

Catholicism and Secularism in Contemporary Europe

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*The 2008-2009 Terrence R. Keeley Visiting Vatican Lecture
The Nanovic Institute for European Studies at the
University of Notre Dame*

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Published by the Nanovic Institute for European Studies
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Notre Dame, Indiana.

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I. The Arch, The Cathedral, and Johnny

By way of beginning, I would like to present two images that can offer an idea of the religious situation in Europe today.

The first image is that offered by the American, George Weigel, in his book, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God*. At the end of the last century, The Great Arch (*La Grande Arche*) was built in Paris. It is a colossal construction in the form of an open cube that houses the International Foundation for Human Rights. Then President, François Mitterand, envisioned *La Grande Arche* as a monument to human rights, in order to mark the bicentennial of the French revolution and the declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen. Tourist guides point out that *La Grande Arche* can comfortably accommodate the entire Cathedral of Notre Dame with its towers. George Weigel, however, asks whether human rights and the ethical foundations of democracy are better protected by the secularist *Arch*, or not rather by the Christian Cathedral.¹

The second image is that offered by the Italian intellectual and politician, Marcello Pera, who has often been engaged in dialogue with the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. Imitating the satire of the *Persian Letters* of the Baron de Montesquieu, Pera imagines a young American tourist, Johnny, who writes to his fiancée, Danielle, to give her an idea of contemporary Europe.² Johnny is just the man because he is down-to-earth, has a strong sense of identity and patriotism, and does not belong to the intellectual or artistic elite of New York or Hollywood, which is filled with pro-European prejudices and feelings of anti-American guilt.

In his imaginary *American Letters*, then, Johnny writes more or less the same things that, three centuries prior, the Persian, Uzbek, had observed. Uzbek had not noted in the French a profound Christian faith: “For them there is a great difference between professing religion and believing in it, between believing in it and being convinced about it and putting it into practice.”³ Johnny also writes that Europe has its anthem, which is the *Ode to Joy* of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. The anthem, however, is played without the words that make reference to God: *Brüder, überm Sternenzelt / Muss ein lieber Vater Wohnen* (Brothers, above the star-filled heaven / there must dwell a loving father). Europe also has a Patron Saint, Saint Benedict. All seem to be united, but they are not. Speaking of rights, Johnny states that Europe is the area of the world in which rights are protected and guaranteed. In fact, new ones are always being invented, that are called “rights of the last generation.”⁴

1. G. Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (Basic Books: New York, 2005), p. 2.

2. M. Pera, *Perché dobbiamo dirci cristiani. Il liberalismo, l'Europa, l'Etica* (Mondadori: Milano, 2008), pp. 60-70.

3. C-L. Montesquieu, *Lettere persiane: Lettera LXXV* (BUR: Milano, 1997).

4. M. Pera, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

In his last letter, Johnny writes that Europe is an entity *sui generis*. Some consider it a dream that eclipses the American dream, and others consider it “EUtopia” or “EURabia,” and complain about its impotence, its flexibility, the loss of its Christian roots and its demographic decline.

II. Secularization and Secularism

In these two representations of Europe there emerge many elements concerning the problem of the image of Europe today: secularization, the condition of the Catholic Church, the European Constitution, inter-religious dialogue and European identity. Let us make it immediately clear that we are referring above all to western and central Europe which, in the second half of the last century, has enjoyed the greatest freedom of thought.

Let us begin with the phenomenon of secularization, a complex and ambivalent phenomenon. With exaggerated synthesis, one can say it is the purely immanent understanding and functioning of the world and of society, of history and of human existence.⁵ Reality is no longer transferred to the sacred, to the religious or to the divine sphere, all of which do not find a place in a secularized society.

In the first centuries, even the Church itself conducted a type of secularization when it demythologized pagan gods and idols, and denounced them as human creations that had nothing to do with the true God of revelation. On a positive note, then, secularization can push the faithful to become adults in the faith and to face responsibly the complex challenges of the historical and cultural processes that are occurring.

