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### CALL FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE FACE OF TODAY'S THREATS

Originating from the American continent, *via postmoderna* tends not only to question the *raison d'être* of all cultural paths hitherto followed by Europe (i.e. *via antiqua*, *via Christiana*, *via moderna*), but also impels the contemporary man to question any possibility of understanding the existing reality in all its entirety. This outlook, accompanied by the design of universal deconstruction rejects the existence of such universal categories as *truth*, *world*, *history* and *community* on the presumption that they converge with totalitarianism and fundamentalism. One consequence of that approach is the questioning of what the modern teaching of the Church revolving around the idea of human identity in its cultural dimension, defines as the truth about man.

This identity can be analyzed from different perspectives. It becomes the subject of interest for cultural and social anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and other human sciences. The main point of reference for the present teleological and moral reflection on the cultural identity of man, and precisely, on the factors that may influence the loss of cultural identity, will be the need to respect the indicated by John Paul II and recalled by Benedict XVI "grammar" of dialogue and peace, understood as the universal moral law inscribed on the human heart. This law reveals itself as an essential *constants* describing human identity in the dimension of culture, however, it finds its deepest justification in God as the highest Good. Bearing that in mind, presentation of threats to cultural identity should commence with reference to the phenomenon of contemporary religious indifferentism understood as a specific type of threat to identity in vertical dimension, i.e. one of the major dimensions of cultural identity (John Paul II, 1993, 98). Religious indifferentism along with pluralism on axiological level are manifested as, to use the classification proper for classic aretology, a specific type of distortion of cultural identity *per defectum*, while fundamentalism and nationalism, described in the following part of the article, as distortion *per excessum*. The last part of the article will present the relationship between fidelity to cultural identity and deficits of modern democracy.

## 1. CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS INDIFFERENTISM AS A FALSIFIED FORM OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The hitherto widely accepted anthropological vision of God as an archetype providing man with answers to the majority of fundamental questions related to the meaning of life and death, good and evil, past, present and future, is nowadays confronted with emerging ideas in which God gradually loses His personal dimension, His central position in history, or His unicity in inspiring the processes of liberation and salvation. Jesus has become one of many liberators and saviors, or one of many teachers of moral order and peace in the world. He is no longer, in all His prophetic fullness of humanity, a paradigm in which man could contemplate or find his identity (Sanna 2003, 815).

This weakening of the idea of God gave rise to the weakening of the idea of man and to the loss of his identity. Human *I* lost the autonomy and consistency of the inner sphere of conscience, traditionally referring to God, it broke off the relationship with the Absolute and thus, became easy prey for other people representing power and knowledge, who colonized his consciousness. Consequently, in the postmodern world, man is defined by a variety of reductionist and fragmentary categories parceling out his *I* into “thousands of masks, appearances, mannequins”. As a result, the loss of faith in God resulted in the fact that, instead of ceasing to believe in anything, people tend to believe in everything. However, if one believes in everything, nothing is worthy of absolute faith and there are no longer any binding models or icons serving educational and existential orientation. It is true that, when God vanishes, there arise idols, religion becomes superstition and man loses the sense of his dignity and destiny (Sanna 2003, 816).

Modern man affected by indifferent religious pluralism loses his identity in the basic dimensions of his own existence, since that pluralism inevitably leads to ethical relativism, gnoseologic subjectivism and religious individualism (Zabielski 1999). The efforts of human reason focused on the search for knowledge about man as a subject and seeking the ultimate truth in man himself, admittedly led to the development of complex systems of thought which, in turn, resulted in the development of different fields of knowledge and fostered progress in culture and history. However, at the same time, it has been forgotten that human vocation consists in the pursuit of truth which transcends man. “Sundered from that truth, individuals are at the mercy of caprice, and their state as person ends up being judged by pragmatic criteria based essentially upon experimental data, in the mistaken belief that technology must dominate all. It has happened therefore that reason, rather than voicing the human orientation towards truth, has wilted under the weight of so much knowledge and little by little has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being” (John Paul II 1998, 5).

This process gave rise to various forms of agnosticism and relativism, which made the questions about human identity and those about the identity of the phe-

nomena which are referred to as culture, get stuck on the shifting sands of widespread skepticism. Furthermore, "Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines which tend to devalue even the truths which had been judged certain. A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth." (John Paul II 1998, 5).

