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The New European Ethos and the Concept of the Gift

**Public session talk at the
Conference of the Scribani Network**

**RELIGION: PROBLEM OR PROMISE?
THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE INTEGRATION OF EUROPE**

**The Michael Lacko Center of East-West Spirituality
11-12 September 2008**

Introduction

First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the organizers of this conference for the invitation to participate in it and the opportunity to share some reflections on the European integration process and the concept of the gift.

My intention is to share with you three intuitions which, I think, may offer an interesting way of approaching the European integration issue. First of all, I would be in unison with those who argue that among the key constitutive elements of the European culture are: (1) openness to the transcendent, (2) sensibility to the truth, and (3) understanding of man's life as gift. Secondly, I believe that the personalist anthropology which considers the gift character of the person as an essential aspect defining man's life plays a crucial role in analyzing the integration process. And finally, I believe that if we carefully and wholeheartedly listen to the current European culture, which has made its way through the difficult and often tragically perplexed 20th century, we may discern some signs of new realities which potentially may considerably influence what we now call Europe.

In order to illustrate the above mentioned intuitions I decided to present my reflections in three sections. In the first I will analyze some examples of the integration process. The second section will deal with the analysis of the phenomenon of the gift. And in the third section I will draw a conclusion regarding the European ethos and European integration in the context of the philosophy of the gift.

I.

When I think of the phenomenon of integration, three examples of far-reaching "integration projects" come to mind. One of them, which I personally had the chance to experience and, as it were, to live from within, is already in the past and belongs to history. This is a kind of integration which was dominant in the Soviet era and which was supposed to lay down the foundation for a communist superpower. The other two are still ongoing projects.

One of them, which I only mention without going into any detailed analysis, is the "integration effort" which we observe today in Russia. The kind of integration we have at stake here plays primarily an instrumental role in accumulating the power and dominance of the Russian state.

Such integration is, as it were, negatively defined. The integration impulse comes about from the mutual and shared opposition to or the rejection of something or somebody. This would be quite different from the integration resulting from mutual respect and response to something inherently valuable and positive in its content. Unfortunately, the most recent events have manifested that the leading Russian politicians are firmly convinced that each time they identify a new threat to the country and point to a new enemy to be combated with all means, they thereby create a major integrating impulse for the nation.

The third integration project which many of us have a chance to observe, to participate in, to experience, and to promote or to protest against it is the process of European integration.

It goes without mentioning here that in all three examples I have just pointed to the process of integration, irrespectively of how far reaching it was and whether it went successfully or not, or if whether it was accompanied by the creation of some ethos in which and through which such integration was taking place.

Before we take a further step in our analysis I would like us to ask ourselves about the meaning with which the word “integration” is embedded in the present context. Let me briefly outline my understanding of the word “integration”:

If we consult *Webster’s Dictionary*¹ we will find that the English language suggests three interrelated meanings which could be associated with the use of the word “integration.” Firstly, to integrate implies *to make something open to all* (“to make a group, community, place, or organization and its opportunities available to everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or social class”). Secondly, to integrate has a meaning *to fit in with a group* (“to become an accepted member of a group and its activities, or help somebody do this”). And thirdly, to integrate means *to make into a whole* (“to join two or more objects or make something part of a larger whole, or be joined or made part of a larger whole”). In other words, we could think of integration as a process which brings about a certain *unity* into a larger *whole* which at the same time remains fundamentally *open* in accepting new members or groups into it.

Therefore, it would be important to remember that integration thus understood brings about moments of unity, wholeness, and openness. It should be also emphasized that integration in this sense comes about as a result of some specifically personal acts. In other words, integration in its most fundamental and metaphysical sense occurs between persons. If European integration were only about, for example, the integration of Austrian railways into the European transportation system, or, for example, the integration of Slovak higher education regulations into the educational space defined by and mutually agreed upon by some other European countries, these and similar examples certainly would not be the most profound manifestations of integration.

II.

