

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE “CALL OF THE TRIBE” AND THE FASCINATION OF UNIVERSALITY

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ABSTRACT: The identity of the individual is given in the tension between the particular and the universal, tension taken over by the political organizations of human communities that favoured either the local component (the city-state) or the universal component (the empire). Modernity, influenced by Christianity, affirmed the connection between the individual and the universal and, in opposition to the Church, proposed a new model of organization, liberal secular democracy, based on universal rights of the individual. After the second half of the twentieth century, in the name of individual freedom, democracies increasingly adopted axiological neutral liberalism, but this diluted individuals' belonging to a community and led to persistent identity confusion. After the confrontations of the beginning of modernity, Christianity and science find themselves in a post-secular era in which they can complement each other to overcome the identity confusion of society by reconfiguring the balance between the individual and the universal and inserting values.

Keywords: border, individual, universal, community, collective identity, Christianity, state, liberty, neutral axiology, dialogue.

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It is in the tension between the fascination of universality and the call of the tribe that an inner frontier is created. Most often unrecognized, diffuse and only sporadically realized, these frontiers determine the dynamics of a whole, be it state, continent or human being.

The fascination of universality is the motivation that makes people see themselves as part of one humanity. It manifests itself as the motivation and justification of empires and also in the great religions and the great ideologies.

The Call of the Tribe is the title of a book by Nobel laureate in Literature Mario Vargas Llosa. He published this book in 2018 to present the connection between liberalism and political freedom. “The call of the tribe” is another name for what Karl Popper called the “spirit of the tribe” in *The Open Society and His Enemies*² and refers to the mentality that gives primacy to the blood community (the tribe) and customs over the individual and critical thinking.

The negative effects of this attitude are emphasized by the Popperian opposition between closed and open societies. Closed societies are constituted according to an ideal model that circumscribes the lives of individuals. This scheme of thought was initiated by Plato and was taken up in modernity by Hegel and Marx. They envisioned a perfect world, and politicians tried to make it a reality, and so the logic of totalitarianism is entered into. In contrast, the open society is

“a civilization which we might say is striving towards humanism and rationality, towards equality and freedom; [...] this civilization has not fully recovered from the shock of its birth, from the transition from the ‘closed society’ or tribal, subject to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which liberates the creative forces of man.”³

The first edition of this book was written in 1945, the fourth in 1966, and it is still relevant in 2018 when Llosa brings back into question the “call of the tribe” as a threat to the social-political freedom of the individual, as it is in Western democracies based on respect for the Universal Declaration of

² K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and His Enemies*, vol. 1-2, London 1962.

³ Popper, *The Open Society* (vol. I) 1.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE “CALL OF THE TRIBE”
AND THE FASCINATION OF UNIVERSALITY

Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948⁴. The threat no longer comes from the powers that want to impose a model of the world, but from an increasingly complex and unpredictable world as a result of globalization, information overload and post-truth.⁵ In these conditions, retreating into tribal positions gives a sense of security and comfort, a retreat that is facilitated by virtual social networks, which allow the creation of “bubbles”, virtual tribes whose members do not share the same blood, but the same mentalities and opinions, usually contrary to the official trend in political and social life or even in science.⁶

The refragmentation of the world does not bring more freedom for the individual, but on the contrary, it opposes individual freedoms, its result being the neo-tribes announced in 1993 by Zygmunt Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics*.⁷ In modernity, traditional opportunities for people to meet have been replaced by artificial, ideological products (in which the Nazis and communists excelled). To emancipate from ideology, in postmodernity, the state refrains from imposing ideals, and traditional ideals have already been devalued, so neo-tribes emerge:

“The short-lived, restless products of such spontaneous structuration are the neo-tribes. Tribes — because the levelling-down of units, erasure of differences, and militant assertion of collective identity are their mode of existence. ‘Neo’ — because deprived of the mechanisms of self-perpetuation and self-reproduction. Unlike ‘classic’ tribes, neo-tribes do not last longer than their units (‘members’). Rather than being a collective compensation for individual mortality, they are vehicles of the deconstruction of immortality; tools of a kind of life which is a daily rehearsal of death and thus, by the same token, an exercise in ‘instant immortality.’”⁸

⁴ (20.11.2024), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

⁵ (20.11.2024), <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

⁶ An example is the growing number of people who believe the earth is flat (20.11.2024), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2018/04/04/only-two-thirds-of-american-millennials-believe-the-earth-is-round/>, or those who expected J. F. Kennedy to be reincarnated in Dallas in 2021 (20.11.2024), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/11/02/qanon-jfk-jr-dallas/>).

