

Human Nature, Human Cultures and the Communication of the Knowledge of God

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Abstract

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of “the ability of human reason to know God [and the Church’s] confidence in speaking about him to all men” Such claims involve both philosophical and theological questions concerning the possibility of transcending cultures. Philosophy can vindicate the capacity of the intellect to speak of God, and despite varying intellectual traditions, the Church has been able to communicate the Gospel across cultural boundaries. In fact, historically Christendom was built up by preaching not to individuals but to cultures. Conversion of a culture means that its fundamental principle has changed, and individuals will usually begin to change with it. This does not necessarily imply an inauthentic or merely formal religious adherence, but highlights the fact that cultures as well as individuals are susceptible of evangelization.

Keywords

Catholic Church, Catechism, First Vatican Council, evangelization

I.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (39), referring to the First Vatican Council’s dogmatic decree, *Dei Filius*, which deals among other matters with the ability of the human mind to come to a knowledge of the existence of God, states,

In defending the ability of human reason to know God, the Church is expressing her confidence in the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men, and therefore of dialogue with other religions, with philosophy and science, as well as with unbelievers and atheists.

In the first place, the Church is here making an assertion about the capacities of human reason. But since the Church is engaged not merely in communicating a vague theism, but in preaching the

Gospel of Jesus Christ, this assertion also necessarily raises theological questions, particularly about the possibility of communicating the Gospel to the entire world. We are faced with two interrelated questions, then, the first about “the ability of human reason to know God,” and the second about the dogmatic proclamation of the Gospel.

Although we can speak of the human intellect in general, since human nature is the same in each member of the human species, the actual exercise of our intellectual powers is shaped and conditioned by the various human cultures with their variety of languages, traditions and ways of attempting to express truth. Therefore our two questions have two further ramifications in that both of them concern not just the capacities of the intellect considered in itself, but human cultures and languages as well. These questions involve both philosophy and theology, as well as the data provided by other human sciences, such as sociology and history. Moreover there is need of a philosophy that is aware of revealed truth and open to the insights of revelation, even while still remaining philosophy.¹

In historical context the statement from the *Catechism* points primarily toward the philosophic tradition associated with Thomas Aquinas. That is, it was on the basis of his thought that the Church, especially at the First Vatican Council, claimed “the possibility of speaking about [God] to all men and with all men.” But a question may be raised here: Aside from any specifically philosophic objection to the use of Thomism, are we not privileging Western culture as such, tying the Church and Christian thought to one particular culture? However, there is no question here of the Church attempting to privilege Western culture as such, that is, we are not concerned with the Christian civilization that arose in Europe in its totality. We must carefully distinguish the Church’s appropriation and use of elements of European civilization, a civilization of course that the Church herself helped create, from an approval of every aspect of that civilization either in the past or especially today. To affirm that the Church asserts a universal value for elements of her own philosophical tradition has absolutely nothing to do with attempts, political or otherwise, to claim a universality for the West as a whole. The Church’s concern here is with human reason, not with Western culture as such. Thus this concern is both more limited and more fundamental: the ability

¹ The following (summarizing Maritain’s views) expresses my own opinion. “If we consider philosophy ‘abstractly,’ we can say that it is autonomous both in its principles and its methods, so that a pagan philosopher would have as good a chance of attaining philosophical truth as a believer. If, however, we consider it *in ordine exercitii*, we have to speak of a ‘Christian state of philosophy’ intrinsically potentiated by revelation. It seems, then, that we can say the following: *In ordine exercitii* the philosopher cannot have [a] neutral attitude towards revelation . . .” Augusto Del Noce, “Thomism and the Critique of Rationalism: Gilson and Shestov,” *Communio, International Catholic Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, winter 1998, p. 735.

of the human mind to know reality, specifically the existence of God, and to understand, despite cultural differences, the fundamentals of the Christian revelation. How and whether that is possible will be the subject of my argument.

II.