In an article entitled “Christianity as the Soul of the West,” Christopher Dawson made a very interesting observation by saying that “current beliefs are always out of date.” There is good irony in this saying. However, there is a great deal of seriousness in it, if we agree with Dawson arguing that “it is difficult to realize how much of current thinking belongs to the past, because it is natural for men's minds to be soaked in the mental atmosphere of the last generation, and it needs a considerable effort to see things as they are and not as other people have seen them.”²

¹ See www.websters-online-dictionary.org

² Dawson C. “Christianity as the Soul of the West,” in *The Dawson Newsletter*, Winter, 1995.

The reason I am quoting Dawson is because I would like to invite us Europeans to see things as they are, and thereby to overcome somewhat stereotypical modes of thinking about ourselves and thus to be able to discern the characteristics of the new age that might be on its way. By the way, the great title which was chosen for this conference certainly contains an invitation to move beyond the “politically correct” and “safe” solution to the raised issue, which might have gone along the following lines: Yes, there is nothing wrong with religion and it won’t be a problem for European integration if it leaves interpersonal and communal space and hides itself in the privacy and subjectivity of every person.

Let me share with you some examples from recent history which, I believe, prove the validity of Dawson’s observation and thus provide us with some incentives to further explore and anticipate some new developments in the sphere of European culture and spirituality.

II.1.

In the late 1980s, after decades of communism the evil of the Soviet regime seemed to be so profoundly penetrating and damaging to human hearts and souls that one might have thought that the Soviet ethos would unshakably exist for many coming decades. And yet, it turned out that the tendencies which were considered so characteristic of the Soviet time were – to quote Dawson one more time – “characteristic of the age that is just passing away rather than of that which is beginning.”³

It is clear now that the massive and seemingly all-encompassing “integration project” launched by communists, which aimed at the creation of a new kind of man and a new Soviet ethos, has eventually turned into its opposite, namely into a *radical disintegration*. The disintegration at stake should not be merely understood in terms of a previously existing state now falling apart and dissolving into a number of smaller parts. The moment of disintegration has profoundly anchored itself in human minds and souls. Such personal disintegration could be also described as a loss of a true sense of one’s identity which, in other words, could be also described as living one’s life in a non-authentic way⁴. By the way, the incredibly elaborated repressive institutions (the KGB would be a good example) of the regime were specifically focused on the destruction of the personal spiritual and moral integrity of anyone classified as an enemy of the system.

To be able to experiment with the lives and identities of millions it was necessary to introduce a whole new set of values and even to invent a quasi religion with its ceremonies, practices, and quasi saints and infallible leaders, teachers and preachers. Eventually some new kind of morality was invented to facilitate the formation of a new Soviet or communist ethos.

Without going any further into the analysis of the integration model exercised by the Soviet regime, which would require a separate study, I would like to emphasize the following. The methodology of implementing the communist model of integration and the model itself were contradictory already in their anthropological assumptions. For example, it was professed that religion exercises a profoundly inimical and damaging influence on man, and yet quasi-religious acts were constitutive elements of the existing system. To give another example, it was also assumed that man is nothing but a product of evolution, and yet it was acknowledged that man’s motivation cannot be explained solely in terms of material causality and the reference to some sort of transcendent source is required. All truly heroic and sacrificial acts performed by many during the Soviet regime exemplify an anthropology different from the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles Taylor in his *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) explores in details some insights regarding man’s desire to live his life in a truly authentic way. His reflections are particularly important in showing how openness to the axiological dimension (or the lack of it) plays a role in shaping one’s identity and in becoming authentic.

Marxist kind. We may only regret that these acts were so much deprived of their true nature and instrumentalized by the existing system.

II.2.

My second example has to do with recent Ukrainian history. In the early 1990s, when the continent of communism became covered with cracks, a peculiar spiritual, cultural and social situation was formed in Ukraine. It seemed to many then that, at a time of geopolitical shifts, one could easily catalogue one's past on museum shelves, thereby distancing and freeing oneself of it and building the country of one's dreams.

However, the past tightly held the country in its embrace and dreams drifted towards unrealistic utopias, or somehow faded, withered away and eventually degenerated into ideologized political mottoes used at yet another election. It was quite clear that the country, which had entered into a long process of rediscovering its national identity and integrity, badly needed spiritual and moral guideposts to achieve this goal. One could hardly expect opportunistic programs of economic development or mass media images of political leaders, virtual by nature, to play this role. Active testimony was needed.