## 2. GLOBALISM AS PLURALISM OF OTHERNESS

The second form of pluralism constituting a threat to human identity, this time in horizontal dimension, is pluralism of otherness. This type of pluralism is seen as a direct result of globalization, which changed the concept of space and time. While the concept of space has been significantly expanded, the concept of time has been considerably reduced. The consequence of this process, in relation to the issues of identity and peaceful social coexistence, is the creation of multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious communities. So far, geographical distances allowed for peaceful coexistence of cultural, religious or ethnic differences. In this context, globalization has undoubtedly removed these obstacles, which is in itself positive. Formerly, a stranger was defined as someone living outside the borders of certain communities, nowadays, strangers arrive among those communities and become their members, as can be observed happening on a large scale in Europe (Gocko 2006, 363-387).

This situation, as noted by Ignazio Sanna, virtually revolutionizes the idea of cultural identity with respect to such aspects as the sense or forms of belonging, the processes of developing and recognizing one's identity, the ways and rules of defining citizenship, or the attitude towards remembrance and culture. Undoubtedly, reduction of protective barriers taking place due to immigration processes and cultural mix, provides an opportunity to reinforce various integrating factors in the scope of diverse religions, cultures and nationalities and can lead to cultural enrichment, strengthening of solidarity and expanding social horizons. The global village certainly fostered mutual understanding among various cultures traditions, customs and religions, which were brought closer to one another. On the other hand, globalization can lead to blurring one's own identity and losing one's own religious beliefs, value systems, etc. New factors, such as ethnic mixing, migration and global interdependence, challenge, or at least open up for discussion, the existing paradigms as well as impose high demands on culture and the law. The author quoted here, explicitly states that these factors "led to the crisis of identity of the Western subject and problematized the appearance of *the other*. The other that comes from the outside, from a different horizon of sense, exposes the incredible weakness of the *I* and then, immediately, becomes a threat, an intruder, due to the very identity retreating into itself to such an extent that it can no longer recognize

itself and becomes a stranger to itself. The question about one's neighbor's identity should henceforth be reformulated, because social space is no longer determined by territorial proximity, but by personal choices and cultural mediations"(Sanna 2003, 818).

### 3. HYBRIDIZATION OF CULTURE

The phenomenon of globalism referred to the shape of contemporary culture leads to the creation of substitutes for global culture, described in terms of hybridization (Kempny 2000, 15). Global culture becomes a form of hybrid, i.e. a phenomenon composed of a variety of mismatched parts, which amalgamates all the content of its component cultures producing a wholly new indeterminate quality (Stolarczyk 2003, 149). This leads to a gradual loss of cultural identity of societies and, eventually, to the disappearance of local cultures. This process raises reasonable objections on the part of societies, whose identity is closely linked to their culture developed over the history.

In the era of development of global communication technologies, homogenization and uniformization of many cultures is also, on an unprecedented scale, accompanied by the phenomenon of cultural confrontation. That diffusion of "values and models, including the so-called cultural activity or the widely understood consumption on the market of cultural goods" (Kempny and Woroniecka 1999, 10) is sometimes ambiguously perceived. Optimists see it as an opportunity for mutual enrichment of cultures, pessimists, in turn, as a threat, especially in view of the great influence exerted by American mass culture. Leon Dyczewski stresses in this context that the "culture of any society left to itself, or remaining in contact with only one type of culture, loses the momentum or does not develop comprehensively. Comprehensive development of culture requires contact with many cultures, because no culture is self-induced" (Dyczewski 2000, 32).

Harmonious intercultural communication most often remains an unrealized project. In fact, globalism generates a more mechanistic type of cultural transformation, defined as a model of *billiard balls*. This vision, in which cultures rather than coexisting together, collide with one another in the likeness of billiard balls, is well captioned by the term coined by an American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, i.e. *clash of civilizations* (Huntington 1996). It means an inevitable process of deterioration, stagnation and separation of cultures as well as abandonment of any kind of dialogue among them, which leads to the emergence of more and more powerful fundamentalisms.

Regardless of the direction in which the scenario of transformations in the sphere of culture will unfold, the dominance of global culture will lead to tensions between what is global and what is local. This, in turn, will lead to the loss of cultural identity in result of gradual dissuasion of individuals, groups and entire nations from their culture, from the unique spirit of their country that is an inherent

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part of each language and each creation characteristic of a given nation, but also in result of inevitable and clumsy imitation, which loses at the same time originality and uniqueness of individuals, groups and entire nations (Ritzer 1997, 14). This by no means can lead to consolidation of peace and harmonious coexistence of states, nations or other communities.