Secularization, however, presents its negative aspect when it becomes an agnostic and anti-religious ideology. Then, it is secularism that implies an attitude of total emancipation from the faith and of opposition to the Church. Secularism is a tendency that, in Europe, pervades culture, political power and the means of social communication. It is the profanation of human existence and its apostasy from the religious and the sacred. The cosmos, society and the ethical conduct of the individual and of peoples are seen as completely emancipated from religious bonds which are considered as undue, intolerable, oppressive and alienating interferences. Secularism does not allow any other reality than that of this world. It rejects God, his redemptive incarnation, His word and His salvific presence in the Church and in history. The extreme limit of secularism is atheism.

5. J. Doré, *La sécularisation aujourd'hui. Un phénomène complexe, un défi pour la pastorale de la culture*, in the Pontifical Council for Culture, *Sfide della secolarizzazione in Europa* (Urbaniana University Press: Roma, 2008), p. 63.

III. The Exception of Western Europe

In these last years, however, there has been a dispute regarding the general phenomenon of secularization, which is considered a false prophecy. In his last and very large work, *A Secular Age*, the Canadian Charles Taylor, who is one of the greatest English language thinkers and one of the most important contemporary Catholic intellectuals, declares that, despite the ease with which many today do not believe in God, the world continues to remain substantially religious, with the exception of western Europe.⁶

Peter L. Berger, as well, thinks that secularization is in its decline:

Since the age of Illuminism, intellectuals of every opinion have held the decline of religion as an inevitable consequence of modernity, affirming that the progress of science and the concomitant rationality were destined to substitute the irrationality and the superstition of religion. And this has been the thought not of only Nietzsche, but also of other authoritative modern thinkers. Among these are Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. In simple words, however, they were wrong. Modernity is not of itself 'laicising', even though it has been so in some particular cases.⁷

In reality, however, even Berger has to admit the European exception. In western and central Europe, in fact, a Euro-secularism is present that is supported by a very influential minority of the continental *intelligentia*, who seek in every way to bar religion from public and private life.⁸

The analysis of Lieven Boeve seems to me to be more subtle. When examining the religious situation in Europe, he speaks of a transition from secularization to post-modernity or post-secularization. If secularization has meant a gradual decrease of the influence of Christian tradition upon individuals and society, post-secularization in contemporary Europe seems to be characterized by two phenomena: de-traditionalization and pluralization.⁹

De-traditionalization signifies the socio-cultural interruption of both religious and socio-political, as well as ethical, tradition. This is clear in the case of Christianity, which no longer enjoys a familiar and social milieu that lends itself to the handing down of the convictions and of the traditional religious behavior necessary for the formation of the Christian identity of the individual. Christian identity is not given, but must be acquired. Every individual must construct his own religious identity.

6. C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007). Cf. the presentation, which is considered here, made by M. P. Gallagher, *La critica di Charles Taylor alla secolarizzazione*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* IV (2008), p. 249.

7. P. L. Berger, *Secolarizzazione, la falsa profezia*, in *Vita e Pensiero* (2009), p. 15.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

9. L. Boeve, *Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe*, in *Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005), p. 104.

Religious pluralization signifies the massive presence on European soil of believers of other religions. Immigration has put on our streets great numbers of non-Christian faithful who claim their precise identity. That makes life difficult for Christians who, in a climate of post-secularization, seem to live a weak and problematic identity that is open to pluralistic and syncretic deviations.

In modern Europe, therefore, there are Christians. There are, however, also post-Christians who are indifferent, atheists, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and still others.

In this panorama, the influence of Christianity on social life is greatly weakened. The awareness of an ever more marked independence from tradition and of an ever more accented acceptance of pluralism of religious behavior is reinforced.