And this came about at that moment of our recent history when for many people in Ukraine and worldwide the country seemed to be irreversibly drifting towards a non-democratic and widely corrupted society. And yet, unexpectedly for many during the time of the Orange revolution in Ukraine, there was manifested a true spirit of integration both personal and interpersonal, which proved the beliefs and convictions of many current at those times to be out of date. It would be also worthwhile to note that the community of protesters on Kyiv's Independence Square during the first few critical weeks manifested all three aspects of the true integration identified earlier, by being unified and at the same time open and welcoming towards newcomers.

The Orange revolution certainly proves that, throughout years which seemed to be so devastating to the country in some regards, still the profoundly spiritual process of the gradual actualization of personal freedom accompanied by an encounter with some fundamental values was taking place. The question as to how the space was created in which the spiritual maturity of many evolved is yet to be studied and reflected upon carefully.

II.3.

The third case I would like to share with you has to do with current European integration processes.

In what people speak or write about Europe today, we often are able to identify two lines of reasoning. Both of them are somewhat stereotypical visions and perceptions of current European processes and do not do full justice to the phenomenon of Europe.

It is often argued that the current European culture we live in is thoroughly permeated with relativism and secularism. It is also argued that Christianity, which used to be such an eminent constitutive element of Europe in the past, these days has a minimal or no role at all to play in shaping the ethos of the united Europe. It is also true, as Richard John Neuhaus writes, that many Christians "have uncritically accepted the dichotomy between public and private, between fact and value, between knowledge and meaning."⁵ This new *Weltanschauung* leads to a radically confined understanding of faith and religion, which have been reduced to the exclusively private and subjective dimension with no right to exercise any influence on the communal and interpersonal life of persons. Morality seems to be following the same pattern

⁵ Neuhaus, R.J. *Christ without culture*, http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=5460.

as religion by being gradually understood as a phenomenon belonging to the private and subjective space of the person. Thus, we should rather speak of different moralities which have no claims to universality and objectivity. This line of reasoning is certainly derived from some true and valid observations and undoubtedly could be developed in detail and with greater accuracy.

However, I will not engage myself in this thinking any further. Instead, I would like to raise a question in the same manner as Dawson did by asking: Is there something new and different from what I just briefly outlined beginning in Europe today? If secularism, relativism, and consumerism are so eminently present in the current European culture, then will they be characteristic of the future Europe, or should we rather assume that our days are pregnant with some changes in our culture, in our thinking, in our spirituality, and in the values we will be able to perceive and to respond to?⁶

As I mentioned earlier, there is also another kind of stereotypical or over simplistic approach to European integration issues. Such a vision of integration would probably go along the following lines.

It is often stated that European integration is a multidimensional process which includes political, economic, educational, and other efforts aiming at creating a certain unified space, instruments, context and methodology for the further development of European economies and markets (or eventually one economy and a single market). It is also true that, thus understood, integration is a real fact of everyday life in Europe: the same currency, more and more unified European regulations and laws, mobility projects launched in the European educational space, the role played by Brussels officials, transparent borders between EU countries, and so on. Thus understood, integration presumably implies a kind of growing degree of uniformity or compatibility between different life styles, technologies and cultural environments. There is no doubt that some further steps along similar lines will be undertaken to foster and deepen such integration.

However if one goes beyond this stereotypical vision, one would have to raise a question as to the underlying principles and foundations of European integration. Namely, what are the spiritual, moral, and philosophical roots of integration? What is the nature and vocation of man? If these questions are not approached in a serious way or are completely ignored, then, in spite of the rhetoric of integration which is dominant in the European public space, there is a potential danger imbedded in contemporary European culture which might undermine all