In what is arguably the central Christian intellectual tradition we have a basis for philosophical exchange even across the boundaries of cultures in that “the Thomistic approach enables one to dialogue with all other human beings on the basis of human reason to determine what is the moral good for society” as well as other matters.² Any assertion that we can “dialogue with all other human beings” must be ultimately based, as far as philosophy is concerned, on the facts of biology which force upon us the truth that the human race is a unity. If this is so, then it would seem to follow that the human mind everywhere in the world has essentially the same capacities, and that any apparent differences are the result of the formation of those minds by the very different cultures of the world. So if on the basis of biology, not to mention revelation, we can agree that the human race is fundamentally one, then a philosophy that takes human reason as such, and reason’s ability to discover truth, for its starting points can be a means “to dialogue with all other human beings.”

But is such a contention still tenable? And if so, how? Can we overcome either the existence of various cultural modes of expression or of the limits of human language itself? Without denying that a philosopher, like anyone else, is marked by a cultural origin, can philosophical statements notwithstanding ever be transcultural? Or, to put it another way, is it possible that a philosophy which arose in a particular culture nevertheless is essentially an expression of the human intellect as such? There are certainly thinkers who believe that philosophy either cannot be universal, or at least that up to now it has not achieved that status. For example, the philosophical movement known as Universalism is an intellectual enterprise that claims to be a *metaphilosophy*, and as such to transcend the limitations of any Western philosophy.³ But it seems to me that at the outset one can offer an objection in the form of a dilemma to such a project. Either any possible philosophy claiming to be a metaphilosophy will

² Charles Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891-Present: a Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington : Georgetown University, 2002), pp. 8–9. Obviously Fr. Curran is hardly associated with any rigid or old-fashioned Thomism.

³ See Michael H. Mitias, “Universalism as a Metaphilosophy,” *Dialogue and Universalism*, vol. 14, no. 10–12, 2004, pp. 87–101.

be enunciated by one or more persons, all of whom were formed intellectually within particular cultures, in which case one is hard put to understand why the same cultural limitations which other philosophies supposedly suffer from will not apply to this project; or, if this is avoided, we are left with an enterprise that seeks to somehow include *all* points of view in itself, which is the actual way that Universalism wants to proceed.

The supreme goal of Universalism . . . is to proceed from a standpoint that recognizes and includes not only all the philosophies but also all the possible philosophical points of view. Moreover, Universalism aspires to include within its perspective the universal insight of all the religions, ideologies, and cultures of the world.⁴

But since the many and various “religions, ideologies, and cultures of the world” hardly agree on very many points, one wonders what such a philosophy or metaphilosophy would look like in the concrete. Would we actually have a philosophy and would such a metaphilosophy actually say anything? Thomism, at least, would hardly deny the many insights and truths which have been enunciated by the most diverse intellectual traditions or cultures.⁵ It is not the case, as some supporters of Universalism appear to think, that one must either support something such as Universalism or else affirm the goodness of the contemporary West or of Western culture in general.⁶ The fact that Greek philosophy developed in a European cultural context does not mean that that philosophy is indelibly marked with all the cultural traits that existed or exist in Europe. It must be judged on its own merits as an exercise of the human mind.

Moreover, if we try to deny the possibility of communication across cultural boundaries on the basis of the multiplicity of languages or cultures we involve ourselves in other initial difficulties. For we must either regard our denial as addressed to the rest of mankind indiscriminately, and thus comprehensible by them despite cultural differences, or as the speech of a uniquely privileged portion of mankind, those who can talk *about* others, while those others cannot comprehend or talk about us. And indeed, our very efforts to understand the approaches of the most diverse cultures, even if imperfect, show that we do not in principle regard culture or language as an impassable barrier for the human intellect.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵ Thomas, in fact, in contrast generally to later European philosophy, recognized philosophers outside European Christendom, e.g., the Arab philosophers, as among those with whom he was in intellectual dialog.

⁶ See, for example, Krzysztof Gawlikowski, “From False ‘Western Universalism’ Toward True ‘Universal Universalism,’” *Dialogue and Universalism*, vol. 14, no. 10–12, 2004, pp. 47–49.