⁷ Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford & Cambridge 2002.

⁸ Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* 141.

The freedom of the individual is constituted in the tension between the collective and the universal and disappears under the pressure of the collective identity of the neo-tribes, which is so strong that it completely covers the horizon of the universal.

The freedom that both authors cited above had in mind is freedom from political power, but it cannot be consistently argued in its favor without the involvement of a spiritual dimension, even if only tacitly. This is required, on the one hand, by a logical balance of powers: in the absence of spiritual dimension, the freedom of the individual can only be defended against the abuses of political power by another political power, but this can always turn into a dictatorship. On the other hand, spiritual approach is required by the very complex reality of the individual, inexhaustible for any social or political theory. We could say that political power secures the individual's freedom if it recognizes his infinity and enables him to express it, if it does not make the individual merely the follower of a cause or a way of life.

The relation of the individual to the universal is the most neutral form of presence of the spiritual dimension in social life, which is why Popper and Ortega y Gasset considered, almost six decades apart, that the freedom of the individual is threatened precisely because his openness to the universal is concealed. The individual can be free when he also relates to the universal, when his horizon is not a particular collective identity, but a universal identity that ensures his freedom precisely because it remains undelimited.⁹

The contortion of the internal boundary between tribal and universal identities deprives democracies of their specific dynamism and leads to a deadlock reflected in the model's declining attractiveness at the global level.¹⁰

One of the causes of this situation can be traced back to the 1970s, when young people began to devote themselves to their own fulfillment and stopped believing in causes that transcend them, this leading to a contradictory

⁹ *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* does not invoke a common nature of human beings, only their equality.

¹⁰ v. Appendix, the decrease in the overall democratic index, where all indicators decrease except for political participation, but we believe that this expresses the increasing importance of "tribes" in political life.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE “CALL OF THE TRIBE”
AND THE FASCINATION OF UNIVERSALITY

situation: neutral liberalism. The ideal of self-fulfillment is a principle of political liberalism, according to which everyone has the right to lead a good life (as long as it does not infringe on the freedom of others), but it has come to the point where, in the name of impartiality, any debate about what constitutes a good life is forbidden:

“That the espousal of authenticity takes the form of a kind of soft relativism means that the vigorous defence of any moral ideal is somehow off limits [...] In adopting the ideal, people in the culture of authenticity, as I want to call it, give support to a certain kind of liberalism, which has been espoused by many others as well. This is the liberalism of neutrality. One of its basic tenets is that a liberal society must be neutral on questions of what constitutes a good life. The good life is what each individual seeks, in his or her own way, and government would be lacking in impartiality, and thus in equal respect for all citizens, if it took sides on this question. Although many of the writers in this school are passionate opponents of soft relativism (Dworkin and Kymlicka among them), the result of their theory is to banish discussions about the good life to the margins of political debate.”¹¹

Without a debate about what good life means, the community cannot have a principle of solidarity. For this reason, several authors have criticized the abandonment of values, of ideals that transcend the individual,¹² but they lose sight of the fact that, in the beginning, the concern for self-fulfillment was the consequence of assuming a moral ideal: authenticity.

In Taylor’s conception, in order to overcome the dead end of the lack of an ideal, we must not go back to the past choices of European culture and civilization, nor accept a conjunctural appeasement (the current situation has good and bad sides, we must accept both), but we must regain the strength of the original moral ideal, that is authenticity, while being aware that it is self-dissolving if the individual no longer takes into account the demands arising from the links with others or from a reality superior to his desires. If it disregarded these requirements, the individual’s claim to originality would become inconsistent because defining by originality means defining by what

¹¹ C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard 2003, 17-18.

¹² Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* 17.

is meaningful, that is, choosing what is important to us over what we consider unimportant. If there were no possibility of this choice, it would mean that all possibilities are equal in themselves, that their value is given only by the choice the subject makes, but this means ignoring the horizon of meanings that precedes us and in which we have formed our identity.

