

Denver, February 16, 2006: Sandro Magister

## **Christians, Islam and the Future of Europe**

Christianity and Islam are inseparable in Europe. There are five and a half million Muslims in France, and it is projected that their number will double within twenty years. There are already more of them than there are French Catholics who go to Mass every Sunday.

A new cathedral church was built twelve years ago in Evry, to the south of Paris. It is recognized as the masterpiece of one of the most famous architects in the world, Mario Botta of Switzerland. During Sunday Mass, it is half-empty. But the nearby mosque is overflowing with the faithful. The imam of the mosque, Khalil Merroun, asserted in an interview: "The Catholic Church should not feel Europe belongs to it. The advice I give my Catholic colleagues is to ask themselves why their faithful don't live their spirituality."

But what sort of spirituality inspires the new cathedral in Evry? The church looks like a cylinder cut off diagonally at the top, with a crown of trees at its summit, and a barely visible cross. The interior is almost entirely barren of figurative art. The bare walls, which should pulsate with the transcendent, in reality remain mute, unable to convey the revelation that has come down from God. There are no visible traces of this revelation capable of showing the way to the faithful along their journey.

Even in Rome, in the capital of the Catholic Church, there are signs of this disorientation. On Sunday, March 26, Benedict XVI will go to Tor Tre Teste to visit a parish on the outskirts of Rome, where the secularized American Jew Richard Meier – another of today's greatest architects – planned and constructed a church which is itself a masterpiece of line, surface, and light, but remains taciturn in translating this emotional impulse into reality and sacrament, into a concrete manifestation of the earthly and heavenly Church.

## **THE ERUPTION OF RELIGION INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

These examples are the reflections in architecture, and sacred architecture at that, of the loss of identity seen in Europe today, which has manifested itself in the failure to mention “Christian roots” in the controversial preamble of the European Union’s constitutional treaty.

For a part of European culture today, the public square should be impenetrable against Christianity. And Christianity should be entirely cut off from the European civilization in which it has its roots and to which it gives nourishment.

But exactly the opposite is happening today in the world, and also in Europe: everywhere there is an impetuous return of religion to the public square.

Here “religion” means: the Catholic Church, reinvigorated by the political charisma of pope Karol Wojtyla and by the theological guidance of Benedict XVI; the Protestant Churches of the American evangelical strain; the Orthodox Churches, with their Byzantine model of conjunction of throne and altar. Then there is Judaism, interwoven with the extremely concrete destiny of Israel, a people, a land, and a state. Then there is Islam, in which faith, politics, and sacred law tend to blend into one, and in which, wherever voting is conducted today, the consensus goes to parties that are strongly inspired by Koranic law: the most recent and overwhelming case being that of Palestine.

Everyone can see the failure of the prophecy of the privatization of religion. But many lack the clarity of thought and the courage to recognize it and act accordingly.

The Muslims are asked to accept the ground rules of democracy. But the process must also work in reverse: Islam, like all the other religions, must be permitted to put its principles of faith into effect in the civil order – as long as these are compatible with the charter of principles that neither Islam nor the West may reject, the charter valid for all, principles “conveyed to us unmistakably by the quiet but clear voice of conscience” (words of Benedict XVI to the Muslims, in Cologne).

The case of Iraq is an exemplary one. What fell with Saddam Hussein was not an imaginary “secular” state purified of fundamentalist beliefs, but an atheistic system crudely copied from European models of a Nazi stamp, which asserted itself through the bloody repression of Shiite Islam and the Kurds. And in contrast, the new Iraqi state, whose constitution has been approved, will be genuinely secular only if its political configuration permits and reflects the full expression of the Islamic religion on the public scene, in respect for the plurality of faiths and for the different traditions.

The existence of political configurations with religious characteristics does not belong to the past alone, but is the present and future of societies worldwide.

The American model of the democratic public sphere and of a widespread religious presence is not the only one from which inspiration may be drawn.

In Europe, there is the Italian model of equilibrium between the secular state and the Catholic Church, with a mutually recognized agreement (called “concordato”) between the two sovereign powers, which is completed by agreements with each of the other religions.

It is natural that countries under Muslim rule should develop their own appropriate models of the interweaving of politics and religion.