Aside, moreover, from any criticisms of intellectual constructs such as Universalism, we have the fundamental point to consider that I have already mentioned. This is the obvious fact that all human persons are the same *things*, the same species, all endowed with essentially the same capacities. This certainly argues for a common ability to discover truth, however differently cultures have understood the most diverse matters through the centuries. Indeed, this key point seems to be conceded by at least some of the supporters of Universalism itself.

It is true that one views and experiences the world from the standpoint of his or her culture, but it is equally true that one views and experiences the world *as a human being*. Regardless of their cultural orientations, in the past or the present, think of how people react similarly to phenomena such as love, hate, death, disease, pleasure, suffering, survival, order, chaos, family, justice, success, failure, to mention some examples. Are these not essentially *human* experiences?⁷

My argument, though, is that we can say the same thing about philosophy, that it is a product of the human mind, or human experience, *as such*, even though, historically speaking, a philosophy that gives expression to the essential human intellectual powers came to maturity only in Europe. Although there is no denying the existence of a rich tradition of speculative thought outside of the European cultural orbit, still we can reasonably maintain that this is not philosophy in the strict sense, at least not metaphysics. “In Oriental civilization, specially in Chinese, Japanese and Korean culture, there was no room to think in an abstract way,” and “Metaphysics seems to be the domain of the Western mind.”⁸ Earlier Jacques Maritain had said much the same thing in the following words:

In *Greece*, alone in the ancient world, the wisdom of man found the right path, and as a result of a fortunate harmony of the soul’s powers and of a long effort to achieve mental order and discipline human reason attained its full vigor and maturity. In consequence, the small Hellenic race appears among the great empires of the East like a man amidst gigantic children, and may be truly termed the organ of the reason and word of man as the Jewish people was the organ of the revelation and word of God.

It was in Greece alone that philosophy achieved her autonomy and was explicitly distinguished from religion.⁹

⁷ Michael H. Mitias, “Universalism as a Metaphilosophy,” p. 90.

⁸ Jan Konior, “The Interplay of Philosophy and Religion in the Chinese Culture,” *Forum Philosophicum*, vol. 14, no. 1, spring 2009, pp. 62 and 63.

⁹ *An Introduction to Philosophy*, (London : Sheed and Ward, 1947), p. 33.

So in the first place we can assert that Europe was unique as the sole possessor of metaphysics.¹⁰ But if the European philosophical tradition is correct, it is precisely by means of metaphysics that we can transcend appearances and approach to the being of things. Without this, genuine abstract thought cannot exist.

The Church's appropriation of the heritage of Greek thought cannot be regarded as an accident, but as part of the providence of God. As John Paul II stated in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*,

In engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church of the future. . . . (no. 72)

Not only is the Church in possession of a philosophy which is able to attain and describe reality, but the Church has used concepts and terms taken from this philosophy in formulating her theology and even defining her dogmas to such an extent that to abandon this would be to undo the entire intellectual fabric of Christian thought.

In the light of these considerations, then, we can understand the Church's confidence in "the ability of human reason to know God" and "in the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men." We can rightly call the tradition of thought that makes this possible Thomism, not because after St. Thomas that tradition ceased to develop or to refine or to correct itself, but because after Aristotle he was a second founder of the tradition and preserved and refined its fundamental structure, a structure that corresponds to and reflects reality itself. This philosophic tradition, even though it developed within one culture, is the common property and heritage of mankind as a whole, since it reflects essential *human* factors and intellectual powers, not accidents of culture. In this way the unity of the human intellect reflects the unity of humanity itself and allows us to speak about God and man, about nature and every other matter of interest "to all men and with all men."

III.

If what I have said about philosophy and the human intellect is correct, what can we say further about the proclamation of the Gospel as a whole? For here we are dealing not just with a way of thinking that may reasonably be seen as among the "essentially *human* experiences," but with a complex message that goes well beyond simply

¹⁰ Of course the Arab philosophers mentioned earlier were working within the Greek philosophic tradition.

the postulates of reason. Is it possible to speak to other cultures about such matters?