IV. The Disputation of Christian Roots

Does this mean, however, the detachment of Europe from Christianity? In 2005, shortly before his election as Supreme Pontiff, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger lamented the religious and moral crisis of the European continent where “a culture has developed that constitutes in a most absolutely radical way the contradiction not only of Christianity but of the religious and moral traditions of humanity.”¹⁰

In fact, the European Constitution makes no reference to God and to the Christian roots of its civilization. In this way, the profound structure of a society that is spiritual and cultural, more than political and economic, is forgotten. European identity is disfigured.

Is the accent on the Christian roots of Europe an offense to non-Christians, who are present in great numbers on the old continent?

Who would be offended? [asked Cardinal Ratzinger]. Whose identity is threatened? The Muslims, who in this aspect are often and willingly called into play, do not feel themselves threatened by our Christian moral foundations, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations. And even our fellow Jewish citizens are not offended by reference to the Christian roots of Europe, in so far as these roots reach back to Mount Sinai: they carry the imprint of the voice that made itself heard on the mountain of God and they unite us in the great fundamental orientations that the decalogue has given to humanity. The same is true for the reference to God: it is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions, but rather the attempt to build the human community absolutely without God.¹¹

The reason for this double “no,” to God and to Christian roots, is found in the presupposition that only a radical and rationalist culture can constitute European

10. J. Ratzinger, *L'Europa di Benedetto nella crisi delle culture* (Cantagalli: Siena, 2005), p. 37.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

identity. The tragic history of Europe of the last century, however, has shown that human freedom, detached from God and from His law, leads to a dogmatism that, in the end, humiliated man by suppressing his freedom. The atheistic ideologies of Nazism and Communism have not produced earthly paradises but only tragic regimes of terror that denied dignity and freedom to the human being, to their victims and even to the executioners themselves.

Still valid today is the judgment that, on the eve of the Second World War, Christopher Dawson made of European society that no longer made reference to God and to the Church, but simply found itself in a land of nobody: “a secular society that has no end beyond its own satisfaction is a monstrosity – a cancerous growth which will ultimately destroy itself.”¹²

The Christian response to atheistic secularism is based upon the experience of the centuries, on the golden rule, according to which “living in the truth can change that which in history seems unchangeable.”

In contemporary Europe emancipation from God and the denial of His law effectively produce blameworthy behavior. Just as in economics and politics, so also in biomedicine and biotechnology, research that is detached from ethics allows man, with impunity, to dispose of life and of other human beings, above all of the most weak and defenseless. Biopolitics, which makes no reference to natural law, can permit, for example, the annihilation of fetuses, the manipulation of embryos considered as simply biological material, cloning, hybridization, contraception and euthanasia. Life loses its inviolability, and the human being loses his or her identity. Then, the very notion of family as a community composed of a father, a mother and children is attacked. Marriage is no longer just between a man and a woman. The adoption of children even by homosexual couples is permitted.

If this is Europe – one can ask – why insist on its Christian roots since it finds itself culturally alien to Christianity?

The answer is to be found in the fact that Europe can not be understood without Christianity. It loses its identity and its originality. European history demonstrates that the “concept Europe” is a plurimillenary construction made up of diverse and complementary strata.¹³

The first stratum is that offered by Greek civilization. Europe, as a word and as a geographical and spiritual concept, is a Greek creation. The elements of this Greek-ness could be synthesized in this way: the right of conscience, the relationship between reason and religion (*ratio et religio*) and the affirmation of democracy in a binding harmony with that which is just and right.

12. C. Dawson, *The Modern Dilemma*, in *Christianity and European Culture: Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson*, ed. Gerald Russello (Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C., 1998), p. 118.

13. J. Ratzinger, *Chiesa, ecumenismo e politica. Nuovi saggi di ecclesologia*, (Edizioni Paoline: Cinisello B., 1987), pp. 207-221.

The second stratum is that inherited from Christianity. Its view of the human person holds that the synthesis between the faith of Israel and the Greek spirit is operative in Jesus Christ.