### **“DUAE CIVITATES”**

The connection between the two forms of citizenship – profane and sacred, earthly and heavenly – is an essential characteristic not only of the Church and of Christians, and not even of the West alone, where this characteristic was born beginning with Plato and Aristotle.

These two Greek philosophers were the first to open the order of society to a higher, transcendent order, thereby un-divinizing the “powers of this world” and freeing man from his slavery in their regard.

In Christianity, the great theoretician of the twofold earthly and heavenly citizenship was Saint Augustine, in his masterpiece “The City of God,” written shortly after the invasion of Rome by the “barbarians” in 410, a shock that might be compared to the one we received on September 11, 2001.

Augustine’s theory – which is profoundly biblical – left a huge imprint on Christian culture and history. But it was not only studied in books. It also speaks through architecture, works of art, and churches.

As I have recalled, there are today churches that reflect the loss of Christian roots in their structure. But so are there countless churches, built century after century in the Christian world, which give visible witness to the interweaving of the heavenly and earthly “duae civitates,” two cities.

An emblematic instance of this is the cathedral of Monreale in Sicily, erected in the thirteenth century by the Norman kings who a few decades earlier had liberated the island from Muslim domination.

Its dimensions are grandiose, comparable to those of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. But, above all, its interior walls are covered with gold-enameled mosaics with a total surface area of six thousand, three hundred and forty square meters. Along the walls there are scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Above the royal throne, at the top of the nave, there is an image of Christ crowning the Norman king William the Second. Above the bishop's throne, which is across from the royal throne, there is an image of William the Second offering the new cathedral to Mary. And in the apse there is a colossal Christ extending a blessing with his right hand, and holding in his left the book of the Gospels opened on the words, in Latin and Greek, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness." The Christ in the apse is the Risen One, the "Pantokrator," he who rules over all, and who surrounds with his light, with his gaze, with his power the Christian people that walks upon this earth and gathers in the church to celebrate the sacred liturgies.

The cathedral of Monreale is the epiphany, the visible manifestation of the "Civitas Dei": the city of God which unites within itself, under the absolute reign of Christ, both the heavenly city of angels and saints, which is represented in the mosaics, and the earthly city of men in pilgrimage upon the earth, in which the Christian faithful mingle with those still awaiting the proclamation of the Gospel, and with all those who reject God to the point of creating the antithesis of his city, the "civitas diaboli," the city of the devil.

Like the city of God, also the Church is heavenly and earthly at the same time, and its earthly component will be mingled with the city of all the men until the Last Judgment. And so, the interweaving of politics and religion finds its paradigm in these two cities, "duae civitates."

It is a paradigm that can be applied, not only to the Christian and Western world but also to the Islamic world, to catch what is similar or different in Christianity and Islam.

What distinguishes Islam is that it has at its center the sacred battle of its faithful, not only on behalf of the one God and against idolatry, but also for the assertion of the "umma," the worldwide Muslim community, against the city of the devil identified with the non-Muslims.

Into the continual interpenetration of the heavenly and the earthly that characterizes the city of God in the Christian conception, Islam introduces points of rupture.

From the time that Mohammed broke away from the Jewish community in Medina, Islam has thought of itself as a community in perpetual exodus upon this earth, journeying toward a destination that is utterly beyond earthly history.

Islam is essentially prophetic, always in a battle march towards a world that is beyond, while Christianity is, instead, prophetic, priestly, and kingly, and the cosmic Christ as "Pantokrator" is the same one who offers himself, here and now, in the "daily bread" of his body and blood in the Eucharist.

For Islam, Mohammed is “the prophet,” the last and greatest of all the prophets, and his prophecy is always in act; while for Christianity, the age of prophecy ended when the Son of God “came down from heaven” in the man Jesus.

For Christians, the city of God is already present in history, although, being mingled with history, it has not yet been revealed in its fullness; while for the Muslims the only manifestation of God that has entered history is his uncreated, eternal, immutable word – the Koran.

Does this mean that, in an Europe now more or less consciously Christian, there is no room for Islam? The answer is no, there is room for Islam.

This is above all because, in spite of differences and conflicts, Islam has always been part of Europe, and is one of its constitutive elements.