In this essay we aim to argue that Christianity has made a specific contribution to avoiding the impasse described by Charles Taylor. Since its emergence, Christianity has influenced *the relationship between the call of the tribe and the fascination of the universal*, and this has influenced both political and anthropological models.

This influence is presented by Pierre Manent,¹³ who believes that after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Europe had two models of political organization (the city and the empire), but its specificity was formed in the confrontation between these two models and a third model of organization, that offered by the Church.

“To be sure, the Church cannot be placed on the same plane as the empire and the city-state. Organizing men’s social and political life is not its *raison d’être*. But by its very existence and distinctive vocation, it posed an immense political problem to the European peoples. This point must be stressed: the political development of Europe is understandable only as the history of answers to problems posed by the Church, which was a human association of a completely new kind. Each institutional response created in its turn new problems and called for the invention of new responses. The key to European development is what might be called, in scholarly terms, the theologico-political problem.”¹⁴

The theologico-political problem was posed at two levels, one conjunctural and the other essential. The conjunctural level concerns the Church’s involvement in the organization of public life after the empire and its institutions had fallen apart. The essential aspect derives from the purpose of the Church, which is to lead people to salvation in the world beyond which is reached through actions in the world here, therefore the Church considered it her duty to regulate the

¹³ P. Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, Princeton 1995.

¹⁴ Manent, *An Intellectual History* 4.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE "CALL OF THE TRIBE"
AND THE FASCINATION OF UNIVERSALITY

secular life of the faithful through the institutions of political power. Thus, a tension between the Church and Caesar invariably arose, a tension resolved by the compromise of divine right monarchy whereby the Western monarchies preserve the tension between the power of Caesar and the authority of the Church, this leading to the dynamism of European history.

This tension did not exist in the East, where the emperor represented the symbolic union of political and sacred power, so that, internally, he sought to maintain the status quo. In the West, the monarch of divine right, in order to escape the tutelage of the Church, promoted the emancipation of the secular domain, which is completed in modernity with the affirmation of the sovereignty of the citizen. This path seems paradoxical, but the emancipation of the sovereign is accomplished precisely through the French Revolution, when every citizen becomes a "lord". Also apparently paradoxical, the new political organization, despite its anticlerical attitude, adopts the Christian anthropological model whereby every individual has a direct link with the universal. The person, created in the image of God, is unique and in direct dialog with God, just as the citizen is sovereign and equal before the law. The citizen, like the person, has a direct connection with the universal, from which their dignity derives.

The secular, in turn, can assert itself in closed societies or open societies, according to the terminology proposed by Popper. The emergence of open society is linked to the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution of the 16th-18th centuries and democratic liberalism, and its maintenance is linked to the ideal of both truth and individual freedom.

In the 21st century, in liberal democracies, both ideals seem to be stifled by information overload and the assertion of individual rights through which the individual builds a strong group identity, but the consciousness of universality is lost. The individual claims certain rights in the name of a universal that is forgotten and even rejected, and in the end, freedom breaks down because of the lack of discussion about what good life means. A common ideal, a common general conception of the world and life are conditions for its survival. In the context of relativism, the authority of truth can no longer impose a common ideal; the only authority that can impose anything is the political one, and this is taken over by particular interests, by neo-tribes. How, then, can the community

survive? Through a “continuous struggle” is the answer given by Charles Taylor,¹⁵ through a permanent negotiation between ideals and interests.

We will exemplify this ongoing struggle with the debates on the legality of abortion. The position on abortion divides people into two camps, each claiming a fundamental right (the right to life of the unborn vs. the freedom and autonomy of the individual). Debates and legislative changes in the US show that decisions are not made based on an objective truth that is neutral to people’s beliefs, but by political decisions that reflect people’s beliefs.

On June 24, 2024, the US Supreme Court held that the right to abortion is not a federal right¹⁶ and that each state may have its own legislative provisions in this area. As reflected in the press, but also in scholarly articles, the Court’s decision was primarily driven by political influence. In the article “Should Constitutional Rights Reflect Popular Opinion? Interpreting *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*”,¹⁷ Mary Ziegler points out that both anti-abortion and pro-abortion activists wanted the judiciary to be independent, but also to consider popular will.