The third stratum is that inherited from the Latin tradition. In history, Europe has been identified with the west, and, that is, with the sphere of Latin culture and the Latin Church which, however, embraced people of the Romance languages, Germanic peoples, Anglo-Saxons and a part of the Slavic peoples. The external reality of Christianity (*res publica christiana*) was certainly not a politically constituted European reality. It existed in the totality of a unifying culture that was visible in its juridical systems, universities, councils, religious orders and in the extension of Church life. The whole had Rome as its center.

Finally, the fourth stratum of Europe is that inherited from the modern era. The elements of such a heredity are: the distinction between State and Church, the freedom of conscience, human rights and the self-responsibility of reason.

All of these diverse elements have been brought together into a unity by the Church of Christ, that has been the matrix of European civilization, of its defense and of its spreading throughout the world. In his work, *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, Thomas E. Woods, Jr., lists the multiple contributions that the Catholic Church has brought to European civilization with its monasteries, universities, scientific research, art, international law, economy, charity, ethics, and, above all, with freedom.¹⁴

Thus, the Europe of the future can not be only the product of a political and economic unification, but also the synthesis of the values inherited from tradition. It would, therefore, have to take into account its Greek roots and the intimate relationship between democracy and good government (*eunomia*). It would have to base its laws upon moral norms which respect the natural law. It would also have to bind its public law to the respect for the moral values of Christianity and not relegate God to the private sphere alone. Rather, it would have to recognize him publicly as the supreme value. An exasperated atheism would not guarantee the survival of a State of law: “democracy functions solely if the conscience functions and this conscience is struck dumb if it is not oriented according to the validity of the fundamental ethical values of Christianity, which can be realized even without an explicit profession of Christianity, indeed also in the context of a non-Christian religion.”¹⁵ The rejection of atheism and the public recognition of God as the foundation of *ethos* and of law (*jus*) is also the rejection of a spirit of exaggerated nationalism.

14. T. E. Woods, Jr., *Come la Chiesa cattolica ha costruito la civiltà occidentale*, (Siena: Cantagalli, 2007).

15. J. Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, *Chiesa, ecumenismo e politica*, p. 219.

For this reason, the Catholic Church, above all through the magisterium both of John Paul II with his Post-Synodal Exhortation, *The Church in Europe*, and of Benedict XVI with the three exemplary lessons given at Regensburg (September 12, 2006), at the University of Rome *La Sapienza* (January 18, 2008) and at Paris (September 13, 2008), is not lukewarm on the agenda of ideological and political secularism. Rather, the Church continuously encourages an attitude of positive laicism that values the input of Christianity with its “yes” to life, liberty, democracy and respect for the dignity of every human being. This attitude seems to recall what Blaise Pascal said to his non-believer friends when he invited them to live “as if God existed” (*veluti si Deus daretur*). In this way, no one loses his or her freedom, and moral decisions find a sure and urgently needed foundation.

V. “Christophobia”

If a certain “Christophobia,” present in the predominately secularist European culture, is to be overcome, it is indispensable that Europe anchor itself to God and remember its Christian roots.

With its aversion to Christianity, the European community is a body that is always growing, but without a soul. In his analysis of the projected European Constitution, Joseph H. H. Weiler, an orthodox Jew born in South Africa and Professor at the New York University School of Law, recognizes the historical absurdity of eliminating Christianity from modern European history. Indeed, he arrives at the affirmation that a European Constitution, which deliberately ignores the Christian roots of Europe, would be constitutionally illegitimate.¹⁶ A Christian Europe, in fact, would respect the rights of all citizens, believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians. The lack of its Christian roots brings about the lack of democracy.

