

The first part of our reflection unfolds around three words that can be found also in the title and theme of this conference and will orient our thoughts.

### Culture, economy, religion

The first word is, of course, *culture*, a word minted *ex novo* at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Germany (*Kultur*) on a Latin etymological basis. In Latin it had diverse meanings because the verb *colere* could apply to knowledge, religion and agriculture with a wide semantic range. For the German "illuminati", on the contrary, starting with Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the concept becomes eminently aristocratic: culture belongs to an elite, members of an exclusive circle, endowed with a high rational level, who can therefore apply themselves to the sciences, philosophy, the arts. This idea is still shared by many people, convinced that culture belongs to a small group of intellectuals.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a proper semantic revolution that gave anthropological value to the term "culture", applying it to all conscious and coherent human action. For example, it is totally acceptable now to speak of an industrial culture because the worker that manufactures a product, even a mass produced one, on the basis of a pre-existing model and consciously striving to produce that precise item, does cultural work. Economic activity can fit into this wide multifaceted horizon.

The second word is therefore economy. It has its matrix in Greek culture and is made up of two terms, *nomos* (law) and *oichia* (house): it can therefore be translated into "law for the management of the house, of the world". We are not merely dealing with matters of money, market, financial models, we need a humanistic approach. Here I would like to quote the *incipit* of the book *On Ethics and Economics* by the 1998 Nobel Prize Amartya Sen : "Separating economics from ethics is an impoverishment of economics, which should be rooted in moral philosophy, a ground many economists are afraid of entering." Analogically, I would place side by side the terms "*economics*" and "*politics*" for economics, management of the house, is actually a particular facet of *polis* management or even a widening of its range. In this sense Kant's (one of the pillars of German culture) remark "Politics cannot take a step forward without first giving precedence to ethics" becomes illuminating. As we do with ladies, ethics first then politics can come in.

The third word is religion, a much criticized, some time ostracized, component of contemporary culture and of all cultures, but undoubtedly part and parcel of the life of a people, so much so that cultural anthropology cannot fail to study religions. Ours is a Christian tradition and if we look for the fundamental nucleus of the Christian religion there is no question that it is the Incarnation,

represented in an almost figurative way by Chesterton (1874-1936), a famous British writer: “All Christian iconography portrays Saints with eyes wide open to the world, whereas all Buddhist iconography portrays every being with eyes closed”. The meaning is clear: Jewish-Christian religion is a historical religion, does not lead you out of the real world towards a mythical and mystic heaven; it keeps its eyes on the world and is deeply rooted in this earth of ours.

For example, if we open the Bible at random, we are likely to read about a political issue, a war, a sin, a social drama, a man who cries in desolation, in desperation, Job and Qoélet, or the Lament Psalms. Biblical revelation does not invite us to look for God beyond God, but for the God who chose to interact with man. And with Christianity we reach the paradox that God becomes man, wholly assuming a human identity. In fact Christ, in the dramatic hours of the Passion, went through the gamut of human limitations: physical pain, solitude, fear of death, the silence of God and His absence, than death itself that reduced Him to a corpse. All this, however, without ever ceasing to be the Son, the seed of Easter, of the Resurrection.

For this reason the Church, the Christian religion, unquestionably has a social, economic, political, historical dimension. Just as an example I will mention some moments of Jesus’ life: Jesus chases away money dealers and merchants from the Temple (denouncing an unjust structure); Jesus speaks of a merchant who sells all his property to buy the precious pearl; the parable of the Talents, that introduces the idea of a bank in which to deposit money in order to receive interest: “you should have entrusted my money to *“tois trapezitais”* (the bankers) and I would have gotten my money back with interest (*tokos*)” (Mathew, 25,27).

### The human person

The second part is closely linked to transcendence and allows me to introduce the term “person” and the personalistic principle from both a theological and cultural viewpoint. I will quote just one verse of the Bible (Genesis 1, 27) to illustrate their meaning. The construction of the text is in parallel – a technical term – i.e. according to Semitic methodology it enunciates a thesis, it repeats it and then takes a step forward illuminating it: “So **God created mankind** in his own image, in the image of **God he created** them; male and female he **created** them.”

