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European Identity and the Christian Heritage

The Diffusion of Identities

A European identity does not yet exist. What exists are multiple approaches to what Europe should or could be. In this respect, most contemporaries obviously have a geographic shape in mind which, however, does not have a clearly defined boundary in the East. When, at the beginning of the 8th century, Islamic holy warriors crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and conquered the south of present Portugal, they called this region *Al Gharb*, the *west*. Anyone who has ever stood at Europe's south-westernmost point at the Atlantic Ocean at Cabo de Săo Vicente knows why: nothing but water as far as the eye can see – to the West, the South and the North. Undoubtedly, this is the geographical end of Europe. On the contrary, Europe's boundary to the East is vague. Where is it? – At the Ural Mountains, at the Bosporus – or even further in East Anatolia where the Turkish representatives in all seriousness want to locate the cradle of (European) civilization. Then one could also include the whole Caucasus area, including Chechnya.

Examples like these show that the geographic option is obviously difficult because it culminates with a political, a geo-strategic and, consequently, a cultural perspective. When the encyclopedists of the French Enlightenment defined their image of Europe, it only reached as far as Warsaw. Later on, opinions were divided as to whether Russia belongs to Europe or not. So, how can the European *area* be determined? – For area and identity do not form a unity but a hermeneutic intersection with regard to the view of reality.

In principle, historical lines of tradition are both determinative and inadequate. The *right* tradition can only be derived from the respective national context – which is a specific one. Traditionally, the four cities of Jerusalem, Athens, Rome and Versailles can be indicated as paradigmatic places for certain phenomena which in this form are specifically *European*:

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- the Jewish culture as a transnational phenomenon which is, however, characterized by the demos of a religious community at the same time;
- Ancient Greece where both the claim to logic and the democratic concept originated;
- the Roman Empire which created a surprisingly dense and sustainable legal culture in Europe – and, over a period of a thousand years, brought the Christian message into the remotest places;
- finally, the French state model of absolutism which not only demonstrates a culmination of political rule, but also generates the modern democratic profile in the synthesis of people, state and territory.

The last paradigm especially entails a strong interaction of political and social culture with regard to a particular exclusive area of identity. As a consequence of the consolidation of the territorial state as a prevailing form of rule since pre-modern times, this area of identity has been massively dominated by religious and even denominational concerns. Even secularization does not change the fact that the respective constitutional foundations of the European states are subject to a domestic religious and cultural presupposition. However, especially since the beginning of the European integration process there has been a shift in the main indicator that determines the political identity of the citizens in the respective nation state due to a simple positivist understanding of function: A *citizen* is someone who pays taxes. So, by modifying the rallying cry of the *Boston Tea Party* one can say: *No Representation without Taxation*. However, the inevitable consequence is that the majority of taxpayers decide what policies the government should pursue – or – what the message of national identity should be.

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Aporetic Dimensions

As a result of the above-mentioned reflections, there are two aporetic constellations regarding the question of European identity:

- will the European identity continue to be attached to the model of a national demos as long as this demos legitimates *its* state in democratic elections?

- is it the majority of taxpayers that decide what self-interpretation is officially derived from its image of society (and thus of Europe) or not?

These two aporetic traps help to explain why, so far, the political model of the European identity has failed. There are at least as many national self-interpretations as there are states which constitutionally belong to Europe. Therefore, it is not (only) a question of historical lines of tradition or adequate constructions of the European self, but also of the empirical behavior of majorities that aggregate in the national demos on a voluntative and linguistic basis. In this sense, not even those who speak English together are *Europeans* because it is a universal lingua franca. Strictly speaking, Europeans are only those who are able to communicate in more than two conference languages in addition to their mother tongue and English. As a matter of fact, this only applies to the officials of the European Commission, but neither to the politicians of the European Parliament nor to the heads of state and government. This indicates that the quality of the European identity beyond the nation state is very limited. The actual behavior of the masses is heuristically attached to the national cultures and for the time being, mass tourism in the common Schengen area will not change this. The conformity of consumistic structures in the first pillar does not imply the creation of a European identity.