One may reasonably argue from the parting words of our Lord, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .” (Matthew 28:19–20), not to mention the actual historical record, that it is possible to communicate the Gospel to the entire human race. Indeed, as Pope Benedict noted, “Christians of the nascent Church . . . saw their faith as belonging, not to cultural custom that differs from one people to another, but to the domain of truth, which concerns all people equally.”¹¹ But philosophically how can we understand or justify this?

At the outset we must make an important distinction. This is the profound difference between speaking to those who are committed to a religion which claims its origin in a historical revelation from God and those whose religion is ultimately based on tradition, however venerable, and cannot point to specific times or events when a divine communication to mankind is alleged. With adherents of the first type there is *in principle* no fundamental difficulty. If Catholics can show the credibility of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ made to his Church, this is, again in principle, a sufficient means of demonstrating the truth of the Gospel. Since truth cannot contradict itself, only one such revelation can be true, or at least final. It is a question of investigating the historical credibility of what purports to be a revelation from God.

But only within the Jewish, Christian and Muhammadan traditions is a claim of this sort made. The rest of the religions of humanity we may classify as various forms of paganism.¹² As a result,

¹¹ “Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture,” Paris, September 12, 2008. Available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080912_parigi-cultura_en.html

¹² ‘Paganism’ here is not meant as a derogatory term, but as a handy way of designating ways of worship which do not make truth claims in the same way that religions claiming revelation do and which rest in the end solely upon tradition.

I should say something briefly about Buddhism. Originally it was hardly a religion as Westerners are accustomed to use that term. “The Buddha himself, according to scripture, took an agnostic position with regard to the existence of God as known in the Indian tradition.” William Theodore de Bary, “Introduction” to *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*. (New York : Vintage, c. 1969, pp. xvii–xviii.) Thus John Paul II, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* states, “Buddhism is in large measure an ‘atheistic’ system” in which “We do not free ourselves from evil through the good which comes from God; we liberate ourselves only through detachment from the world, which is bad. The fullness of such a detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world.” (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 86.) There is reason to regard the later development of the Mahayana doctrine as a religion, however. Cf. de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, p. 73. Whether it is properly called pagan or not cannot be adequately addressed here.

their fundamental approach to truth questions concerning God or the gods may be summarized in these statements of a modern Hindu. “Many sects professing many different beliefs live within the Hindu fold,” and “Hinduism is wholly free from the strange obsession of some faiths that the acceptance of a particular religious metaphysic is necessary for salvation . . .” or, “[Hinduism] did not regard it as its mission to convert humanity to any one opinion.”¹³ The same may be said about classical Mediterranean paganism, for example, which certainly contained a wealth of sometimes contradictory tales about gods, but never insisted that these were *true*, even if they were widely believed by some sectors of the population. Paganism thus contains a relativism or skepticism since it cannot justify itself by appeal to a divine communication. Pagans are apt to regard the Christian revelation as simply another religious story which can be adopted along with other such stories according to the taste of the devotee.¹⁴

Such an approach is clearly unsatisfactory to a Christian. How then has the Church been able to speak to those cultures which are accustomed to regard teachings about the divine as in the end so many poetic speculations of the human mind? One method that was used as early as Apostolic times, and moreover has received the endorsement of the dogmatic teaching of the Church, is illustrated in Holy Scripture in the account of St. Paul’s journey to Athens in Acts chapter 17. As a first step in speaking to the Athenians, Paul appeals to their own ideas and writings about religious matters, mentioning an altar inscribed, “To an unknown god” (v. 23). He then continues, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you,” proceeding after that to quote favorably from the literature of their own poets (v. 28). But then he goes on to make a concrete historical claim, one that could not possibly be misunderstood or explained away as simply human speculation. “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead” (vv. 30–31). The raising of someone from the dead is obviously a supernatural event, that is, an event which cannot be accomplished by the natural powers of visible creation, in fact a miracle. The response of Paul’s hearers, though

¹³ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New York : Macmillan, 1973) p. 28. This book was originally a series of lectures given in 1926.

