



By Julia Koszewska

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The trinity: Religion, Culture and Identity the known and unknown

Is religion totally independent and different from culture? What's actually the difference between those two terms? Why during trainings on intercultural dialogue is the inter-religious side mentioned only shortly? Do all followers of the same religion face problems with culture? What is the interlink between the two terms?

In order to define a term we may use different forms of definitions: A descriptive definition will provide the details on how the object looks; we can also ask what is the function of the object we are defining? What is it for? Why something was invented? That will be a functional definition. we may try to define terms such as religion and culture according to which questions they provide answers.

Religion addresses the unanswered questions of our existence. It deals with the unknown. And the greatest unknown out of any unknown is man's future. The most important message religion carries, is the answer to our question about the future; the immediate as well as the eternal future.

Culture is the medium carrying the message coming from the past. This is the answer to the questions which have been already answered by our ancestors. The way they answered many questions, constitutes our culture. In this aspect culture may be regarded to some extent as a semantic equivalent to the word tradition.

Man exists in present time, which automatically means always half way from the past to the future. Hence man is always half way between culture and religion. As one turns his head back looking at the past, he deals more with culture, while a glance ahead directs him more to religion.

We may say of course, that science addresses any given issue, irrespective of whether the problem belongs to the past, to the present time or to the future. We have to notice however, that science meets only our rational needs, while both culture and religion meet the spiritual needs of man. But it seems strikingly obvious nowadays that science alone is not capable of giving full happiness to society, since it does not meet the most elementary human expectations. It usually reduces man's existence to the present time. It is not an accident that any revolution breaking out in the name of science declares usually something like: it's time to forget the past and start living in the present. The term "modern" is always a key word in such a condition. So man continues to ask culture and not science the questions concerning the past, and he keeps asking religion and not science to get answers addressing the future. And the future still tends to be the joker in the pack.

“For an adequate formation of a culture, the involvement of the whole man is required, whereby he exercises his creativity, intelligence, and knowledge of the world and of people.”

John Paul II

► Religion and culture as media bringing people together

Religion can connect people of different cultures; and on the other hand culture can connect people of different faiths. In JECI-MIEC European Coordination (European Catholic student organisation) we all come from different realities.

From different countries, having a different background we all come together as the children of God, and what we all have in common is first of all the Catholic faith. It is a uniting factor.

But can culture be a uniting medium more than religion? In Poland, where 90% of citizens claim to be Catholics, the religious minorities have been present for centuries. Many of them (such as Jews, or Muslims: Tatars) are not new comers but have been present in Poland for a long time. If you ask them what is their identity, many of them will first answer that they are Poles, and then of Jewish origin or of Tatar origin (using the meaning as a religious connotation).

Is faith related only to religion? Recently SALTO organized two trainings: one focused on faith and the other one on religion, and their relations with dialogue. I got a great opportunity to contribute to the “Faith and Dialogue TC” as a trainer. The main topic discussed there was the relation between faith and one’s identity. And faith not only in a religious sense, but using a more inclusive definition: also political or faith in someone. In many languages the word “faith” is related only to religion. In German (as in Polish) the “faith” term is strictly related to religious faith while the secular faith will be referred to more as an ideology, i.e. political ideology. How cultural is this meaning? :)

► **How cultural are you? – the trends in Europe**

New trends in Europe are: to be tolerant, to have as friends, representatives of different minorities (as a kind of proof of our tolerance), to be aware of many things etc. In the questionnaires-application forms for participants in different trainings I saw a question to measure cultural awareness among youth in Europe. In the majority of cases the question was “How do you rate your own sense of cultural awareness?” with 1-6 scale and space for explanation. Many people rated it as 6 (the highest awareness) and as proof provided information on their awareness of cultural events in their hometown.

► **How religious are you?**

What is the relation between religion and our daily life? Is a religion just to perform special rituals at a sacred time in sacred places, for example only on Sunday for one hour of mass? Religion is something more than that. It’s not only strictly about our relation to God understood as a way of praying. Religion is also our relation to the world, it’s a lifestyle! However the followers are not always allowed to implement their religious belief in everyday life. We (as European society) are so afraid of all kinds of extremism – especially religious extremism – that we sometimes end up being too sceptical about any kind of relation between religious-based values and the law or public life. Fear of extremism is actually just a current explanation. Other than that we have a long tradition of separating Church and State in Europe and the tendency for secularisation. Nevertheless now we are seeing the waves of different forms of discrimination towards different faith-based groups including anti-Semitism, growing islamophobia and along with these a form of what we might call “Christophobia” slowly appears.