#### 4. FUNDAMENTALISM

One more, particularly significant modern threat associated with the issue of cultural identity can be identified as misunderstandings at the intersection of religion and politics. They are especially evident in those environments where there are no sufficiently distinct boundaries between the two powers. Without entering into a wider discussion about the origins of fundamentalism, it must be stated that many of its contemporary forms, which aggressively seek to emphasize the importance of local identity and cultural autonomy, emerged as a reaction to false claims issuing from the phenomenon of globalism, which can be brought down to favoring the need to recognize the ostensible, universal relevance and hegemony of the Western culture<sup>1</sup>.

Fundamentalism should be considered as a falsified interpretation of cultural identity in the sense that it distorts religion which, as it has already been pointed out, is one of its essential elements, by reducing it to the function of a means, whose role is to justify nationalistic, political or economic interests. This hypocrisy is all the more painful that it stands in contradiction to the deepest and most authentic inspirations derived from religion.

There is no doubt that driven by false religious inspiration, the fundamentalist factor is one of the reasons behind the tensions in the modern world and thus one of the major threats to peace. However, it is necessary to raise objections against a thesis promoted in some circles that the main source of fundamentalism can be linked with the immanent structure of each religion as such. Similarly, a simplified view of reality too hastily deriving prerequisites for modern terrorism or other forms of violence ravaging the Muslim world from the doctrine of Islam should become subject to equally critical analysis.

The absolute character of references to God and the consequent necessity to respect the sanctity of His name prompted Benedict XVI, like his Predecessor, to a particular reaction towards those who, under the mask of religion, ultimately despise God and discredit religions. At the roots of fundamentalism lies not only dangerous contempt for man and human life, but also, eventually, contempt for God

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<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned Huntington analyzing the origins of fundamentalism argues with the widely adopted assertion of cultural and moral superiority of the West, pointing out the fact that it did not conquer the world thanks to the superiority of ideals, values or religion (to which only a scarce number of members of other civilizations converted), but thanks to the superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget about it, people from beyond the circle of this civilization - never (Huntington, 1996).

and distortion of the full truth about Him. "Fanatical fundamentalism disfigures his loving and merciful countenance, replacing him with idols made in its own image" (Benedict 2006, 10; cf. John Paul II 2002, 6). In fact, the use of violence against another person or another nation is always an insult offered to God Himself.

Events of recent years confirm that the diverse expressions of religious life, reinforced by globalization processes, are a source of conflicts, because they lead to radical encounters of religions and various traditions. A universal nature of the vision of the world proposed by the largest religions is also conducive to potential conflicts. It creates a kind of religious competition which, due to a missionary character of Islam and Christianity, is particularly noticeable in those two religions or cultural circles. Potential conflicts can stem from diversity of religious norms, rules of conduct and customs directly related both with the sphere of everyday life and politics.

Modern varieties of fundamentalism can be interpreted as a form of authoritarian reaction to the risks associated with the loss of one's own cultural identity and concerns about globalism and postmodernism. They are an example of "religious militancy, in which the self-proclaimed "the only faithful" seek to halt the erosion of religious identity fortifying the borders of a given religious community and creating alternatives to secularized structures and processes" (Otwinowski 2005, 139). Special environments in which fundamentalist attitudes find fertile ground are developing countries, or countries undergoing cultural and political transformations which do not have stable legal and state systems or a strong cultural identity.

## 5. NATIONALISM

Fundamentalism is often associated with the phenomenon of nationalism. Both of these trends are a socially articulated manner of nurturing one's own irrational visions, accompanied by indifference towards global problems. In other words, they are manifestations of misunderstood cultural identity, which is confirmed in isolationism. Nationalism, which John Paul II regarded as one of the most serious threats to peace and defined as new paganism, boils down to exalting one's own race or nation with respect to other communities. This is due to the fact that aggression-imbued presence of one nation on a plane on which interstate relations are formed, leads to an escalation of antagonisms and mutual claims. Questioning of nations' equality, also on the plane of cultural identity, must inevitably lead to the loss of the sense of equality among people and give birth to new totalitarianism, as can be illustrated by the fates of some states in the twentieth century. Nationalism results in progressive subordination of others to one's own vision of the world (John Paul II 1994, 7).

The internal structure of nationalism has, therefore, a totalitarian character, because its purpose is to allow a given state to adopt the role of an absolute hegemon, capable of thinking and acting for all. The primary task of the state in such case is to eliminate cultural diversity. Ultimately, the real threat issuing from adopting

the vision proposed by nationalism, is a serious deformation of a fair love of one's country and lack of respect for the identity of one's own nation.

