

Philosophical Thinking **For Form 1 of secondary schools**

Excerpt

15. European culture and the values which it respects are determined by the borders of Europe.

What is Europe? The word “Europe” comes from Ancient Greek. It was used by the Greeks to distinguish the lands inhabited by them from the territories of barbarians. Unlike the Greeks, we are not so proud as to believe that only we have created true culture or that all other races are barbarians. We are aware of the fact that so-called barbarian cultures are simply different to ours. The word “barbarian” has changed its meaning; instead of referring to people who come from outside Europe, it refers only to those who have no culture whatsoever, neither a foreign culture nor one of their own, and who destroy the achievements of culture.

Although we understand Europe in a different way to the ancient Greeks, we still consider that its culture gives it a special place among other continents.

The borders of Europe. How far does Europe extend? If you look at an atlas you will see that the borders of Europe coincide with the borders of several Eastern European states. As you have learned from your history lessons, the history of the formation of these countries often involved violence and conquest. Does this mean that the borders of Europe were imposed by force? By no means. After all, many European rulers, beginning with Alexander the Great in the 4th Century BC, conquered large areas of Asia, but none of this had any effect on the borders of Europe. These borders are the borders of **European culture**, and they cannot be expanded merely by using force to subjugate other countries.

European culture. Our concept of Europe is based on a common European culture. But what is European culture, and how does it differ from Chinese or Indian culture, for example? Many historians and philosophers have reflected on what constitutes the **essential nature**, that is, the most important features of European culture. According to some, the borders of European culture are the same as those of the areas under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, and in particular of Catholic religious orders, who for several centuries were the representatives of Catholic learning and education. There are others who maintain that Europe should also include the areas influenced by the Orthodox Church, such as Russia. Another criterion which has been used is that of art, and in particular architecture; countries in which architecture developed according to the styles prevailing in Europe - Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, etc., are considered to be part of Europe. Europe is also considered to be the countries in which the culture of Ancient Rome has left a lasting effect, particularly in the form of Roman Law, which forms the basis of laws in European countries. There are different criteria for belonging to Europe, and therefore also different conceptions of what is contained within the borders of Europe.

European values. One could argue for ever about what belongs to Europe and what does not. However, the real answer to the question “what is Europe?” is to do with **values**, and not geographical borders. These values include justice, democracy, respect for property, taking responsibility for oneself and others, respecting the human dignity of others regardless of their

position in society, creativity and constant technological progress, and finally, freedom of speech. Of course, none of these values if taken separately is exclusively European. Europeans did not invent them, and they are often ignored or violated in Europe itself. However, taken as a whole they form the basis for a way of life which at least some Europeans have considered to be their own since antiquity and right up to the present day. If we take all these values together, we arrive at an **image of European man**, as someone who believes in the rational nature of the world and in the possibility of perfecting it. European culture is therefore a culture of **experimentation**, of creating new ideas, institutions, and inventions. Experimentation goes together with an atmosphere of unceasing **revolt** against previous generations. However, Europeans also believe in cooperation and **dialogue** between people. Dialogue involves disagreement, but also respect for differences of opinion and establishing common views. To sum up, European culture is based on reason, but at the same time is full of conflict and upheaval. The most remarkable feature of this culture is that it has the capacity to survive turbulence and to regenerate itself after periods of profound malaise such as the two World Wars, which the European nations themselves were to blame for. European history includes periods of humanism and peaceful development as well as periods of violence and injustice. However, Europe has managed to retain its belief in the possibility of creating a better world. The **arts, sciences and philosophy** have made a major contribution to the survival of European values. In no other culture has science played such a significant role. For example, although the Chinese came up with some wonderful inventions, they only used them for practical purposes and not to find out more about the world. Both in China and India there were marvellous and wise philosophical systems, but these systems made little contribution to the lives of common people.

Representatives of other parts of the world have accused European countries of enriching themselves at the cost of others in the course of colonizing large areas of the globe. Unfortunately, this accusation is well-founded, and in certain ways we Europeans have a debt to repay the rest of the world. If we have managed to accumulate a huge amount of wealth, advanced technology, artistic treasures and so on, this confers an obligation on us to help others. The more that one has, the more one is expected to give.

Let's read!

Pope John Paul II on Europe

The Church would like to warn against reducing a vision of Europe exclusively to its political and economic aspects. [...] If we want it to last, we should build the new unity of Europe on the foundation of spiritual values which originally formed it, without forgetting the riches and the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the individual nations. We intend to build a great European Spiritual Community. (Warsaw, 1999)

I, John Paul, son of the Polish nation, which has always considered itself to be European [...] bishop of Rome and pastor of the Catholic Church, call on you, old Europe, from Santiago, with a voice which is full of love: Find yourself! Be yourself! Discover your origins. Breathe life into your roots! [...] You still have an opportunity to be a beacon of civilization for the world and to spur it on to progress. Other continents are watching you and awaiting the same answer from you which St. James gave to Christ: "I can do it". (Santiago de Compostella, 1982)

Interpreting the text

- 1** What is Europe's greatest glory, and what was the greatest disaster to befall Europe?
- 2** After reading quotations from Pope John Paul's speeches, do you feel that Europe has reached a state of peace and happiness, or do you feel that it still faces serious problems?
- 3** Why do you think that the Pope as head of the Catholic Church, which is represented all over the world, attaches special importance to Europe?

Let's philosophize!

- 1** Before you go back to reflecting on what Europe is, why not do a simple exercise. Without thinking about it too deeply, each one of you should sketch the borders of Europe on the following satellite photograph. Take a look at the maps which your classmates have drawn. You are sure to find plenty of differences, both large and small ones. In particular, look at where you have drawn the borders of Europe. How sure are you of where to draw these borders and which countries belong to Europe? Make a table of all the things which you are not sure of. For each one of them, consider whether you could easily remove any doubts you have (for example, by asking somebody who knows more about the subject) or whether anybody might find it difficult to decide.
- 2** Suppose that Poland has just joined the European Union and someone has the idea of celebrating by organizing an exhibition entitled "What is Europe". What items would you include in the exhibition?
- 3** Imagine that you have your own travel agency. One day, a Japanese company telephones you and asks you to organize a "Europe in 5 days" holiday. What kind of trip would you plan, and why?
- 4** Think about what things you have in common with other Poles. After you have made a list, underline the things which you have in common with all Europeans. You will of course notice that the things you have in common with other Poles are not necessarily the same as what Europeans have in common. On the other hand, is there anything which all Europeans have in common which Poles do not?

Europe is not just a geographical location. The answer to questions such as "what is Europe?" and "what does it mean to be a European?" needs to consider our common history, social institutions, Christianity, which we share as a common religion, and, above all, European values. These include freedom, rationalism, constant scientific and technological progress, respect for human rights, and social involvement. However, being Europeans and creating Europe are ideals which we are often unable to live up to.