

VALUES, CULTURE, RELIGION*

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“Value”, “culture”, “religion” are terms with a very wide semantical range. In order to avoid easy misunderstanding and dangerous confusions and to secure a good start to my brief essay on the relationship between values, religion and culture, I will explain first of all how I shall be using these terms, by enunciating three rather elementary definitions.

By *religion* I mean any system of rites and myths wherewith man lives his relation with the divinity.

By *value* I mean any object (beings and actions) that is considered worthy of appreciation or estimation.

By *culture* I mean the spiritual form of a society, i.e. the interior bond that keeps together its members and at the same time distinguishes them from the members of other societies.

The purpose of my paper is to clarify the relationship between culture and values. My problem may be put in these terms: are values entirely subordinated to culture and, consequently, are they simply expressions, overstructures of a particular culture or, at least in the case of certain values, is it possible and even necessary to say that they enjoy a sort of sovereignty, transcendence, autonomy, independence with regard to culture?

But if the object of my paper is to clarify the relation between culture and values, one may ask what is the reason for adding the term “religion” in the title. The reason is a very simple one: it is the essential function that religion exercises with regard to both culture and values. According to my view, religion is the only solid bridge between culture and absolute values. I will attempt to support this thesis with arguments drawn from history and from metaphysics.

I state first of all that values belong to the substance of culture. This is a truth that is widely recognized by cultural anthropologists. If we give a look at the famous volume *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*⁽¹⁾, we find that a good number of the definitions collected by C. Kluckhohn and A.L. Kroeber, “value” (or some analogous term) is included as an essential element.⁽²⁾ But we may reach the same conclusion

* Paper read at the World Congress of Philosophy, Montreal, August 1983.

1. Vintage Books, New York 1963.

2. See the definitions of Kroeber, Herskovits, Lynd, Bidney, Small, Morris, White and Murdock. In the same line with anthropologists R. Niebuhr gives the following definitions of culture: “Culture is the artificial secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values” (H.R. NIEBUHR, *Christ and Culture*, Harper, New York 1965, p. 32).

by means of a philosophical study of what belongs necessarily to culture as the spiritual form of a society.

The philosophical analysis of culture shows that its fundamental elements are four: language, habits (customs), technical procedures and values. For the realization of its spiritual unity it is not sufficient that a social group develops a language, acquires some special habits and creates some technical processes, it must also assume a certain number of values, which will concern beings (trees, animals, persons, divinities) or actions that have a special significance for the life of the group and for this reason they become for it criteria, norms, ideals, i.e. values.

The unity and the strength of a culture depends on the values on which it rests. Culture is not an amorphous entity, a gross amount of products, an aggregate of disjointed atoms, but an organic whole. Every cultural expression (politics, arts, religion, literature, education etc.) is associated to a unique principle which is the fundamental, primary value that a culture has in view. The members of the social group try to assimilate it in the best possible way and contribute, generation after generation, to shape it, to incarnate and to transmit it.⁽³⁾ And it must be so, for if it belongs to culture to transform a man in a true man and a society in a true society, and if it is a basic value that gives life and strength to a culture, then it is quite natural that the full assimilation of an authentic value gives birth to a true man and to a solid society.

Cultural anthropology and philosophy are one in showing that values are a basic element of culture, that there cannot be any culture without values and, finally, that there is a main value that shape every cultural expression.

What we want to know now is the ontological ground of values: are they creations of man, of his culture, or do they have an existence of their own? Here we need to recall the fundamental distinction between absolute and instrumental values: absolute values are those which can never be used as means but must only be sought as ends. Such are God, man, truth, love, goodness, justice etc. Instrumental values are those which are or can be pursued as means or as intermediate ends but not as final ends, eg. food, work, study, sport etc. Our question is not concerned with instrumental but with absolute values. It is with regard to them that we ask the question about their ontological status: is their being entirely conditioned by culture, i.e., are they merely cultural creations, as are houses, cars, books, etc., or do they enjoy a sovereignty with regard to culture and do they have an ontological consistence which provides them with a full autonomy with regard to culture?