Identity in a Supernational Federation

The rules of the European Union directed at a communitization of national differential standards can, therefore, only be of a legally conforming nature. This is quite a lot, as the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union shows. However, a substantial Europeanization is only achieved to some extent. As long as there are no European but only national parties, as long as the elections to the European Parliament do not occur according to the same modes and standards, as long as the political establishment uses *Europe* only to present itself in a favorable light in the national arena, one can only speak of a rudimentary European identity. The grand design is missing. The ideas about how it could be achieved are borrowed from the arsenal of the 19th and 20th century. It is not about formulating a monolithic concept. Because of the diversity of European national cultures, it only makes sense to adopt a federal strategy. Therefore, it might not be a bad idea to re-establish a utopian thinking. After all, the utopian factor is represented par excellence in the European mind – and is quite original compared to other continental cultures. Since the *United States of Europe* will not be a simple blueprint of the American model, as was already emphasized by Hermann Lübbe more than 10 years ago (cf. Lübbe 1994), it will be necessary to relate to another

approach to *federation* (cf. among others Weidenfeld 1991 and Hahn/Husemann-Lüking 1995). Perhaps we should reconsider the basic premises of premodern political philosophy, for the nation state is not a biologically developed project but is a voluntaristically determined result obtained by bringing different premises in a specific sequence into congruence. Perhaps the theory of Abbé de Saint-Pierre is more helpful in this context than the lectures of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (cf. Asbach 2002)? After all, what does not exist, may begin to exist. In any case, the European Integration cannot successfully proceed in the way it has been negotiated so far. It is certainly not enough to deal with market functional benefit calculations. A normative debate relating to the question of European identity will be on the agenda for the next decades. Therefore, the rejection of the European constitution in the national referendums in France and the Netherlands (in 2005) may be more beneficial than disastrous. For, obviously, the national elites were unable appropriately to address the European integration project in the sense of an identity-forming entity to the majority of national taxpayers. In this context, much more far-reaching discourses than those focusing on financial negotiations of the EU structural funds are needed. But where could a utopian potential for the European identity be positioned? Since the fundamental problem lies in the matrix of the classic nation state which, according to democratic theory, is perfectly legitimate, the question should be what can be determined as a structural-political spatial entity on this side of the nation state or beyond? Here the regions come into focus which, even though Europe is structurally and politically quite differently organized, present a further level of legitimacy besides the nation state – without dissolving it (cf. e. g. Nitschke 2003). The quite heterogeneous concepts of regionalism, regional policy, decentralization and regionalization include another level of significance and legitimacy for democracy in which the demos continues to exist, but on a different territorial basis. This level of legitimacy is partly below the threshold of a nation state and partly identical with it or transcends it by crossing national boundaries because regions represent cultural areas which can be both interregional and transnational. In this context, the question of the European identity would have to be discussed in a more complex and differentiated manner. This is not a shortcoming but rather an advantage.

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Regardless of how this debate is resolved, it will not be possible to ignore the needs and cognitive situations of the taxpayers.

Traditional Lines

Relating to the cognitive position towards the majority of the taxpayers in the European Union the Quest for a European identity can, of course, be answered in many different ways. The classical one is the reference towards the basic juridical structures which have been developed in Europe throughout the past two-thousand years. The keywords of this structural approach are phenomena like the Greek and Roman philosophy, especially the Roman impact on the juridical side with its strong legal discourse. This approach has been developed during the Middle Ages with the Christian attitude towards human rights in the worshipping of God. Since the early discussion in Renaissance and reformation there has been a specific understanding to realize that these rights are individual rights of human beings – created and formulated for their own benefit – and nothing else. Especially during the enlightenment process this perspective is perpetuated to a secularized understanding of human rights. It's not the religion but the state which has to organize and compromise the individual rights of the human beings. All the classical topics of the modern state which we are using conventionally for the integration process belong to this epoch of the Enlightenment. For example:

- the articulation of *human rights* as the original rights for individuals;
- the perspective that a thing called *state* is the strongest legitimation of our understanding to arrange the necessities of the behavior of the people living in a society;
- even the term *society* represents this conceptional understanding of human beings as individuals (for example: society and community are not the same as in Muslim countries);
- the state is in its central position organized by a so called *monopoly of power*, which means that all pressure and violent behavior have to been bounded towards a legitimate institute (of state);
- the legitimacy of this power is fixed to the codex of representation bounded towards the voluntary vote of the *common people*; for this reason everyone must have the same rights as the others.

In general, these five topics structure the centre of democracy in our days. The questions of checks-and-balance, how to vote, how to make a legal process in the public discourse and so on, which are the key issues of the deliberative democracy, are just the usual themes in a logical consequence. In

this way, Europe is of course originally constructed by its juridical discourse through the centuries.

The Christian Dimension

This story, as mentioned above, is naturally a traditional one. When defining the roots of the European identity, there is always the possibility of another answer. In this respect, the legal discourse towards the existence of the state and the society as a democracy was only possible in realizing another essential line of the European mind – the existence of the religious dimension. Even in the polemic notes of the Turkish government during the last years stating that the European Union seems to be a *Christian Club,* there is more evidence in this position than most of the analysts and politicians of the Union would like to confess. Relating to the Christian dimension, there is of course a special attitude even in the secularized structures of our days that makes the impact of democracy not changeable in every way. How can this be explained?

