

THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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WHERE IS EUROPE'S BORDER?

The geographical delineation of Europe's borders does not cause any problems in the west, north, or south. Nor does it cause any problems in the east, where the border seems to be rather more conventional than natural. The question of Europe's borders remains nevertheless justified and necessary. It is a question not only of borders which demarcate land, but of the much deeper border located within peoples themselves.

It is a fortunate occurrence that amid various factors, an article on the borders of Europe has been included among the various contributions which *Vita e pensiero* is publishing in this issue.¹ It should be understood as an attempt to supplement and even to correct a vision which manifests itself as the result of specialized studies in these pages which seek to present a certain picture of Europe, particularly of contemporary Europe.

Without such a question the picture presented would be one-sided, something which frequently happens. The tendency to speak and think of Europe in exclusively "Western" terms is characteristic of peoples and circles representing the western part of Europe, although this tendency is not exclusive to them. Doubtless, this manner of thinking and speaking has its rationale. It also results from certain objective factors and circumstances. Nevertheless, it is marked by a certain one-sidedness, perhaps even a certain "professional malcontentedness" (if "Europeanism"² or the fact of being European in the "Western" sense can be understood as a certain "profession.")

¹ This article was first published in 1978 in the Italian journal "Vita e pensiero", 61 (1978)/4-6: 160-68. It is now appearing for the first time in English.

² The translator renders Wojtyła's term *europajskość* as "Europeanism." The most accurate rendition of Wojtyła's notion might be to create the adjective "Europeanness," though his idea is also captured in the English word (now somewhat rare) "Europeanity." (Trans.)

THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

That is why I happily accepted the invitation of "Vita e pensiero's" editorial board to address the question of the borders of Europe. I am convinced that the division of Europe into East and West, which has lasted for thirty years, has excluded from everyday thinking and expression the particular character of Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*). For thirty years the division of Europe has followed a political and ideological border that divided one nation (Germany) into two states.

On the other hand, during the first half of this century, especially between the First and Second World Wars, the notion of "Central Europe" was explicitly felt. That notion was permeated above all by the very content of the cultures of the peoples and nations which in that part of Europe manifested themselves as being particularly strong, along with their richness and diversity, especially when the centre of Europe moved southward: it is a well-known fact that Europe is most differentiated nationally and demographically on the Balkan Peninsula.

THE BORDER RUNS THROUGH PEOPLES THEMSELVES

When we pose the question: "Where does one find the border of Europe?" we have in that formulation given ourselves to understand that the border is to be understood in various ways which have different meanings for us. This is how we ought to situate our problem.

The geographical border of Europe is clearly defined: it runs along the length of the Urals. To the east of the Urals lies the huge Asian continent. To the west spreads out the much smaller continent of Europe, a continent which, if one takes its area in square kilometers into account, could be regarded as a significantly large peninsula of the Eurasian continent.

The geographical delineation of Europe's borders does not cause any problems in the west, north, or south. Nor does it cause any problems in the east, where the border seems to be rather more conventional than natural. The question of Europe's borders remains nevertheless justified and necessary. It is a question not only of borders which demarcate land, but of the much deeper border located within peoples themselves.

Those very borders divide societies and particularly nations, binding them to a defined piece of territory, which has had a particular significance precisely on the Europe continent. Let us therefore attempt to see what factors determine these kinds of divisions.

Language, culture and history allow us to indicate the lines along which run the borders between France and Germany, or between Germany and Poland.

Can one speak in the same way of the border between the East (where the man we call "Asiatic" lives) and the West (where so-called "European man" lives)? To what degree can that border be seen as "natural" and to what degree is it "conventional?"

That border is "natural" to a much lesser extent than the borders between nations; the analogy to frequently conventional state borders is even more distant. As is well-known, the efforts undertaken at the end of World War I to establish political borders according to criteria of nationality did not prevent the outbreak of World War II on the European continent.

From the history of my own country I know that several generations of Poles have had to bear on their identity papers the stamp of affiliation to a foreign state, despite the fact that they lived in the land of their birth. This was the result of the division of Poland, i.e., of the Commonwealth of the Three Nations: Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian. This division removed the name of the Polish state from the map of Europe during the period 1795-1918. That nation, or rather those nations, nevertheless survived by living their own authentic (though certainly difficult) life.