There is evidence in support of the thesis of the cultural relativity of values. First of all, the strong divergence with regard to values that we encounter from culture to culture, for instance, with regard to the cult of

3. Cfr. R. BENEDICT, *Patterns of Culture*, New York 1934.

the deads, premarital chastity, divorce, polygeny, beauty, etc. A second reason in favour of the relativity of values comes directly from the study of the nature of culture itself. We have seen that cultures, being the specific forms of the social groups, differ from one another, and have also seen that the main cause of difference is provided by values. Cultures are different because they choose and pursue different values, for instance, justice rather than freedom, power rather than wisdom, honour rather than pleasure, eternity rather than time, etc. For these and other reasons many anthropologists and philosophers have supported the thesis of the absolute relativity of values: as the other elements of culture, also values are the result of the creative genius of the social group which assumes and cultivates them; of their own, values do not have any ontological consistency.

But a more careful and accurate study of culture leads to the opposite conclusion: it reveals that in all cultures there is a common ground not only with regard to the structural aspects, as it has been shown by Lévi-Strauss⁽⁴⁾ but also with regards to some main contents: "the true universals or quasi-universals are apparently few, but they appear to be as deep as they are rare (. . .). The facts of anthropology show that the locution 'a common humanity' is not at all unjustified".⁽⁵⁾ On the other hand the recognition of some basic values (logical, ontological and moral values) is necessary to culture in order that it may fulfil its function of unifying into a true whole the members of a social group by giving to them the same education, and this takes place by socializing them not only into the same language, customs and techniques but especially by socializing them into the same values.

For these reasons it is necessary to draw the conclusion that the thesis of an absolute cultural relativism goes against both experience and the essential function of culture. At the same time we are bound to recognize that for its very existence a culture needs to assume some absolute values; it will survive only in the measure that it will remain faithful to its values, but will quickly collapse at the very moment that it loses confidence in absolute values and abandons them.

Now we may raise the question: is it possible to establish with certainty which are the absolute values that no culture worthy of this name is allowed to ignore and to put aside?

In my recent volume, *Nuova cultura per una nuova società*,⁽⁶⁾ I have shown that this can be done for values such as human life (the human person) truth, goodness, wisdom, friendship, love, mercy, peace, freedom, justice and . . . the divine Being. With regard to the divine Being it is quite obvious that it is an absolute value, but what is the justification for including it among the fundamental values of culture? The justification is

4. C. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Antropologia strutturale*, it.tr., Milano 1966, pp. 33 ff.

5. C. KLUCKHOHN-A.L. KROEBER, *Culture, a Critical Review on Concepts and Definitions*, cit., p. 364 (in the Italian translation).

6. Massimo, Milano 1981.

quite simple. It boils down to this: except for the divine Being, none of the other absolute values that must be pursued by culture is a self-subsistent value: human life, truth, goodness, love, wisdom etc. as they take place in history are absolute inasmuch as they should never be used as means, yet are not absolute but contingent inasmuch as they do not last forever: they have a short life, and when their span of time is over they fade away and disappear. And yet culture, as we have seen, needs absolute values, values that are truly absolute, really absolute and not abstract ideas or empty words (*flatus vocis*). This means that human life, truth, virtue, love, justice, freedom etc. to become absolute values need to be rooted into an absolute self-subsistent value, and such in the divine Being.

This shows that there is a very close relationship between culture and religion.

That there is an essential bond between culture and religion is not a new thesis, but a familiar one among contemporary scholars: it has been asserted by a solid group of sociologists (Luckmann, Berger etc.), philosophers (Maritain, Guardini, Niebuhr), historians (Toymbee, Dawson), theologians (Tillich, Chenu, Teilhard de Chardin, De Lubac, von Balthasar etc.). But my point of view for asserting it is different: my reason for establishing a necessary relationship between religion and culture is provided by absolute values. No culture can do without absolute values; but absolute values to be truly such need to be grounded into religion. Only religion secures to absolute values a solid foundation.

History is on our side on this point. It shows that cultures grow and remain vital as long as they assign to moral, political, social, ontological values a transcendent, religious foundation and accord to religion a central role in the cultural life of society. Whereas the exclusion of religion or its eclipse is always accompanied by a moral crisis, the collapse of moral and social values and finally the total ruin of culture and society.