#### 6. DEFICITS OF MODERN DEMOCRACY AND FAITHFULNESS TO CULTURAL IDENTITY

In contemporary democracies, faithfulness to cultural identity encounters strong opposition, especially on the part of those supporting the so-called new ethics and new law. These trends, which feature themselves as tolerant and which are bolstered by the ideology of postmodernism, postulate freedom and arbitrariness in the choice of one's own truth, one's own ethical standards or values providing the basis for the culture and social life. What is more, such a tolerance towards beliefs is treated as an inalienable condition for peace and harmonious coexistence among people.

It must be remembered, however, that this tolerance towards beliefs is irreconcilable with civil tolerance, which assumes respect for every human being, because it deprives the society, as aptly described by Gaetano De Simone, of "all protection against the quantitative despotism of the so called *majority*". (De Simone 2003, 869). And it is not always the real majority, since it may turn out that a relatively small group, which in normal democratic procedures would be of minor importance, may gain a disproportionate impact on social life, for example by means of easier access to the media or in result of ideological imposition of certain standards associated with the so-called political correctness and in the situation where the media and publicly expressed opinions lack genuine pluralist character.

In this context, John Paul II pointed to one of the risks faced by contemporary democracy: the risk of transforming democracy into open or camouflaged totalitarianism. This situation takes place when democracy is divorced from the proper concept of the human person and when agnosticism and skeptical relativism become the philosophy and the attitude of democratic forms of politics. Those, in turn, who harbor the belief that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it, in other words, those who retain allegiance to their broadly understood cultural identity are not, from the democratic point of view, trustworthy, since they do not agree with the fact that the truth is defined by the majority, or that it changes depending on changeable political trends (John Paul II 1991, 46).

In order to enable proper functioning of modern democracies and make them a guarantor of social peace, the shaping of public opinion must proceed in terms of dialogue and discussion, because within a democratic political system all citizens should participate in the decision-making processes. This dialogue should support decision-making and that is why it is linked with the existence of common criteria of judgment and values which are recognized by all members of the public. Without them, the dialogue would be meaningless or even impossible, because epistemological agnosticism in the scope of the knowledge of truth and the associated ethical relativism would lapse into contradiction with their own ideas.

Thus, the prerequisite for democracy and social peace is the existence of defined consistent ethical conditions, and not only of legal procedures based on the majority principle. This situation imposes certain tasks with regard to preserving faithfulness to cultural identity on Christians involved in the social life. It is indicated in the so called *Political Note* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, when it states: "It is insufficient and reductive to think that the commitment of Catholics in society can be limited to a simple transformation of structures, because if at the basic level there is no culture capable of receiving, justifying and putting into practice positions deriving from faith and morals, the changes will always rest on a weak foundation" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2002, 7).

Rejection of that culture, which finds its deepest rationale in the dignity of the human person grasped integrally, makes it impossible to find any fixed points of reference, any universal ethical and cultural proposition, which would not be purely instrumental. This may result in the consolidating the model of liberal subjectivity which ignores the possibility of reconciling interests based on the axiological foundation of the person and in the frames of which it is difficult to develop and adopt a reliable concept of the common good. Without this, in turn, it is impossible to establish authentic peace in all areas of social life as we learn from one of the key motifs of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (John XXIII 1963, 55-59).

It seems, that loss of cultural identity issuing from a kind of cultural relativism and revealed in attempts at providing theoretical justification and defense of ethical pluralism which sanctions the fall and corruption of reason and rejects an objective moral order, is one of the most serious threats to peace and, therefore, an important challenge for Catholics involved in social life. In the situation when specifically understood ethical pluralism is accepted as a condition for democracy, reference to a clearly defined cultural identity, comprising also permanent principles of natural ethics, becomes its denial and manifestation of fundamentalism. Within this relativistic vision of culture, a legal and moral system is created which is dependent on fleeting and most vociferous cultural or moral trends, as if all concepts of life were of the same value. At the same time, a significant part of the society, including Catholics, are expected to "refrain from contributing to the socio-political life of their countries that input which, according to the concept of the human person and assessment of the common good, they humanely recognize as true and right, and which should be achieved through decent means, which a democratic legal order makes equally available to all members of the political community". In other words, despite the tragic experience, especially regarding the history of the twentieth century, they are required to resign from their own cultural identity, whereas, it is necessary to concede the point that the relativistic thesis assuming "that there is no moral law rooted in the nature of the human person, which must govern our understanding of man, the common good and the state" is totally false (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2002, 2).

