

Pluralism and Common Values

by Joseph Joblin

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A peaceful worldwide society cannot exist without common values. Yet, in view of the plurality of civilizations, such a goal seems illusory. The plurality of civilizations is deeply ingrained in human nature. Individuals do not live in isolation; even children feel the need to gather together in small societies with their secrets, initiation rites, and ways of behaving.

Every civilization reflects an experience of "the human," therefore all civilizations have the right to be respected. But their experiences are not the same, and none expresses the whole richness of human nature; consequently the first step for each in the encounter with other civilizations is admitting its own limits. Each needs to incorporate what it has learned from others, so as to become more human.

The awareness that a set of shared moral demands may bring together those who hold different views on human life has been gaining ground in both the US and Europe for the last two centuries. Wars of secession and the defense of one's native soil were powerful motives that made peoples rally to a common cause despite social and ideological differences. A movement toward cohesion may lead different communities to overcome their divisions at a given moment, causing seemingly insurmountable obstacles to vanish. The great values of peace and justice are two of the strongest motives that have influenced and transformed public opinion in our century, bringing together many social movements, whether humanistic, socialist, or Christian-oriented. In 1928, Albert Thomas, a socialist and the first director of the International Labor Office, said at a congress of Christian union leaders: "You have your faith, I have mine; but nothing prevents us from joining forces for the workers' well-being and, in so doing, moving beyond divisions which we regard as intolerable."

The struggle against injustice is no longer merely a matter of personal initiatives; it has become a joint endeavor in which every participant -- even to the smallest degree -- in the process of globalization is involved. Today, national and international laws are admittedly indispensable for ensuring the common good, but misery has spread to such an extent that limited or selective measures are no longer sufficient to fight it. We have become aware that injustice is largely brought about by our social structures; for this reason, popes Paul VI and John Paul II called them "sinful structures" and appealed for "new ways" to remedy the situation.

It is not enough to say that every civilization has its roots in a feeling of solidarity, because not all levels of solidarity are likely to guarantee its permanence. For example, the level of material goods is highly unstable, yet is the one on which people seem to focus in our days. Admittedly, economic ties are drawing many countries together, but such unions are in jeopardy as soon as a possibility arises for more advantageous alliances. The level of solidarity will be more stable if material and technical links are based on a common social project; then those links will become an integral part of the peoples themselves. However, this level of the common good, which calls to a great extent on a determination to preserve a cultural and historical identity, is constantly menaced by clashes between blocs.

A third level is what Paul VI called the "civilization of love." This is not based on a combination of earthly interests, even if they converge on an exalted ideal like the "mother country"; indispensable though it may be, one's homeland does not constitute a universal value, for it is not open to those who have different interests, either material or spiritual. The civilization of love urges people and nations to regard possessions as the means to achieve a greater unity and understanding of minds. In this way, to serve "the other" becomes a moral demand far more important than the protection and development of one's economic and cultural goods.

Such an attitude is not without risk, because it is possible to give up being oneself on the pretext of working for the union of humanity. Reason must come to the rescue, for everybody is not ready to follow this path; furthermore, its end still remains vague and one must grope one's way along. We need criteria to help us choose a course of action. Establishing these criteria and adapting them to new circumstances is precisely the task of international institutions and "forces inspired by ideals" (in French, forces d'idéal), including religions.

It is not the purpose of international nongovernmental organizations or UN-related agencies to impose certain values of which they are supposed to be the guardians, nor does their task consist in standardizing different peoples' values or in sparking discussion about the respective merits of social and political doctrines. In fact, international organizations must avoid everything that might make them appear to be serving such and such a power or ideology. Their vocation being to protect the general interest as defined in their constitutional texts, they strive to guide peoples of different civilizations to find that they share common concerns, and that cooperation may help them come closer to reality in spite of their specific traditions and viewpoints. These organizations urge us to reappraise the values underlying different civilizations' social doctrines, in order to make those values more universal. They provide various peoples with a method for getting out of prejudices and attitudes that are not an essential part of their traditions.

The international organizations make no direct contribution to the working out of a worldwide social doctrine; instead they help people from varied backgrounds find a reliable way to ensure their respective societies' human growth. Bearing in mind that universal values cannot be those of one or another partner in international life, these organizations endeavor to build up a spiritual patrimony and put it into words that all the world's peoples should be able to understand.

The role that has been assigned to international organizations in establishing universal values might lead us to think that religions are already outdated in this respect. In fact, given their links with specific cultures, how could they play such a role in our present society?

In international life, religions are the antidote against the temptation to rely exclusively on reason and momentary impulses to set the goal of human history. Their strength comes from their ability to remind us that we are not absolute masters of all beings on earth and that, like other beings, we are subjected to an immutable order. Monotheistic religions are especially significant insofar as they maintain that a transcendent Being, God, took the initiative in making Himself known to us. For Christianity, the "civilization of love" is based on a reversal of the world's logic, because one is supposed to attain

fulfillment by seeking not one's personal advantages, but those of our fellow human beings, both at the material and humanistic levels of the common good.

Are common values possible? Yes, provided that 1) each people recognizes its duty to strive for that goal; 2) all peoples agree on some essential truths, at any time, and make them central to their concerns; in our days, these truths are an equal dignity of persons and human societies as well as a yearning for freedom, justice, and peace; 3) the policy each people chooses to fulfill such expectations is allowed to be judged in the light of common values, which should be the mainstays of social order.