In some countries we see this as a kind of fashion: it’s not trendy to be religious. J.H.H. Weiler explains «that the aging children of 1968, now middle-aged and soon to be retired, are upset that, in some cases, their children have become Christian believers.». Nonetheless it influences not only the generation of parents but also the generation of kids.

Sometimes these anti-religious tendencies go further than just fashion or lifestyle; when it comes to politics they might be used as arguments in discussions on legislative documents such as the European Constitution or might slightly influence trade in the country: shops closed on Sundays.

► **How deep is our daily culture and way of living determined by religion?**



Photo taken by W. Koszewski: photo of the screen in a Malaysian Airlines plane showing the direction to Mecca as a practical guideline to Muslims who pray in the aircraft flying to European destination (Amsterdam)

► **European identity**

So who are we in Europe? United in political meaning, proud of the Christian roots of our continent, but cutting the present links to this religion? What does the typical European look like? Are we able to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the globalised world nowadays?

Hearing about a “Europe of nations” we sometimes wonder which nations we are talking about: the so-called old European or the nations of new Europeans?

With the definition of identity comes the question of territory. What is the geographical border of Europe and what does that say about our (European) identity? Do we all agree that Georgia is a European country? And what about Turkey? Is Europe the region defined by the size of the European Union and the member states? Or is it bigger like the coalition of Council of Europe countries? European Identity is changing quickly and is still not finally defined. For ages it was a mixture of cultures, but for many periods we had one country dominating the others so it was easier to define. Now, with a Europe of different nations, a nomadic society and many new comers, and in the state of peace with no one dominating country we have arrived to question our continental identity.



► **One culture – many religions**

European identity (whatever it means) pertains mainly to our cultural heritage. But if one is looking closely into this tradition then it becomes obvious that there are several religions constituting our present identity. European identity – as a specific feature originates from Greek and Roman polytheism, as well as from Judeo-Christian heritage, and also it has some Islamic roots in parts of our continent. It may sound strikingly paradoxical that the main Catholic sanctuary in Portugal carries the name Fatima – the name of the beloved daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. And it is not by chance.

► **One religion – many cultures**

In order to understand the different new topics we first try to make it simple and later go into details. How to understand the world's religions? We just mentioned that in Europe there are Christians, Jews, Muslims, but now we need to update our list also to include Baha'i, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Hindu and others. But not all Jews from Spain are like Jews from Germany. Sephards and Ashkenazi Jews not only have different outfits but also different ways of celebrating their religion. Although the religion is one for them, in Judaism, the cultures vary. Same with Christians, but the differences between Roman Catholics and Orthodox are more known - at least from the mass-media. Let's talk then about Catholics. The Catholic Church in Western Europe is a bit different from the one in Eastern Europe. Not different in theology: the religion is the same, even the religious domination. However it is the national tradition that makes the difference. Religious cognition as well as emotion can be the same, but religious behaviour and participation varies. Religion is not only the doctrine. It is also a personal question. How religious a person is, but not how that person is religious (in the meaning of practising certain rituals).



photo taken by Julia Koszewska: Multi-cultural mass during International Committee of IMCS (International Movement of Catholic Students)



► **Multi-culti and inter-religious initiatives**

A few years ago, people in Europe realised how culturally various Europe is and what's more how fast it is changing. The great need to understand each others' cultures was stated. And many intercultural programmes (also for youth) were organized. Later – especially after September 11 of 2001 the world discovered that we are too ignorant not only of other cultures but mainly of religions. A great need for exploring the intercultural (but with special focus on inter-religious issues) was found. It is actually somehow a never-ending need. Let's try to increase our efforts again. A great opportunity is approaching: 2008 is European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

In Europe there are just a few active European faith-based youth organisations. A European faith-based youth organisation will be an organisation that gathers national movements from many countries in Europe. The values that the group represents are based on religious faith.

In YFJ (European Youth Forum) the member organisations formed a Faith-Based Expert Group (FBEG). This group is working not only on inter-religious and intercultural dialogue issues, but the organisations that created it found it very important to combine their efforts in order to stand together for the rights of faith-based youth groups in Europe. This initiative is unique and was the first such in Europe.

Quite recently a new initiative was taken by faith-based youth. A new network was founded and called Religions for Peace - European Inter-faith Youth Network (RfP – EIYN). The group is the first pan-European organisation that gathers youth organisations representing so many religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Baha'i, Sikh, Judaism). The group is very inclusive and is open also for non-faith-based organisations that are active in inter-religious dialogue, i.e. facilitating it), and to individuals. There are also many local or national inter-religious and intercultural initiatives that are becoming more and more popular.