⁶ At this point one might be inclined to guess that I am developing a kind of “optimistic” but at the same time overly simplistic thinking which goes along the following lines: We currently live in a very wounded and problematic present which somehow and sometime will be changed and improved in the future. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with a hope for a better life, for a more refined culture, and so on. However, the real problem is manifested whenever someone is unable to receive one’s present moment and life as a gift. The inability to truly receive the present moment and the constant intention to promote future success and happiness create a situation which Max Scheler aptly defines as the “diminished capacity for enjoyment.” In this regard, argues Scheler, utilitarian civilization, which pronounces the maximum amount of happiness as its goal, leads us to a state wherein “men’s minds become increasingly joyless. Extremely merry things, viewed by extremely sad people who do not know what to do with them: that is the ‘meaning’ of our metropolitan ‘culture’ of entertainment.” (Scheler, *M. Ressentiment*, ed. by Lewis A. Coser, trans. by William W. Holdnem, (New York: The Free Press, 1961, p. 154.).

The point I am emphasizing here has to do with the fact that already an attempt to understand the gift dimension of one’s life and the willingness to enter into the dynamics of gift-receiving and gift-giving introduce some important change into the general mental, spiritual, or cultural environment. While it would be improper to expect that such a change would have some immediate economic or political consequences, it would be certainly true that a change of this kind makes people more sensitive to values, and thus much more selective, critical and responsible with regard to political initiatives and activities. In other words, one may also say that to experience the gift moment of the present life is to experience oneself as being blessed. With this experience the creation of a new ethos begins.

integration efforts. In this case the project of integration would turn into its opposite, namely a project for the disintegration of the European culture and ethos.

III.

At this point I would like to take a further step in my reflection on the phenomenon of integration by introducing one more crucial aspect into our considerations. As you recall, I proposed thinking of integration as a process which aims at a certain unity, wholeness, and openness. Given that the integration we speak of is fundamentally anchored in interpersonal space, it is crucial to understand the way in which the gift and the gift situation enter into the process of integration. The acceptance of a gift has to do not only with the fact of receiving or appropriating something that is given but, most importantly in giving a gift it is implied that the giver himself gives himself to the recipient of the gift. Thus the one who as a recipient enters into gift situations not only receives *something* but also *somebody*.

Already at this point, I believe, we intuitively understand that the act of *giving oneself* to another and the subsequent *being received* by another constitutes a unique invitation to and an opportunity for integration. What completes the integration is the act of acceptance of the gift accompanied by one's gratitude. If this happens, the integration is accomplished in a very true and profound sense, while being defined by characteristic moments of unity, wholeness, and openness at the same time.

If we recall the parable of the prodigal son, we would certainly agree that the idea and the concept of the gift are in a very important way imbedded into the situation depicted in the parable.⁷

If we reflect for a while upon the situation depicted in the parable, we come to realize that the donor (the father) and the recipient (the younger son) have completely different experiences of the gifts and the gift situations they are participating in or are called to participate in. The main difference consists in the fact that, from the father's point of view, his major gift of his self is given already in a full and overwhelming fashion. In contrast to this, the son thinks that in his present situation he is suffering a humiliating dependence on his father's will. The problem he has is not at all caused by the lack of something he may badly need; it is neither due to the lack of enjoyment nor from certain restrictions regarding the use of his father's property. As paradoxical as it may be, the problem for him lays in experiencing the gift character of the goods he enjoys.

He finds himself in a situation which is well captured by John Paul II: "At times it happens that [...] we see in mercy above all a relationship of inequality between the one offering it and the one receiving it. And, in consequence, we are quick to deduce that mercy belittles the receiver, that it offends the dignity of man."⁸

Thus it seems that the younger son is more and more vividly experiencing the desire to possess something while bypassing the moments of receiving and appropriating the gifts as gifts. He would legitimately, as he believes, wait for the right time to come to become the true owner of the property of which he is the rightful heir. In his mind true ownership foremost consists in the capacity to exercise power over one's possessions with no need to previously receive someone's permission or consent to do so. Thus the son thinks that his independence and autonomy will immediately and inevitably follow upon his final request and the "final gift"

⁷ It would not be an exaggeration to say that both sons are thinking, acting, behaving, hoping, and complaining as most Europeans would today. It is also clear that the older son, "the good one," was not really experiencing the gift dimension of his life.