“the abortion debate both reflected and reinforced a contradictory attitude about the courts: voters demanded that the justices be both apolitical and in step with popular preferences. The history of the abortion struggle in the decades after *Roe* also serves as a reminder of the complexity of rights culture in the twentieth - and twenty-first - century United States. While movements and even voters expected the federal courts to safeguard rights, they hardly acted as if rights came exclusively from the judiciary, looking to Congress,

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* the whole chapter 7.

¹⁶ The US Supreme Court has held that the caselaw established in 1973 by *Roe v. Wade* only applies at the state level (i. e. Texas), not at the federal level, so other states may decide differently (20.11.2024), <https://apnews.com/article/abortion-supreme-court-decision-854f60302f21c2c35129e58cf8d8a7b0> .

¹⁷ M. Ziegler, Should Constitutional Rights Reflect Popular Opinion? Interpreting *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, *Modern American History* 6(1), 2023 in (20.11.2024), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-american-history/article/should-constitutional-rights-reflect-popular-opinion-interpreting-dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization/009FBA02D5885AECE95B7510F992E0DF>.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE “CALL OF THE TRIBE”
AND THE FASCINATION OF UNIVERSALITY

state legislatures, state courts, and state ballot measures to articulate different visions of the Constitution.”¹⁸

The partisans on both sides have not engaged in a debate about what good life means (respecting the life of the unborn or respecting the will of the adult individual), but have waged a battle to influence the parties that nominate Supreme Court justices. People debate and form their beliefs about what the good life means in different particular groups and try to impose their conclusion not through a public debate in the agora, but by appealing to political power.¹⁹

The ongoing struggle that Taylor spoke of is in fact a continuous dialog between groups with different beliefs, but also at the level of every individual, a permanent negotiation between the individual and the collective component of his identity, between belonging to the group and breaking away from it, between personal beliefs and an objective truth which in today’s times seems to be the result of negotiations.

We believe that among the greatest challenges that dialog has to overcome are people’s willingness to rest their beliefs on evidence and the expectation that their evidence is accepted by all. In fact, it is only the latter that blocks dialog, because dialog can take place if we rest our beliefs on evidence that we are willing to question, in the hope of a common conclusion in which everyone can stand by their premises.

To see how the ongoing struggle and dialog between paradigms can overcome the contradictions in which we would otherwise get stuck, I propose a thought experiment, a reflection on posthumanism. The term, still fluid, refers to several phenomena, but we can say that it has two main directions: the sharing of knowledge and the body between humans and machines (which of course involves a lot of technology), and the blurring of the distinction between humans, animals and machines.²⁰ For our imaginative exercise, we will focus on the second aspect. Today, post-humanists who criticize the

¹⁸ Ziegler, *Should Constitutional Rights* 89.

¹⁹ All sides accept, however, that the appeal to political power is made according to democratic rules, but democracies need values other than *majority rule*. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* stipulates exactly those values that cannot be violated even by majority vote.

²⁰ P. Mahon, *Posthumanism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, 2017, 195.

anthropocentrism of classical humanism are also in total disagreement with Christian theologians for whom man is the pinnacle of creation. However, if we were to ignore the anti-religious positions of posthumanists and if we were to detach their options from the technological discourse that disregards the soul, if we were to retain only the idea of the equal dignity of man, animal and machine, we could rediscover an ancient human attitude to existence, even older than Christianity, the attitude of an eternal shepherd for whom he himself, his sheep and their bells are equal existences in relation to Being. Man can thus rediscover his sense of co-creation, a profoundly Christian sentiment, and we could discover the similarities between posthumanism and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which says that “every creature has its own goodness and perfection [...]. The different creatures, willed in their own being, reflect, each in its own way, a ray of God’s boundless wisdom and goodness. Therefore, man must respect the goodness proper to each creature in order to avoid the disorderly use of things”.²¹

The relationship between Christianity and the Enlightenment is an example of this dynamic, of finding common ground after differences. Christianity has had a long and profound confrontation with the Enlightenment, so that, after centuries of settling the sediments of disagreement and settling the turmoil of social implications, it has discovered the common ground, as Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in his famous lecture on the Crisis of Culture:

“Is this a simple rejection of the Enlightenment and of modernity? Absolutely not. From the beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the “Logos,” as the religion according to reason. [...] In this connection, the Enlightenment is of Christian origin and it is no accident that it was born precisely and exclusively in the realm of the Christian faith, whenever Christianity, against its nature and unfortunately, had become tradition and religion of the state.”²²

Posthumanism does not yet have the force and scope of the Enlightenment, but we can imagine that in two hundred years’ time a

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 339.