You find it in the Moorish arches on the exterior of the apse of the cathedral of Monreale. You find it in its cloister, the center of its fountain displaying an Arab-style column shaped like a palm tree. The great Muslim mosque of Cordoba, begun in the eighth century in Spain, is likewise a forest of Roman columns, and is adorned with mosaics in the pure Byzantine style. The entire medieval world of the Mediterranean, both Christian and Muslim, had as its common source the heritage of ancient Rome.

## **A GLOBAL EUROPE**

As a civilization, Europe has much wider boundaries than those we imagine today, when we make these coincide with the political boundaries of the European Union.

The Europe first spoken of by the historian Herodotus in the fifth century before Christ was initially identified with Greece. But the undertaking of Alexander the Great widened its area immensely, all the way to central Asia and India. This is where the Hellenistic “koinè” was born, with Greek as its common tongue. And Rome extended its empire throughout this region, which included both shores of the Mediterranean, the valley of the Nile, stretching east all the way to the kingdom of the Parthians, and north to the Danube, the Rhine, and Britain.

The culture that generated European civilization was the Greco-Roman culture, which later became Greco-Roman-Christian.

In the West, after the barbarian invasions, it was reborn with its focal point moved farther to the north, as the Carolingian empire, which continued to call itself “holy” and “Roman.”

In the East, it maintained its center in the “Second Rome,” Constantinople, and continued as the Roman-Christian Byzantine empire, with an intimate marriage of religion and politics that continues until today.

It was from these two Romes not yet divided by schism – sent by both the patriarch of Constantinople and the pope – that Cyril and Methodius set off in the ninth century in order to spread Christianity through the Slavic northeastern portion of Europe: this underwent a new powerful geographic expansion, but retained the closest of ties with its place of origin, as shown by the name of “The Third Rome” that Moscow would give itself in the sixteenth century.

It was within this civilization, and not necessarily in opposition to it, that Islam was born and expanded beginning in the seventh century, gradually conquering the southern shore of the Mediterranean and the Sicily, penetrating Spain, and contending the area of the Roman-Christian Byzantine empire in the East.

The rupture in commercial and cultural ties that intervened for a while between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean – identified by later historiography as a rift between Mohammed and Charlemagne – does not change the fact that both sides of these civilizations, Christian and Muslim, continued as the inheritors and interpreters of the same Greco-Roman-Christian heritage, which was germanicized or slavized in the first case, and islamicized in the second. Islam, as found in history, is unthinkable without the structure, institutions, and cultural features of the Greco-Roman-Christian “commonwealth” in which it developed.

Of course, Islam is also that which subjugated and extinguished the blossoming Churches of the Christian East and of northern Africa.

It is that which extended its domain beyond the Spain, even coming to the point of assaulting and sacking the Rome of the popes, in 847.

It is that which destroyed the holy places of Jerusalem and reconquered the land of Jesus which had temporarily lost with the Crusades.

It is that which brought Constantinople to its knees in 1453, and more than a century later was defeated and beaten back at Lepanto, and yet did not retreat, but instead, another century later. put Vienna to the siege.

But in the meantime, Europe was ravaged by bloody wars among its own Christian members with Islam as the ally of first one and then another kingdom. For many centuries, Islam was treated as a legitimate power within the concert of nations and European public law.

It was only much later, in the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire was in full decline, that the European culture of Enlightenment origin drew a boundary between a civilized Europe and a despotic, backward Europe, including within this “inferior” Europe, together with Islam, the Roman Catholic Church as well.

The same period, from the nineteenth century forward, saw the birth of the myth of a bygone golden age, an age of peaceful multicultural dialogue between Islam and the Judaeo-Christian world, an age said to have taken place now in Sicily, now in Spain, now in Baghdad.

In reality, much of this is legend. Even in Andalusia when it was ruled by the Almoads, which is so frequently remembered and praised, Jews and Christians were second-class citizens and were systematically harassed, and the two great exponents of that so-called golden age – the Jew Maimonides and the Muslim Averroes, the great translator and interpreter of Aristotle – both ended their lives in exile.

## **EUROPEAN ISLAM**

Therefore, the current temptation to exclude Turkey from Europe has understandable reasons behind it, which Joseph Ratzinger brought to light before he was elected pope.

But this push to exclude the idea that Christianity and Islam can interact on positive terms is the perverse effect of very recent developments.

It's been just a few decades, not centuries, since the Armenians in Turkey were exterminated, and the Greek Orthodox expelled.

