ages of Christianisation ceased to be doubted.

These processes were so strong that they could not be stopped by even the deepest crisis although several did take place in the 14th and the following centuries. Gradual consolidation of Christianity in the minds, in the hearts and in religious practices of citizens of the West led, in some sense, to the strengthening of christianitas, whose social basis was becoming much more solid.

Nowadays we are still astonished at the wide range of the assimilation of Christianity in the European world which initially had been so miscellaneous. Christianity, preserving its traditional values and language, managed to function in symbiosis with states, with nations, with social classes and with communities of different types, with local cultures and with elites. National cultures began to develop intensively since the 12th or 13th century. Folk cultures, familiar to the majority of the inhabitants of Europe, for a long time preserved their separateness which was so essential to them. However, the two processes - Christianisation of folklore and folklorisation of Christianity – finally led to the merging of the Christ's religion with the reality of the European country.

As a result of all these transformations Christian spirituality in its European form became one of the most important elements of the cultural unity of Europe. This spirituality enabled to overcome differences which were rather liquid in the 16th century, and in the 17th and 18th century allowed – at least from time to time – for the two religions to meet.