Weiler also speaks of Christophobia that manifests itself with different accents and motivations. For example, there is the mistaken conviction of European intellectuals who consider the tragedy of the holocaust to be a logical conclusion of an historical anti-Judaism, whereas it is the direct consequence of the atheistic conception of National Socialism. A second component of Christophobia is present in the followers of the youth revolution of the 1960s, which was substantially anti-Christian. Furthermore, Christophobia is the psychological and ideological counter-attack to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, which was due to the extraordinary influence of the personality of John Paul II.

It is unthinkable, however, to dream of a Europe as “a special place of human hope” without the men and women, great and small, who have contributed

16. J.H.H. Weiler, *Un'Europa cristiana: Un saggio esplorativo* (Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli: Milano, 2003).

their genius and creativity to European civilization.¹⁷ In the same way, it would be unthinkable that Europe might defend “the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person” without the foundation of Christian civilization.¹⁸

VI. Why Europeans “must” profess themselves to be Christians

This apostasy from Christianity, that is propagated in the daily press, is in reality plunging Europe into a grave moral and social crisis: “Relativism, laicism, scientism and all that which today is put in the place of faith are the poisons, not the antidotes, the viruses that attack the body that is already ill, not the anti-bodies that defend it.”¹⁹

The experiment that is taking place today in Europe, and that is, of living as if God does not exist, is not producing its promised fruits.

Above all, secularism, which is the basis of civil rights, does not justify itself without a strong reference to the good and the true. It remains without foundation. Christianity, on the other hand, which perceives man as the image of God, brings to society the incommensurable value of personal dignity. Without this, there is neither freedom nor equality, neither solidarity nor justice.

Furthermore, Europeanists lament the lack of “European identity” and seek a soul for the new Europe. Without Christian identity, however, Europe is not more open, more tolerant and more peaceful. On the contrary,

Without the awareness of Christian identity, Europe detaches itself from America and divides the West; it loses the sense of its own limits and becomes an indistinct container; it does not succeed in integrating immigrants, in fact it places them in ghettos or it surrenders itself to their culture; it is not capable of defeating Islamic fundamentalism, in fact it favors the martyrdom of Christians in many parts of the world and even in its own home.²⁰

Thirdly, it is affirmed that freedom consists in welcoming all freedoms and, therefore, insisting upon the Christian religion would not be necessary since democracy is a religion in itself. As Plato had already observed, however, one discovers that such a relativist democracy is self-destructive. It devours itself.²¹ If truth no longer exists, but only the sum of the various beliefs does; if the moral natural law no longer exists, but only the absolute freedom of the individual does, “then, the moral good need only be put to a vote and a vote, look at our laws on bioethical questions, can

17. Cf the Preamble of the projected European Constitution.

18. *Ibid.*

19. M. Pera, *op. cit.*, *Perché dobbiamo dirci cristiani*, p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

21. Plato, *The Republic*, VIII, xi-xiv.

decide that anything is good.”²²

Europe must profess itself to be Christian if it wishes to find again its soul, its identity, its foundations and the truth of things. The great theoreticians of liberalism, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and Immanuel Kant exalted human freedom, but placed a precise condition in order to be able to realize it: respect for the natural law. For Kant and the others, respect for that law, however, was assured by the duty of conscience to adhere to the principle of good and not to that of evil. And the good, to which Kant also was referring with his religion within the limits of reason, was that proper to the Christian ethic. All these thinkers were Christian. They bound the fundamental rights of mankind to the commandments of the Christian God. All were, in their own way, anti-clerical, but none of them was agnostic, a non-believer or an atheist.

There are many reasons that would have to motivate Europeans to profess that they are Christians: the memory of their origins, the possibility of overcoming the crisis in their society, the inhumanity of a self-sufficient and atheistic secularism, the maintenance of social stability, pride in the universality of European civilization, the rational and non-prejudicial foundation of the distinction between State and Church and the survival of socio-political institutions.

Benedetto Croce, also, in August of 1942, right in the middle of the Second World War and at the height of the greatest crisis of civilization in Europe brought about by Marxism and Nazism, wrote the work, “Why We Cannot but Call Ourselves Christians.” Christianity was, for him, the greatest revolution of humanity that has produced an extraordinary human civilization, which still today sustains contemporary society. Christianity is at the basis of modern thought and of its ethical ideal.