Culture of the language

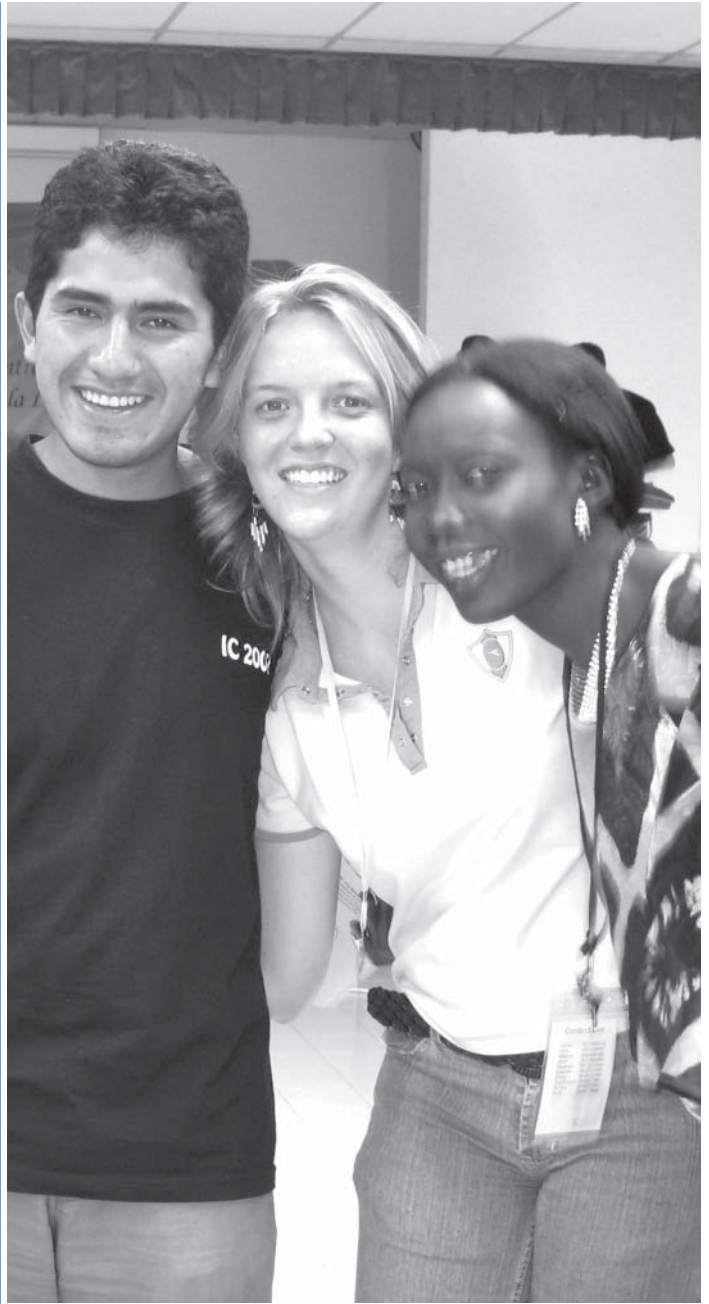
How much is our culture connected to the language? On the way to better integration in Europe we have all accepted English language as the main in Europe. Even though we have many EU official languages, still the most often spoken is English. But is our English really English? A good example is to take a look at the understanding of “faith”. Have you realised how many times the word “faith” in this article was referring to religious faith? Only once to other meanings. Maybe it is because of our native languages, where faith is only religious? That is the reason why the SALTO “Faith and Dialogue TC” was so exceptional. It was the first time that European youth was exploring the varied meaning of the (English) word “faith”.

How about you? Are you speaking British English or Globish? Take a test and compare your vocabulary here: <http://www.salto-youth.net/globish/>

«A language is the vehicle of a culture. Globish doesn't want to be that at all. It is a means of communication.» – said its inventor Jean-Paul Nerrière. So why speak globish: (American version): The real target here is also to decipher what's coming across at you. If you don't, you should not let your friend from California throw one past you; lay it on him, “Hey Bro, this time in Globish please?”

Have you understood? If not try globish version: The goal is also to make sure you understand what is said to you. If you don't, you should make it a duty to tell your friend from California, “could you repeat that, in Globish this time, please?”. Better now?

Is it now part of our European culture? Not anymore British English? And what has it to do with religion? Try to express yourself about your religion or understand the others (if you are not observing any religion) in English. Or try to pray together with the believers of the same religion, just coming from other countries. If you are not a native English speaker it won't be easy. Same prayer, but do we all know the English version to say it out loud? But it does not mean we are not really active followers, nor have a limited knowledge about our own religion. It means only that the language is not ours. Same European culture, same religion, different national languages. ■



Notes and references :



- “For English-speaking readers: globish explained in American, AND in globish.”:
<http://www.jpn-globish.com/articles.php?lng=fr&pg=120>

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