It is obvious that the image of God is not the soul, as Augustine will maintain following a long Platonic tradition, but the “male and female” he created. The human person is therefore complete when male and female love each other, generate life and continue the story of love between God and mankind. Within this perspective the Apostle John in his first Letter (4,8) affirms “God is love” and many centuries later Pascal almost echoes him with a fulgurating intuition: “If there is love, God exists”. Love between two persons represents a reality so unique and extraordinary that it allows us to see in them the luminous visage of God.

Thus the concept of “person” in Jewish-Christian culture encompasses two dimensions: a vertical one, image of God, and an horizontal one, the relationship of communion with the other. One of the great tragedies of the contemporary world takes place in the apartments of our poor suburbs where a person – old, sick, foreign – sits next to a phone and waits for it to ring, or waits for somebody to ring at the door. Phone and bell remain silent today, tomorrow and through many days plagued by solitude and a hopeless wait. How many people live in loneliness, isolation, suffering from a total loss of relationships.

I will end my reflection quoting another verse of the Book of Genesis (2, 18) “*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper fit for him.*” In this second chapter man fulfills his identity not merely when he meets God but when he discovers a helper “fit for him”. It is not a very good translation but the only possible one. In Hebrew we have a much more fulgurating version: a “*kenegdo*” help, which literally means “*who stands before you*”, in front of you, looking into your eyes. Man must have a transcendental relationship, since he was created in the image of God, but at the same time feels the urge to relate to the corporeal substance from which he was created (in Hebrew ‘*adam* means a clay colored being) through the presence of the woman, the *kenegdo*, into whose eyes he gazes. Your pain becomes my pain and vice versa, as the woman in the Song of Songs says: “*My beloved is mine, and I am his*” (2, 16) .... “*I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine*” (6, 3).

I would like to end this second part with an image taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In the preface he says: I started with the idea of defining man’s finiteness comparing him to an island. Science can define the island-man through its cellular structure, biological dimension, neuronal structure, complexity of its organism, identifying the items that can be analyzed by the ideal microscope of scientific experiment. What I ended up discovering, Wittgenstein continues, are the frontiers of the ocean.

It is as if a scientist were a tourist who walks along the perimeter of an island: he looks towards the interior and see its characteristics, he can describe them and even draw them on a geographical map. But if he looks into the distance he realizes that this island-man is bathed by the waves of the ocean. Man is a complex reality because his skin – as the island’s coastline – is bathed by waves ignored by science.

On our finite skin is etched a higher dimension which the faithful will define as God and the mystery of transcendence, and a non believer as something larger than man, that cannot fit into a mere horizontal dimension. Think of what happens when a man falls in love: it is an experience that sublimates and transfigures, uses a language, a channel of knowledge completely different to that of biological, scientific, rational analysis. Stephen Gould (1941-2002), the famous US scientist, who was Jewish and atheist, uses a parable to describe it.

Let us imagine a scientist who, one evening, leaving his laboratory where he was using a scientific-rational method of research, goes to a party where he meets a woman and falls in love. At that

moment, and from that moment on, when the scientist looks at this person will he use a strictly biological-scientific-experimental approach? If his woman gets sick he will certainly use every possible scientific means to save her life, but day after day he will look at her through the lenses of love, which are the same as those of poetry but also of theology and religion.

Pope Francis underlines that our present crisis is not merely financial but anthropological, caused by a lack of the authentic image of man. He referred also to the “golden calf” of the market, to the reduction of man to mere consumer, to the refusal of ethics, to selfishness, to the supremacy of capital on labor, emphasizing the urgent need to go back to an authentic view of the human person. He recommends to strive towards this goal using the triptych faith-politics-economy and following Christ’s only explicit political pronouncement : “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's*” (Mathew 22, 21).