Today, Europe is without a soul because it rejects that Christian soul which history has given it. It is not sufficient to speak of unity in diversity or of a *mestizaje* of cultures. These are ambiguous formulas because they do not provide an identity. Integration presupposes an integrating subject.

In the end, Europe must profess to be Christian if it wishes to be united; if it wishes to affirm itself as a civilization of fundamental human rights; if it wishes to defend itself and avoid wars of religion; if it wishes to overcome the tragic season of its recent past; if it intends to defeat its profound moral crisis.

Why do millions of people from other continents and from other non-Christian cultures knock not only at the doors of the United States of America but also at those of Europe, and invade it? Do they do it only to find a job and a better condition of life? Perhaps! But the deeper reason is only one: because they find liberty and because the real native country of the human person is not the territory where he or she was born but the land where he and she can live free.

22. M. Pera, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

If Europe wishes to continue to live with freedom for all, it must continue to live “even if God existed” (*etsi Deus daretur*) and to be based upon Christian tradition. If Europe wishes to integrate people coming from other cultures, it cannot be without identity. It must, however, still have trust in the values that identify it, appreciate them, and even have the serenity to consider them good. If they were not good, millions of immigrants would not be seeking them.

Does integration, then, mean a conversion to Christianity? Not necessarily. Integration means adhesion to the fundamental values of European civilization: “If Europe is not a melting pot but only a container, it is because it does not have the sufficient energy of its identity to blend the contents.”²³ The community without God, which Europe is constructing through laicism, relativism, scientism and multi-culturalism, is not just an obstacle to its identity. It is also an impediment to the politics of integration. Does this presuppose a new Christian fundamentalism? No, because while Christianity recognizes itself as the religion of universal salvation in the mystery of Christ, it avoids fundamentalism through the antidote of religious liberty, of respect for the individual conscience, of the distinction between the error and the person who errs, of the commandment of love towards all, even towards one’s enemies.

VII. The Gospel as good news for Europe today

The attitude of the Church toward contemporary Europe reflects the Gospel message of love and freedom: “Go out into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16: 15-16). “He came among his own people, but his own, however, did not receive him. To those who did receive him, he gave the power to become children of God” (John 1: 11-12). The Church proposes, but does not impose, the Gospel. Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor suggests having a more understanding attitude toward European society without God. The Church must not always be grumpy, but ready to listen. More than correcting, what is necessary is proclaiming the good news of the Gospel of Jesus and witnessing to it with coherence.²⁴

The Gospel is essentially good news even for today. As a result, our reflection on the situation of Catholicism in secularized Europe is intended to be good news.

In his exhortation, *The Church in Europe*, the Servant of God John Paul II mentions among the many signs of hope: the regaining of freedom by the Church in Eastern Europe, the attention of pastors and faithful to their spiritual mission

23. *Ibid.*

24. C. Murphy-O’Connor, *The Challenges of a Society Without God. The Church’s Pastoral Initiatives in Western Europe*, in Pontifical Council for Culture, *Sfide della secolarizzazione in Europa* (Urbaniana University Press: Roma, 2008), p. 83.

and to the proclamation of the Gospel, the pacification of European peoples, and the martyrdom of the witnesses to the faith. The Pope also mentions the holiness of many children of the Church in Europe. They are living stones that have held fast to Christ the cornerstone and have built the moral and spiritual edifice of Europe. Also mentioned is the birth in Europe of new movements within the Church, such as that of the Focolarini, the Neo-Catechumenate, Communion and Liberation, the Community of Sant'Egidio.²⁵ These have become the leaven of hope for all people, Christian and non-Christian: "The source of hope, for Europe and the whole world, is Christ, and the Church is the channel through which the wave of grace, that flows from the pierced Heart of the Redeemer, passes and spreads."²⁶

The task of the Church in Europe is threefold: to accept the Gospel, to witness to it with coherence and to announce it in the modern Areopaghi of culture, of politics, of mass media, and of the education of youth. For Europe, the Gospel remains, even for the third millennium, its Book *par excellence*, a book of life, of truth and of light, as Christ, the Word of God incarnate, is life, truth, and light. Let us once again take this Book into our hands. Let us devour it, taste it, and celebrate it. This was the exhortation of the Servant of God John Paul II.