It's been just a few decades since the Jews disappeared from the Arab countries and the Maghreb.

It's been just a few decades since the numerous Spaniards, Italians, and Frenchmen – both Jewish and Christian – disappeared from Algeria.

It's been just a few decades that Alexandria in Egypt has been inhabited solely by Arab Muslims, and is no longer the cosmopolitan city that it had always been before, where Greeks and Italians mingled with the Egyptians.

It's been just a few decades that the Christian minorities in the Arab countries of the Middle East have been reduced even further in number, depopulated by an exodus to the West. Not to mention what happened at the end of the twentieth century in the former Yugoslavia, where the clash of civilizations theorized by Samuel Huntington was made tangible in conflicts between Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims, with the massacre and expulsion of peoples guilty of having trespassed upon centuries-old political and religious boundaries.

Of course, there is no comfort in the fact that a radical Islamist party like Hamas won the elections last January 25 in Palestine.

But if one looks at these events in the perspective of centuries and millennia – and if one looks at the recent outbreak of religion into the public square – the alternative to Islamist radicalism cannot be the “secular” Islam dreamt of by many in the West, both intellectuals and governors.

This “secular” Islam is the pet project of authoritarian regimes with no future, like that of Syria, or of rare secularized authors and businessmen, almost all of whom have left their countries of origin and have practically no following in the Muslim world.

Historically, a “secular” Islam of great power and breadth, which also gave rise to a stable modern state, is that of the Turkey of Kemal Ataturk. But even within Turkey this “secular” form of Islam has been noticeably on the decline for a while, and the government is now held by a party that is conservative, democratic in some partial features, and openly religious.

Also in Palestine, the defeat of Fatah – the party of the late Yasser Arafat – in the recent elections marked the end of a superimposed “secular” system of power, inspired by old socialist and nationalist European models. The victory of Hamas is the affirmation of a party that has understood how to re-Islamicize society. And this affirmation was obtained through democratic procedures, by a vote.

But democracy is not merely a procedure; it is a culture, a culture made of individual liberty and of free interaction between politics and religion. And it is here that Hamas and the other neofundamentalist parties now on the rise – most of them connected to the Muslim Brotherhood which has a great deal of influence over Islamic immigrants in Europe – find themselves in check.

They have no responses to the problem of governing diverse groups. And this is precisely what made Europe into a civilization at once united and varied, on its Greco-Roman-Christian foundation, not excluding but rather including Islam.

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For this reason, there are two obligatory steps along the way to integrating the Muslims within the Europe of today and tomorrow.

These are the self-reform of Islam, and the education of minds.

The first step is very difficult, but possible. It is difficult because the Koran is not the equivalent of what the Sacred Scriptures are for Christians, but rather the equivalent of Christ, the eternal word of God come down to earth. And thus the Muslim does not see the Koran as open to interpretation and adaptation, as the Sacred Scriptures are, which are “divinely inspired” but still written by men.

But it is possible because in the Muslim world – above all among the Shiites, but also among the Sunnis, from Morocco to Turkey to Indonesia – there are nevertheless currents that acknowledge and practice various interpretations of the Koran, and some of these are capable of incorporating its principles with modern democracy. Together with his former theology students, Benedict XVI dedicated a meeting of study last September at Castelgandolfo to precisely this varied approach to divine revelation on the part of Muslims.

As for the second step toward the integration of Muslims into Europe, the education of minds, last August 20 Benedict XVI insisted upon this in his meeting in Cologne with some of the exponents of the Muslim community in Germany.

After condemning in biting words the acts of terrorism carried out “as if this could be something pleasing to God,” the pope addressed the Muslims present there as follows:

“You guide Muslim believers and train them in the Islamic faith. Teaching is the vehicle through which ideas and convictions are transmitted. Words are highly influential in the education of the mind. You, therefore, have a great responsibility for the formation of the younger generation. As Christians and Muslims, we must face together the many challenges of our time”

This is the interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims that Benedict XVI wants.

He has asked his “dear Muslim friends” for unity of action “in the service of fundamental moral values conveyed to us unmistakably by the quiet but clear voice of conscience.”

This is a voice that speaks to all, and which the pope trusts will be listened to and acted upon by all. It is a voice that commands Europe to believe in its own Christian identity: the generator of a great civilization of which the Muslims are a part.