First of all, there is the need to reconstruct the real topics of the enlightenment process. All these questions of tolerance and human rights were naturally formulated in a discourse between radical (orthodox) Christian thinkers and their (relatively) more rationalist arguing counterparts (cf. Lietzmann/ Nitschke 2000, Schneiders 2005). In this respect, the arguments (for example) from Baruch de Spinoza or Thomas Hobbes as the so-called non-believers can be understood only if we refer to the truly Christian position as we can see with Leibniz or Christian Wolff. On the one hand, the arguments were working for a behavioral, utilized position of men and society. In this understanding, the government is only a question of a more or less accomplishing arrangement of different interests. Things had to be done in the way the majority prefers it. Questions of truths are not the things which can give the society a suitable structure to convince and persist. It's only the position of the majority as a position of self-legitimating interests which formulates a positive constitution for the society. In this understanding, the questions of truth – religious, for instance – are reasons that explain why societies can step into the crucial scenario of a civil war.

On the other hand, there had been the fundamental position that things can't be discussed in a rational way without the consent that everyone has his own rights only because there is the existence of a God. Of course, this has to be a Christian God. The vote for tolerance can be used successfully only if the differences between the confessions are not too big for an agreement to be out of reach. In this way, the European tradition of separating the church and the state is specifically oriented towards the Christian dimension. The dualism in constructing

the reality between a world of power and a world of faith favors thinking in terms of rationality because the world we live in has to be explained for our own sake.

In this respect, even the pladoyer for equal rights as human rights is a prominent argument given from the Christian faith. Towards God, everyone is in a minor position and there is no one who can be called equal to the existence of God. However, in regard to the relation between human beings, everyone is at the same level – and it doesn't matter if he or she is a poor or rich citizen. The whole concept of a modern democracy reveals the classical theological understanding of persons in an equal position towards the supremacy of the Lord himself. Nevertheless, what people do in their life and how different the approaches of what may be useful for their benefit are, no one is at once better than the other – not in this world! In perspective, this traditional theologian argument synchronizes natural human interests within the eternity of God's world.

Together with this (hidden) tradition, we have at least two important points for the modern legal structure of our states in Europe to make:

- *the topic of rationality* meaning that European people have to explain their interests in a public discourse because no one can be sure that his own understanding of his particular interests is really eminent for the others. The questions of truth are essential to the Europeans, especially for their understanding of a public arena. Naturally, this also means that intellectual fighting and different positions are necessary for the public sphere. Systematically, they are the legitimacy for the so called "common sense" itself.
- *the structure of a nation state* is bounded towards a more or less homogeneous society. This means that all European countries are not similar to the United States, Australia or India. The definition of what is *national* is fixed to a sensible code of an inner consent within the people. Agreements about a specific historical tradition, the using of the same language, equal cultural behavior and the same approach for institutional settings make a melting pot of what we can call a *Nation* – after all.

Both, the pladoyer for verity in questions of human interests and the phenomenon of a specific nationalized common sense are the results of the Christian tradition since the days of the middle ages. Every territorial state (and later every nation state) has formulated and created its own best practice in supporting the Christian attitudes of what life could be.

Plurality in Unity

Looking at the map of Europe, it is fascinating how many countries and different states there are on the continent. Space and the population of na-

tions are in an ambitious relation; there are many nations and states on a relatively small territorial basis – in regard to other countries on other continents in the world. Even more fascinating is the fact that all these states have been extracted from the Christian religion. Only in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania there are two Muslim organized societies and states on the European map. The agreement of the Augsburg Treaty from 1555 and later on the Peace of Westphalia underlines the structure of the European solution towards state and society: same space, same religion (i.e. same confession). So *state*, *society* and *confession* have in most cases of nation building in Europe in the past three-hundred years been at an equal level. The question of tolerance arises in all these societies where the variety of people couldn't be fixed in addressing a nation as a cultural cluster for a hegemonial way of life. The Protestant versus Catholic opinions in England, for example, or the differences even among the various Protestant churches in the Netherlands make the struggle for the truth, the addressing of personal interests in a public discourse essential and necessary for the common understanding of politics. Thus, all the theologian differences between the Christian churches were opening a view for an extraordinary field of argumentation and civilian presentation that generates at least the so-called secularized nation-state as we know it today. Even between the states, this proliferation towards a simply functional behavior has been established really successfully in the European integration after the end of World War II. So, in the sense of the classical topic of Thomas de Aquino, the European integration is organized by using the plurality of different nation-states for the background of a historical and cultural equivalence – democracy results from the heritage of the Christian culture in Europe.

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