²² J. Ratzinger, *Europe’s Crisis of Culture* (20.11.2024), <https://catholiceducation.org/en/culture/cardinal-ratzinger-on-europe-s-crisis-of-culture.html>.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE “CALL OF THE TRIBE”
AND THE FASCINATION OF UNIVERSALITY

theologian will recall the contribution of posthumanism to the reawakening of a sense of co-creation by mankind and that, through this, the material world has become more intelligible and transparent, and the destruction of the Earth’s ecosystem has been avoided.

The space of dialog is always to be constructed, it is a sensitive space that needs to be protected by power but is destroyed by the interventions of power in debates, it is a comfortable space of meeting, but also one of uncomfortable conclusions. It often seems like a construction site in vain, but its lasting edifice is not the conclusions it reaches, but the spiritual attitude of the participants. Power favors the emergence of a spiritual attitude if it does not impose decisions of conscience on its citizens; the individual assumes this attitude if he does not avoid decisions of conscience. The collective identity of the tribe exempts us from the pressure of decisions of conscience, but deprives us of the path of personal development. Amos Oz presents this tension between the collective and the individual in his essay *How to cure a fanatic*:

“No man is an island, said John Donne, but I humbly dare to add to this: no man and no woman is an island, but everyone of us is a peninsula, half attached to the mainland, half facing the ocean; half connected to family and friends and culture and tradition and country and nation and sex and language and many other ties. And the other half wants to be left alone to face the ocean. I think we ought to be allowed to remain peninsulas. Every social and political system which turns each of us into a Darwinian island and the rest of humankind into an enemy or a rival is a monster. But at the same time every social and political and ideological system which wants to turn each of us into no more than a molecule of the mainland is also a monstrosity.”²³

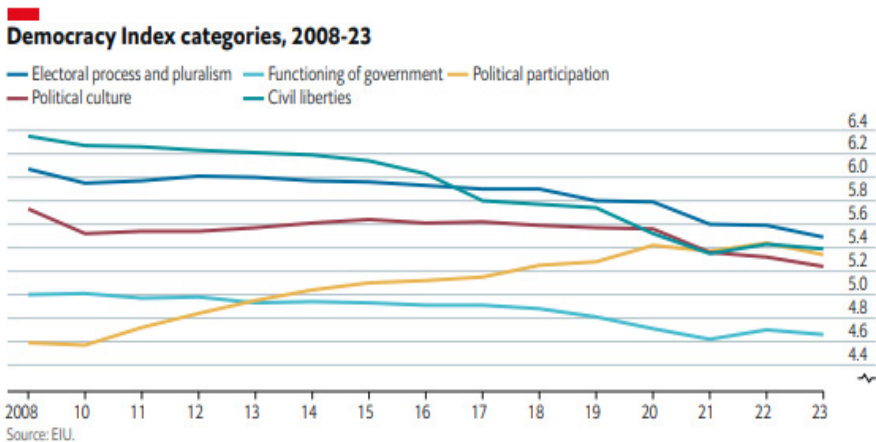
The dialog between individual identity and collective belonging is essential for a free, dynamic society. In this balance, political power must protect the freedom to question and make conscience-driven choices, without imposing collective norms that stifle individual growth.

²³ A. Oz, *How to cure a fanatic*, in *How to cure a fanatic*, Princeton and Oxford 2010, 71.

The ocean, representing an infinite openness, symbolizes the universal, the “space” of freedom that both Christianity and the Enlightenment consider a fundamental value of human identity.

When political authority neglects this openness, it risks compromising both individual liberty and the shared space for universal values. To preserve these freedoms, society must foster spaces for genuine dialog—spaces where individuals can meet as “peninsulas,” as Amos Oz suggests, neither wholly bound by nor isolated from the collective.

Annex²⁴



²⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy index 2023* (20.11.2024), <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>.