### The truth

The third part of our reflection begins with the word “truth”, within the wide framework of economics and culture, in the classical and the contemporary accepted meanings. For the classical meaning let us go to Plato when in Phaedrus he describes soul’s chariot that speeds through the “plain of truth” discovering ever new horizons. The truth, therefore, is objective, does not depend on us, it precedes us and is larger than us. We conquer it and assist to its epiphany. In Socrates’ Apology Plato says again: “A life without quest is not worthy of being lived”.

Proceeding along this ideal itinerary we meet the philosopher Theodor Adorno who in his *Minima Moralia* compared truth to happiness, playing upon words: “Truth is like happiness: one does not have it, one lives in it. Truth is not an object that you can hold, own, handle: no, in truth as in happiness one is immersed. And Robert Musil in his “*Man without qualities*” wrote: Truth is not like an object, a gem you can hold and put in your pocket. Truth is like a sea in which you plunge to set sail and discover new worlds”.

On the other hand, the modern meaning of truth is clearly defined by Sandra Harding, a US philosopher, in her essay “Truth will not free you”, through the image of a spider: truth is something we produce ourselves, like the spider does with the thread of its web. Truth, therefore, is exquisitely subjective, changeable according to circumstances. What is good today could be evil tomorrow and vice versa, according to the theory of situationism i.e. according to different situations and contexts. This concept was born in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in *Leviathan* introduced the fundamental thesis of contractual relationship: *Auctoritas non veritas facit legem*. The norm does not come from an objective truth but from an authority that defines it responding to changeable social needs and not to an existing moral exigency.

Consequently ecclesiastical or civil authorities, society, prevailing common opinion can decide today that something is moral and tomorrow that it is no longer so. It is what Benedict XVI called relativism, linked to situationism and subjectivism. In this post-modern fragmentation, in this “liquidity”, as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called it, perhaps we should go back to the *aletheia* of the classics, to the Christian *veritas*, that is transcendent and ultimately identifies with God, who is infinite, eternal, intangible truth.

### Justice and love

I will conclude introducing a series of terms that are not synonyms but form a lexical unum: solidarity, justice, gift, love, agape. They represent a sort of hierarchy of social values and lead us onto the last stage of our reflection, the category gift-love. I am firmly convinced we need to go back to the gratuitousness of giving not merely as a moral religious issue but as an exquisitely economic one, an authentic *nomos* of our global home that can give life to more human economic structures.

Love in fact does not make calculations and becomes a sort of thorn in the flesh that forces us to strive towards a new humanity, new economic structures, a different society. Unfortunately modern culture made us forget about gratuitousness, ours is at most a parity based system. We may certainly consider it a great achievement but most of the time it translates into a system based on selfishness. Ignazio Silone, an Italian writer who was deeply interested in the poor peasants of Abruzzi (he called them “cafoni”) in one of his novels talks of a peasant who, looking at a present from his master says to his wife: “if it is free it’s a ruse”. This is the photograph of our world, no longer used to gestures of gratuitousness.

In this perspective Christ changed the equation of love, already present in Leviticus 19, 18: “*thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*”. On the last evening of his earthly life he goes beyond the goal of parity by saying : *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* (John 15, 23).

We began this reflection using the great code of our culture, the Bible. Let us end by looking at the remote world of another religion, at Indian culture, quoting seven principles that Gandhi listed in one of his works. These seven precepts represent an examination of conscience for all, an admonition not to fall into the chasm of a desolate, unjust, selfish world :

“Man is destroyed

- by unprincipled politics
- by wealth without labor
- by intelligence without wisdom (intelligence and wisdom are not synonyms: even Hitler’s scientist were intelligent but they were certainly not wise)

- by business without moral
- by science without humanity
- by religion without faith (as in fundamentalism, where there is religion but no authentic faith)
- by love without self sacrifice”

Gianfranco Cardinal Ravasi