This great lesson of history for us citizens of the atomic age, is becoming a bitter and painful experience. We are living in our own flesh the epocal crisis of modern culture. Day after day it is falling into pieces. All its basic elements are crumbling: language techniques, customs, values. But everything is crumbling because the values that were its life-blood are no longer accepted, supported, defended by our society.

Many are the causes that have shaken our trust in absolute values: science, technology, welfare, education, economic and political system, in some cases the changes in Christian doctrine. But the main cause has been modern philosophical thought, especially the atheistic philosophies of Marx, Comte, Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, etc. Moral, social, ontological, political values have fallen down at the very moment in which these philosophers either have deliberately destroyed them or have pretended to proclaim as their unique and ultimate foundation. In both cases the collapse of values was inevitable. For, as we have seen, values are ideals, goals that have the function to provide an orientation for human life, for its moral, social, political behaviour. They must, therefore, be placed, logically and

ontologically, ahead and above man. But if man is conceived as the supreme being (as in the philosophies of Marx, Freud, Comte, Nietzsche, Sartre etc.), then he becomes the arbitrary and unstable source of every norm, ideal, rule of behaviour. All values become relative, and this means that properly speaking, they are no longer values (neither instrumental nor absolute ones) but mere caprices of a person or of a society.

The absolute humanism taught by Marx, Nietzsche and the other atheist philosophers, inasmuch as it cannot provide a solid ground for values, logically leads to nihilism, as it has historically done. This is the cause that has mostly contributed to ruin modern culture and its creator, western society, in both its consumistic and communistic forms.

In order to move out from chaos, to free ourselves from the anguish that we may become sooner or later the victims of our scientific and technical discoveries and to transmit to the future generations some seeds of hope, we must abandon the foolish and diabolic project of absolute humanism, and set ourselves to work for a new cultural project, which should be centred on man, on the human person, as it is conceived by classic and Christian humanism, i.e., as a being whose main dimension is not the exterior, bodily dimension but rather the interior, spiritual dimension; as a being not closed in himself, exclusively concerned with the growth of one's own power and with the satisfaction of one's own pleasures, but as being open to his fellowmen and to God, to whom he tries to address his love.

The work that we are called to achieve in our time is that of building up a new culture, whose main characteristics should be the personalism, religion and universality.

There is need to prove that the first value to be cultivated by the new culture is man, since culture is first and above all the education, the cultivation of man: man in his total reality of body and soul, but with special attention for his specific element, that is his spirit. In order to cultivate the spiritual dimension of man and to help him grow more in the sphere of being than in the sphere of having, the new culture will emphasize such spiritual values as truth, goodness, beauty, love, hope, friendship, freedom, justice.

The second specific element of the new culture will be religion. As we have seen, religion is essential to culture, being the only solid foundation of moral, social, political, gnosological and ontological values.

It must be clear, however, that here by religion I mean simply religion and not Christianity, I mean any theistic religion (included buddhism) and not the religion based on Christian revelation, since for the rational foundation of absolute values a theistic religion is sufficient, and there is no need to appeal to Christianity. But at the same time it is obvious that each one of us in order to secure a solid consistency to the absolute values will appeal to a concrete religion, a particular religion, that is his own religion. The Christian will appeal to Christianity, the Buddhist to Buddhism, the Muslim to Islam, the Hebrew to Judaism, etc.

The third and last specific element of a new culture is universalism. In the past, culture has always been the spiritual form of a particular group. At the beginning the groups were very small: the tribes. In later ages the social groups became larger and larger: the towns, the states, the nations. In the situation of universal socialization in which we live today, in which most geographical, economical, political and linguistic barriers have disappeared, the spiritual form for which we are called to work is a universal, all-embracing one: the new culture should be the spiritual form that unifies all human beings, the Chinese as well as the Russians, the Americans as well as the Europeans, the Africans as well as the Indians etc. The universal culture, however, will not destroy the particular, local cultures, as the soul does not destroy but rather enlivens the different organs and tissues of the body, but rather will safeguard and strengthen them. At the same time it will incorporate them into a larger, universal whole, in which every human person will understand, help, love every other human person.

I believe that only a culture that will assume these three characteristics: personalism, religion and universalism is apt to face and satisfy the needs of a mankind that has entered into the atomic age.

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