¹⁴ “Even certain conceptions of life coming from the East betray this lack of confidence, denying truth its exclusive character and assuming that truth reveals itself equally in different doctrines, even if they contradict one another.” John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, no. 5.

unfavorable for the most part, does show that they understood Paul was making a definite factual claim about something to which the actual evidence of our eyes and touch could bear witness. And it is likewise to miracles, as well as to the fulfillment of prophecy, that the First Vatican Council points as “most certain signs of divine revelation and adapted to the intelligence of all.”¹⁵ Thus even to those shaped by cultures and intellectual traditions which are not accustomed to make strict truth claims for their religious speculation, concrete statements about miracles, and particularly about our Lord’s resurrection, coupled with Christ’s assertion of his own divinity, present the claims of the Church in such a way that they can be understood, at least sufficiently to be accepted or rejected.¹⁶

On the other hand, paganism, however, because of its very inability to point to a specific event which is claimed as a divine communication, can sometimes willingly yield to those who do make such a claim. The account in the Venerable Bede of the encounter of the missionary St. Paulinus with King Edwin of Northumbria illustrates this. The King, who was already inclined to embrace the Faith, wished to “confer about it with his principal friends and counsellors, to the end that if they also were of his opinion, they might all together be cleansed in Christ the Fountain of life.” One of the king’s counselors spoke in this way.

The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore,

¹⁵ Denzinger 3009. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 156, where miracles and prophecy are mentioned as among the chief motives of credibility.

As a matter of fact, such an approach might be useful for philosophers like A. J. Ayer who confidently utter such assertions as “The point which we wish to establish is that there cannot be any transcendent truths of religion” or “... the sentence, ‘There exists a transcendent god’ has, as we have seen, no literal significance.” (*Language, Truth and Logic*, New York : Dover, 1952, pp. 117–18 and 119). But the claim of a miracle is a claim that would necessarily have potential meaning even within such a philosophical system and, if verified by sufficient evidence, would seem to require some explanation by way of an adequate cause.

¹⁶ It is true, of course, that the religious stories of pagans are replete with miraculous occurrences and that it is not unknown to claim such occurrences as happening even today, which are explained of course according to their own religious ideas.

this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.¹⁷

The royal counselor was aware that he could not justify his own traditional practices by either an appeal to a definite revelation or by arguments from reason. Therefore he is ready to accept a faith that can make such an appeal and which “contains something more certain” than the tales which were handed down by his own forefathers. Thus a pagan culture presents a situation which can be resolved in various ways, depending on historical and other factors.

IV.

The question we will consider in this next section is that of the evangelization of entire cultures rather than of individuals, and what that says about the human ability to communicate and receive new religious ideas across cultural boundaries. Now historically most of the expansion of the Faith has been at the expense, so to speak, of traditional paganism and, especially in earlier centuries, this was done not piecemeal by individual conversions, but by conversion *en masse*, or at least by the acceptance of Christian faith by the rulers and elites, usually followed by a more or less voluntary acceptance by the rest of the population. We already saw one instance of that in the account from St. Bede quoted above. Let us look at Christopher Dawson’s reflections on the actual historical process.

The great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century was everywhere based on the principle of individual conversion There is a fundamental contrast between this approach and the collective or communal form of expression which had dominated the Christian world for upwards of a thousand years. Western Christendom was not built up by the method of individual conversions. It was a way of life which the people accepted as a whole, often by the decision of their rulers, and which when accepted affected the whole life of society by the change of their institutions and laws

Moreover it may well be claimed that the missionary Churches of the Dark Ages produced a richer harvest even in the sphere of culture than anything that the modern missionary movement can show. There is little in the new non-occidental Christianity that can be compared with Bede and Boniface, with the religious art of Northumbria or with the new vernacular Christian literature. For in the case of Anglo-Saxon England, the mass conversion of the people meant the rebirth of culture¹⁸

¹⁷ St. Bede the Venerable, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, (London : Dent, Everyman’s Library, 1970) pp. 90–91. (book II, chapter 13).