⁸ *Dives in Misericordia*, # 6, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia_en.html.

from his father through which he inherits what was truly meant to become his own. So, he makes this request and he receives what he requested with no delay.

In the case of the younger son the gift character of what he receives upon his request is completely blurred and finally annihilated as he becomes more and more convinced that the sole purpose and meaning of the goods he owns is to serve as tools for the exercise of his independence and autonomy. Finally, it is not only the gift character of the property which is lost but the property itself is gone.

What could have gone so wrong in the situation where it was always and clearly implied: “You, son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours also (Luke 15:31)”? To intuit an answer to this question let us first think about the possible different ways in which something could be possessed or referred to as “mine.” In his analysis of gratitude Balduin Schwarz argues that that gratitude not only establishes a loving and affirming relation to the donor but it also creates a certain inner context in which and through which I build up a proper attitude towards what I own and what is “mine”. He writes:

Basically, gratitude arises when another person makes my concern *his* concern. But my gratitude to him also establishes a proper relation between myself and what I possess, what is “mine.” For I can “have” the things that are mine in different ways. I can “have” them as gifts entrusted to me; or, in contrast, I can “have” them by being possessive, greedy, clutching them as my own in a self-centered way.⁹

Schwarz suggests that there are two different ways in which a person may take into possession and possess something given to him. In either case I would refer to the things I possess as being “mine.” However, in one case by declaring something to become “mine” I thereby imply that I have the power to use it and to control it in a way which, I believe, will ultimately lead me towards a greater degree of self-possession and autonomy. In this case autonomy would mainly refer to one’s being independent of any sort of constraints and thus could be referred to as one’s capacity to overcome any kind of resistance in fulfilling one’s desires and plans. Therefore, to possess in this case would mean to have the power to instrumentalize what is given.

It is also possible to have a different attitude toward what one possesses. As Schwarz points it out, this attitude is rooted in seeing and appropriating the given as a gift. In this way I may refer to the things given to me as “mine” and as belonging to me in a very true and profound sense. What mainly distinguishes this type of possession from the other kind has to do with the moments of *entrustment* and *appreciation* of the given. That is, I perceive the things given to me as being entrusted to me along with the fact that I also appreciate the given as a good and as a good given to me. This is why Schwarz argues that in gratitude one does not merely recognize that something is given to him, but one has “a deep acknowledgment of this good, a real appreciation of it, a taking it to heart [*anerkennen*]. It is an awakened, responsive “recognition” of a good, a good given to me.”¹⁰

Damian Fedoryka in his essay on the phenomenology of the gift unfolds and deepens Schwarz’s intuitions about the specifically personal character of giving a gift by arguing that the recipient involved in the gift situation faces two major challenges. One has to do with the proper receiving of the given object which should result in the proper way of exercising the recipient’s power and dominion over it. The second challenge comes to the fore when the recipient has to acknowledge the specifically personal dimension of the gift situation and to realize that, along with the given object, there is the aspect of the donor’s self-giving present. In this case the given object not only reveals its own essence, integrity, and certain existential

⁹ Schwarz, B. “The Healing Power of Gratitude,” in B. Schwarz and F. Wenisch (ed.) *Values and human experience: essays in honor of the memory of Balduin Schwarz*, New York, P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 1999, p.16.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

autonomy but it also manifests and testifies to the presence of the giver. In Fedoryka's own words: "Giving as a *personal act*, in contradistinction to the *behavior* of giving, cannot take place unless it is grounded in a self-giving of the donor. Only when there is a self-giving is the intended recipient *addressed as a person* as opposed to simply being the entity that is objectively benefited."¹¹

The act of self-giving could be understood as an act of personal self-disclosure and achievement of radical openness on the part of the donor toward the other person. Such radical openness creates moments of the donor's presence and self-revelation which are constitutive aspects of the gift situation. This is also the moment when the phenomenon of integration comes to the fore.