The source of this relativistic concept of cultural pluralism which finds its clear manifestation in a theoretical approach towards, and defense of, ethical plu-



ralism leading ultimately to relativism and moral permissiveness, can be traced back to the separation of freedom from truth (John Paul II 1993, 32 and 35). As noted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Political freedom is not – and cannot be – based upon the relativistic idea that all conceptions of the human person’s good have the same value and truth” and “Such relativism, of course, has nothing to do with the legitimate freedom of Catholic citizens to choose among the various political opinions that are compatible with faith and the natural moral law, and to select, according to their own criteria, what best corresponds to the needs of the common good” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2002, 3).

Cultural pluralism in the scope of social life refers not so much to determining the essence of true human and social good, but rather to the ways of its realization in specific political undertakings taking into account the historical, geographical, economic, technological or, eventually, cultural context. It is this specific way of realization as well as this diversity of conditions that give rise to pluralism of orientation and solutions that can be accepted from a moral point of view. If Christians must “recognize the legitimacy of differing points of view about the organization of worldly affairs” (Second Vatican Council 1965, 75), they are also called „to reject, as injurious to democratic life, a conception of pluralism that reflects moral relativism. Democracy must be based on the true and solid foundation of non-negotiable ethical principles, which are the underpinning of life in society” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2002, 3).

## CONCLUSION

The above-described factors and phenomena affecting cultural identity of modern man should be seen in the wider context of the current problems of the world. This world faces an increasing social crisis understood as the end of the modern era characterized by its rationalism and scienticism and, at the same time, as the beginning of the post-historical and posthumanist times. The so-called *postmodern breakthrough* means departure from the current model of life and social order and rejection of the existing axiological system, including the whole truth about man, whose propagation and defense is one of the essential elements of the prophetic and critical mission of the Church in the Modern World. “The Church is the only historical *place* that guarantees the truth of theoretical cognition and practical implementation of the revealed identity of man [...]. Beyond the Church (*Extra Ecclesiam*) there is no another *place* in the human world which would allow for actualization of the historical fullness of that cognitive experience” (Cuda 1999, 200-201).

The whole truth about man provides also the foundation of the Church’s social doctrine. The fact that the Church offers the world a true and complete picture of man points to its solidarity with the world. The above mentioned threats to man’s cultural identity in the era of many unprecedented social phenomena as well as the crisis of modern culture and democracy show that this task is highly topical and important.

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CALL FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY  
IN THE FACE OF TODAY'S THREATS

## Summary

Cultural identity can be analyzed from different perspectives: cultural and social anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and other human and cultural sciences. The present study undertakes a reflection on the cultural identity of man in the view of Catholic moral theology and, more precisely, on the factors that may induce its loss. In the first place, the author discusses the issue of contemporary religious indifferentism, read as a specific type of threat to human identity in vertical dimension. Religious indifferentism along with pluralism on axiological level are manifested as, to use the classification proper for classic aretology, a specific type of distortion of cultural identity *per defectum*, while fundamentalism and nationalism, described in the later part of the article, as distortion *per excessum*. Finally, the study presents the relationship between fidelity to cultural identity and deficits of modern democracy.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, culture, anthropology, religious indifferentism, fundamentalism, nationalism, democracy

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WEZWANIE DO ZACHOWANIA TOŻSAMOŚCI KULTUROWEJ  
W OBLICZU WSPÓŁCZESNYCH ZAGROŻEŃ

## Abstrakt

Tożsamość kulturowa może być analizowana z różnych perspektyw: antropologii kulturowej i społecznej, kulturoznawstwa, socjologii i innych nauk o człowieku i kulturze. W niniejszym studium podjęto refleksję nad tożsamością kulturową człowieka w ujęciu katolickiej teologii moralnej, a precyzyjniej: nad czynnikami mogącymi mieć wpływ na jej utratę. W pierwszej kolejności ukazano współczesny indyferentyzm religijny, odczytany jako swoistego rodzaju zagrożenie dla tożsamości w wymiarze wertykalnym. Indyferentyzm religijny wraz z pluralizmem na płaszczyźnie aksjologicznej oraz hybrydyzacją kultury jawi się – używając podziału właściwego dla klasycznej aretologii – jako swoistego rodzaju wypaczenie *per defectum* tożsamości kulturowej, zaś opisany w dalszej kolejności fundamentalizm oraz nacjonalizm jako wypaczenie *per excessum*. W ostatniej części zaprezentowano związek między wiernością tożsamości kulturowej a deficytami współczesnej demokracji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** tożsamość kulturowa, kultura, antropologia, indyferentyzm religijny, fundamentalizm, nacjonalizm, demokracja