¹⁸ *Christianity in East & West* (La Salle, Ill. : Sherwood Sugden, 1981) pp. 99–100.

Historically much of the evangelization of Europe, and to some degree of Spanish America and elsewhere, was accomplished, or at least begun, in this manner. What does this say about the ability to transcend cultures in communicating complex systems of religious ideas? How does it differ from a single individual's reception of ideas which originated in another cultural milieu?

Before considering that, however, let us briefly dispose of the question whether such mass conversions necessarily involved an unjust forcing of consciences. We must distinguish between actual coercion in religion, which is always wrong, and the legitimate power of a culture to shape a society and those who live within it. One result of the individualistic society in which Western man has lived since about the eighteenth century is that we assume the isolated and autonomous decisions of the individual are the only possible or legitimate basis of thought or social life. But in fact this is a largely a fiction. *Every* culture shapes those who live within it to one degree or another and most people do not seriously question the fundamental assumptions of their society. My point here is that it is not correct to posit the extremes of, on the one hand, intellectual coercion or, on the other, deliberate and considered choice as the only options. Rather, there is a continuum and the experience of most people is found somewhere between the two extremes. It is true, of course, that a conversion made for intellectual reasons, in the teeth it may be of all contrary cultural pressure, is both possible and laudable. One who is accustomed to intellectual reflection can hardly otherwise embrace the Faith. But this is not the situation of most people at most times. I reiterate that forced or coerced conversions are always wrong. But we should not regard our only options as the forcible conversion of a tribe or nation, on the one hand, or on the other, individual conversions without reference to the culture. The conversion of a culture need not involve the forced conversion of its inhabitants. It means rather the beginning of the conversion of the political and cultural milieu, the framework in which people live their lives and attempt to make sense of their experiences and environment. It is doubtless historically true that in most such cases, even without the pressure of law, the population would have sought baptism, would have sought to follow what they saw as the superior guidance of their rulers.¹⁹

¹⁹ Most interesting is the way in which Hawaii overthrew its traditional paganism in 1819 even before it was visited by any Christian missionaries. The royal family, especially the widows of the two preceding kings, were determined to end paganism and its system of taboos, apparently increasingly felt as onerous. Even the high priest supported this effort and the king was persuaded to go along. "It was finally arranged . . . that the taboo should be publicly broken at a great festival. This would amount to a religious revolution from the throne After the royal ladies had first eaten forbidden foods in sight of the gathering, the king came over and ate with them. At first incredulous, the multitude finally realized what had happened. Shouts went up, and were carried over the island – 'The taboo is

Is this wrong? I do not think so, at least not necessarily or in every case. For we will err if we expect the traditional peasant in a pagan society to behave as the product of universal education of the last century is said to, for it is obvious that the approach of each to truth questions was very different.²⁰ The assertion of individual opinion, informed or not, is characteristic of modern Western liberal civilization. The Internet, by means of which anyone can voice his views, however absurd, on any topic, is simply the logical endpoint of this civilization. But traditional pagan societies, which were wont to justify their practices simply by an appeal to what their fathers had done, was something very different. As we proceed with our discussion this will become more clear.

Our question, then, concerns the adoption by one culture of ideas, specifically religious ideas, which originated in and developed within another culture or cultures. Although many instances of such cultural adoption have occurred, we want to understand what this means and how such ideas can be transplanted, so to speak, from one culture into another. As we saw in the case of St. Paulinus and the king of Northumbria, whatever cultural renewal might later occur as a result of this corporate conversion, at first we have simply the beginnings of the conversion of the cultural and political milieu, the framework in which people live their lives and attempt to make sense of their experiences and environment. What in fact happens in such cases? I think we can understand this process better if we reflect on some words of John Paul II in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (no. 24).

At the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.