In thinking this way the younger son has completely overlooked the main message contained in "what is mine is yours." This phrase manifests the radical openness of the father towards his son, which completes itself in and through the radical self-giveness of the father to his son. It is only through such a radical act of self-giveness that it was possible for the father to say "mine" in the most profound and true sense while referring to what was owned by him and what was meant to be his son's as well. The son was challenged to receive and appropriate the radical givenness of the father. He was called to possess what was given to him and he failed to do so, at least at first. He failed because his father's gift of his own self, as well as of everything that belonged to him, turned out, paradoxically, to be a way too much from what the son desired and expected. He would have satisfied himself with something much less abundant and profound.

VI.

In the concluding part of my presentation I would like to highlight a few intuitions which, I believe, point to the direction in which the living experience of the gift may play an important role not only in the life of the individual but also in the communal and cultural life of persons.

One conclusion which could be drawn from the above consideration is that a new European ethos will emerge if the dynamics of gift giving and gift receiving play their role in shaping the integration process in Europe. However, it is of crucial importance, in my opinion, to emphasize that I have spoken of this ethos as being both *new* and *European* at the same time. By making this emphasis I thereby invite us to think of the European culture and heritage as being a gift given to us which needs to be received properly and adequately. The inability to perceive and receive this gift would undermine the very foundations of Europe and the European ethos.

In the text of the speech, which Pope Benedict XVI planned to deliver at La Sapienza University in Rome, he argues that European culture built itself up as inherently "sensible to truth," and the duty which the Pope himself has and which should be made one of the major concerns of university communities of scholars and students is "to safeguard sensibility to the truth".¹² The gradual diminishing of such sensibility, resulting from the increasing power of instrumentalization and accompanied by the attractiveness of utility, leads to the disintegration of European culture. This is why the Pope identifies the danger of the Western world as

¹¹ Fedoryka, D. "Toward a Concept and a Phenomenology of the Gift," in B. Schwarz and F. Wenisch (ed.) *Values and human experience: essays in honor of Balduin Schwarz*, New York, P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 1999, pp. 95-6.

¹² The Address that the Holy Father intended to give during a Visit to La Sapienza University in Rome on Thursday, 17 January 2008. As the Vatican reported on January 18, 2008, the visit of Pope Benedict XVI was postponed due to what the Pope's secretary of state called a lack of the "prerequisites for a dignified and tranquil welcome." See: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080117_la-sapienza_en.html.

consisting in this, namely, “that today, precisely because of the greatness of his knowledge and power, man will fail to face up to the question of the truth.”¹³

If we assume that Europe and European culture is a gift, it should be evident that Europe is not something which should be possessed or “consumed” with no gift in return. The acceptance of this gift immediately implies that one enters into the dynamic of gift sharing.

What we call Europe and the European tradition is essentially universal in its character in the sense that such a tradition is preeminently, as it were, “in need of being exported” and shared also with non-Europeans. In this regard it is not exclusive but inclusive, meaning thereby that the sensibility to truth, openness, and a belief in the transcendent, combined with the conviction that every man is a gift to himself and to others, are, as it were, ways or conditions for entering into European culture and becoming a European. This is, by the way, the reason why Europe has a capacity to transcend its geographical frameworks and to expand far beyond them.

The gift character of European culture points to its essentially dynamic character. In order for Europe to remain Europe it has to be in a constant process of rediscovering, rethinking, and reliving its tradition and heritage.¹⁴ In other words, to receive one’s history, culture, and heritage as a gift and to respond with gratitude and the desire to share this gift with others is a constitutive act of “Europeanness.”

At the beginning of the 21st century, Europe is in risk of disintegration and losing its European character, in spite of the widely present rhetoric of European integration. The disintegration I mention here should not be understood as the falling apart of the European Union, which may continue its existence for many coming decades. The disintegration I have in mind – if it ever happens – will transform the EU into non-Europe, however paradoxical or strange this sounds.

Thus I conclude by saying that the European integration process as well as the emergence of a new European ethos will be directly depended on what was so profoundly captured by John Paul II in his famous statement from *Gaudium et Spes* in which he says that man does not discover himself unless he makes a “sincere gift of self” to others.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In this context it could be mentioned that Modernity was not something which came about in spite of the Middle Ages but rather it emerged from a context which was profoundly Christian.

¹⁵ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, #24, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.