On his part, the Holy Father Benedict XVI, a great scholar of Europe and of its Christian identity, has at various times encouraged Europe not to be ashamed of the Gospel, but to appreciate and live it. During his meeting with French intellectuals in Paris, he stated:

For many, God has become truly the great Unknown. . . . A merely positivist culture that has removed into the subjective field the question about God as non-scientific, would be the capitulation of reason, the renouncement of its highest possibilities and therefore a breakdown of humanism, the consequences of which could only be grave. That which has established the culture of Europe, the search for God and the willingness to listen to Him, remains even today the foundation of every authentic culture.²⁷

VIII. Conversions to the Gospel

Besides the signs of hope already mentioned, there are, in fact, also returns to the Christian faith or conversions, even from Islam. Unfortunately, this news is not easily circulated in daily European news services because of a sense of modesty that Christians have in making this reality known. They want to relegate it to the private or secret sector in order not to give fodder to critics of triumphalism.

Just as in the face of intimidation by Marxists and by followers of Sartre or of

25. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation, *The Church in Europe* (2003), n. 16.

26. *Ibid.*, n. 18.

27. Benedict XVI, *Discours al Collège des Bernardins*, on September 12, 2008.

structuralism of the previous decades, so too in the face of post-modern, laicist, relativist, and irrationalist provocations, Christians can not continue, out of fear, to walk with their hands touching the walls. Even Albert Camus in 1948 gracefully scolded the Dominicans of the Boulevard la Tour-Maubourg in Paris for not loudly expressing their *credo*.²⁸ The Gospel of Jesus has still today a foundational value for humanity.

In Italy on Easter Sunday of 2008, in the Basilica of Saint Peter, Benedict XVI baptized a Muslim, Magdi Allam, an Italian born in Cairo, and Vice-Director of the noted daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*. A prominent intellectual of Italian culture today, Magdi Allam has always defended the Christian roots of Europe and of Italy. He was surprised that, while he, a Muslim, appreciated European civilization forged by Christianity, Europeans instead despised it. After a long journey of grace Magdi Allam made the great step of conversion to Christ. In Baptism he took the name, “Christian”: Magdi Cristiano Allam. In the book about his conversion he writes:

Thank you Jesus, God of Love, of Truth, of Life and of Freedom, that through the intercession of the Holy Father Benedict XVI, the Pope of Faith and Reason, you have gathered me into the community of Christian believers. The celebration of your Resurrection has brought about the interior resurrection of my spirit.²⁹

And then he reveals with simplicity that, on his nightstand, he always keeps the Gospels and the book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, written by Benedict XVI, “finding comfort in reading about the life of Jesus.”³⁰

Conclusion

Perhaps The Great Arch—*La Grande Arche*—which, because of its size, can contain the Cathedral of Notre Dame, can also serve as a wish for contemporary European culture. Without the Cathedral, the Arch—a symbol of secularization—remains an empty monument. With the Cathedral of Notre Dame inside of it, it once again finds its soul, and thus gives an adequate foundation to the authentic universal rights of the human being.

28. A. Camus, *L'incroyant et le Chrétien, Actuelles: chroniques 1944-1948* (Gallimard: Paris, 1950).

29. Magdi Cristiano Allam, *Grazie Gesù. La mia conversione dall'islam al cattolicesimo* (Mondadori: Milano, 2008), p. 3.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