When, because of the conversion of a society's rulers or other cultural leaders, its way "of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence" changes, culture change must also begin, and this obviously will affect individuals in their own personal beliefs and ways of acting, sooner or later. The heart of the culture has been changed or is beginning to be changed and necessarily this must have effects throughout the culture. Instead of a single individual having to step outside his traditional way of understanding – an act perhaps nearly impossible in some circumstances – now the integrating

broken!' The high priest himself mutilated the images of the gods and set fire to the temple. This action was imitated everywhere in a sort of frenzy A few months later the first missionaries landed, were received with open arms and royal favor, and Hawaii as a whole rapidly became Christian." A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Culture Patterns and Processes* (New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963) p. 212.

²⁰ But as we will see below, in fact people today often approach these questions in ways not altogether dissimilar to that of their ancestors who lived in more rude times.

principle of the culture is changed at one instant. It is no longer necessary for individuals to do this alone. No doubt confusion and imperfect understanding persist, perhaps even for some time, but the culture is now changing and individuals are able to change with it. Indeed, to resist the change now requires a specific act, an act that often was tantamount to a political revolt, since religion was not seen as merely a private affair.²¹ This understanding of the shaping role of culture explains the Church's awareness of the necessity for evangelizing not only individuals, but cultures. Pope Paul VI, in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), wrote,

[E]vangelization is to be achieved, not from without as though by adding some decoration or applying a coat of colour, but in depth, going to the very centre and roots of life. The gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of life of man

The rift between the gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times just as it has been in other eras. Accordingly we must devote all our resources and all our efforts to the sedulous evangelization of human culture, or rather of the various human cultures. They must be regenerated through contact with the gospel. (no. 20)

Thus when a culture is evangelized there is created at least some subtle pressure of persuasion upon the minds of men. The Faith is no longer something entirely alien, something whose claims had previously been unable to be considered, at least by most people. But now, with a culture beginning to reflect in its practices a new way of approaching God, that new way suddenly or gradually makes an appeal of some kind. Individual conversions do then occur, with varying degrees of awareness and sincerity, to be sure. But such an embrace of the Church's Faith should not be regarded as *ipso facto* inauthentic, unless we reject the actual means by which our ancestors did receive the Gospel. In fact, one can say similar things about many who were raised within the Church regarding their understanding of doctrine and the kind of commitment they make to the Church's Faith.

In the actual life of the Church, most sacred symbols are not understood by most believers in an explicit, intellectual way, but are nonetheless apprehended as having meaning.

The total effect of these symbols is to sustain a strong belief in God, even though specific symbols may not always convey specific religious meanings

²¹ In the case of Hawaii, recounted above, there was in fact resistance to the overthrow of paganism by a member of the royal family, who "rescued one of the god figures and strode with it from the assembly. He rallied a following of the pious and raised a revolt." Kroeber, *Anthropology: Culture Patterns and Processes*, p. 212. There would have been no other way except by armed resistance to oppose the royal policy.

Since the Catholic Church has throughout most of its history been composed largely of uneducated persons, the unity of the Church has been primarily in its worship rather than its belief. Folk Catholics have often been guilty of material heresy²²

Of course, I do not intend to disparage explicit intellectual adherence to Catholic belief or genuine intellectual conversions. An intellectual can hardly hold or embrace the Faith in any other way. Rather I simply point out the fact that both today and in the past this has not been the situation for most Catholics, or for adherents of other religions either.

In fact, this very process occurs today, but as part of the process of de-christianization. The loss of the Christian framework for interpreting reality tends to work the loss of faith by individuals, so that the de-evangelization of a culture proceeds in much the same way as its evangelization.

If a Christian society is de-christianized, this means in fact that many Christians lose their faith. They lose it long before they are conscious of it: that is, when the Christian faith that permeates all the institutions and is present in all the important moments of life, while still being an omnipresent landscape in the culture, has ceased being the factor that determines human experience. More and more aspects of human experience and activity are being left at the margins of faith, determined by other factors, so that the Christian faith is being turned into a forgotten language, to a great extent incomprehensible and, therefore, irrelevant for real life.²³

So much the more is this the case when Christian cultural practices are no longer even “an omnipresent landscape in the culture,” which is the case today in many formerly Christian locales. Over eighty years ago Hilaire Belloc wrote the following about France.

I have seen districts in France which might be called “de-Catholicised.” At any rate, they were districts where the ordinary practices of religion had so far declined as to be familiar to but a very small minority: and the sight suggests a coming generation in which, throughout considerable spaces of the countrysides, that tradition upon which all their civilisation is based will be lost.²⁴

The christianization of European cultures usually began with the effective establishment of a new cultural framework, one which understood and interpreted reality according to the Church’s faith.

²² James Hitchcock, *The Recovery of the Sacred* (New York : Seabury, c. 1974) pp. 120–21. Emphasis omitted.

²³ Francisco Javier Martínez, “To Speak of God or to Show the Redemption of Christ?” *Communio, International Catholic Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, winter 1994, p. 689.

²⁴ *Survivals and New Arrivals* (New York : Macmillan, 1929) pp. 137–38.

So in an opposite manner proceeds the de-christianization of Europe. But in each case, the effective conversion of the culture allows the easy adoption by individuals of the new religious – or anti-religious – outlook. In both cases people need not look outside their culture for a new understanding of existence, for the culture itself provides this new understanding. Although in the past resistance to the new cultural understanding was difficult for most people, since it often required an armed revolt, today one can essentially choose which cultural world one inhabits. Culture remains the framework in which we understand the world, but the existence of competing frameworks means the existence of competing cultures. Why individuals choose one or the other is beyond the scope of this article, but cultural boundaries clearly still affect the communication of ideas. But at the end of our considerations, what does the philosopher conclude? What is his task and what contribution can he make beyond that of the historian or sociologist? I will briefly address that in the next section.

V.

The mission of the Church to preach the Gospel to all peoples and cultures continues until the end of time. But it is no secret that within what was once Christendom a theological and philosophical relativism, naturally hostile or indifferent to such preaching, is now the rule.²⁵ This has come about not from a process of rigorous argumentation but – one must be frank – because of changing intellectual fashions.²⁶ The task of the philosopher in this is modest but perhaps essential: It is to reassert and justify the truth that cultural barriers do not and cannot constitute a definitive bar to speaking about God or to understanding and receiving the Gospel. The unity of mankind, the essential sameness of the human intellect, our ability to communicate

²⁵ Cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 80 and John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 36.

²⁶ Cf. Langdon Gilkey, “Plurality and Its Theological Implications” in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll : Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 39–40, for a clear statement that “cultural changes” – the fact that the West, once dominant “militarily, scientifically, industrially, politically, sociologically, morally, and religiously,” now perceived itself to have lost that unchallenged “assumption of superiority” – were largely responsible for the new theological atmosphere of pluralism or relativism. While it is true that the shift in the theological outlook reflected a changed cultural atmosphere, the situation was always more complex than Gilkey allows. Perceptive observers were always able to separate their theology from their assessment of military and economic factors. Hilaire Belloc, for example, no proponent of the theological pluralism, wrote in the 1920s, “There is no reason why [Islam’s] recent inferiority in mechanical construction, whether military or civilian, should continue indefinitely.” *Survivals and New Arrivals*, p. 195. See pp. 188–95 for his discussion of the historical position and strengths of Islam.

truths despite differences of language or culture – all these questions philosophy can fruitfully address. At the same time the philosopher can point out that a change in the integrating principle of a culture naturally will begin to work changes in individuals. At times this will benefit the Church’s mission, at times the opposite. Philosophy, while appropriating the data of history and sociology, can only address the essential question of the legitimacy of communication of meaning across cultures and of the legitimacy of the individual’s response to a changing culture. Philosophy discovers reality and tries to understand it, but does not create it. The fact that both today and in the past people embraced a new faith or lost their faith without being fully conscious of that is simply a fact of human experience. Those charged with communicating religious truth must recognize and work with this reality. Meanwhile, philosophy has performed its task in the matter if it can help to vindicate the essential point, “the ability of human reason to know God [and] the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men”

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