THE TWO VERSIONS OF THE NOTION OF "EUROPEANISM"

The concept of "Europeanism," while corresponding to the borders of Europe in a geographical sense, cannot obviously be reduced merely to the dimensions of those borders. Neither can one define it by employing the primordial unity of the Indo-European languages, even if their analogical structures influence the minds of the peoples living in Europe (not only genetically but also on the basis of their mutual contacts). The concept "Europeanism" is therefore one with various shades of meaning, at least from the viewpoint of the diverse national identities of the inhabitants of Europe considered geographically. It seems, however, that the division does not have to have a fundamental and definitive significance for the spiritual history of Europe, for the establishment of borders within the continent, for the division into East and West, or for the creation of Central Europe (or for the latter's shifting in easterly or westerly directions). It is therefore necessary to take into account other criteria and elements which have appeared in the history of our continent after the fall of the Roman Empire and of the great migrations of the European peoples.

The process of dividing Europe into East and West, which took place in the second millennium (i.e., the process which gave rise to two different versions of the notion "Europeanism") can perhaps be explained through the influence of the two centres which are found at the southern extremities of Europe. (One of them is geographically located across the Bosphorus, i.e., on the territory of Asia). Those centers are Rome and Constantinople.

The fact that the borders of Europe (or, rather, of “Europeanism”) exist also in a geographical dimension is closely connected with the origins of those two centres, which at root operated exclusively on a certain division. Nevertheless, already at the beginning of the present millennium those centres pointed to the existence of certain contradictions.

This is not merely a matter of the division and opposition of centres of power (first of state power and uninterruptedly of ecclesiastical power) between those two centres. It is also a matter of different cultural traditions. Those differences and oppositions are only partially identical with the pre-Christian division between Greece and Rome. They have their own shape, and flow from many different causes and circumstances which were part of the complex histories of the Church and of European politics at the beginning of our millennium.

The significance which the dynamic presence of the influences of Greece and of Asia Minor had on the eastern centre during the first millennium is well-known. Constantinople, which in its day was the centre for forging the eastern version of “Europeanism” and which became its symbol, was itself the fruit of the mutual interactions of those two influences. One must pay attention here to that small segment of the geographical border between Europe and Asia, even more so perhaps because the long northern segment runs along the Urals to the Caspian Sea and along the Caucasus to the Black Sea. It seems that is the border along which Eastern Europe, or rather the eastern version of “Europeanism” was created. It was not only a boundary of opposites and internal antinomies which eastern and western Europe carry in themselves. It was also a boundary of mutual self-completion, of a complementarity whose basis lies in a common source.

THE MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVE OF POLISH HISTORY

For a moment I would like to direct attention to the process of creating these two versions (Eastern and Western) of “Europeanism” using the example of the millennial history of my homeland, Poland. I do so even boldly since, at the beginning of World War II, Poland was called the “key to Europe.”³

As is known, after leaving Constantinople Saints Cyril and Methodius reached Poland’s historical southern border which runs through the Carpathians. The evangelization of southern Poland prior to the country’s formal history, i.e., the baptism of the Wiślanie tribe in the ninth century, was connected with that mission. The baptism received by the first known historical rulers of Poland, in Gniezno or Poznań in 966 and the conscious policy of the Piast dynasty, which had its beginnings with that baptism, determined that the nation and state

³ See R. L. B u e l l, *Poland: Key To Europe* (New York/London: A.A. Knopf, 1939).

formed by those rulers would be closely bound up with the Holy See and with the western culture radiating from Rome. Lithuania, lying to Poland's north, would subsequently be found within the same cultural orbit (in an explicit way in the fourteenth century).

Within the range of the influence of Rome one can undoubtedly see the border which, within the confines of geographical Europe, determined the division between East and West. Poland's history was played out on those lands which – as a state of one nation from the time of the Piast Dynasty through 1370, and above all, as a unified state of three nations in the fourteenth century – were the centuries-old place of encounter between the influences of East and West, of Rome and Constantinople.

The encounter merits an exact examination precisely from the viewpoint of the title of this article, expressed in question form: "Where is Europe's Border?" We must, however, limit ourselves here to sketching out this problem whose dimensions cannot be entirely explained by events of either a political (e.g. the 1375 Union between Poland and Lithuania) or ecclesial (e.g., the 1596 Union of Brest) nature.

These events bear witness to the mutual interpenetration as well as the opposition of influences originating from those two different centres. One might even propose the hypothesis that it is precisely this process of interpenetration and of mutual opposition of Eastern and Western influences that is necessary for the creation of Central Europe. It is also probably essential to mention here the fact that these processes resulted neither in the West swallowing up the East (nor vice versa) nor the emergence of a kind of conformism going in only one direction. It was rather an attempt at coexistence and coactivity of the two aforementioned versions of "Europeanism," versions evolving according to their own laws. This is important, above all, for the proper evaluation of ecclesial unity which is threatened by a too swift simplification undertaken in the name of twentieth century ecumenism.

THE DIALECTIC OF EUROPE'S BORDERS: THE EAST

An analysis of the problem of the border between East and West, one so important for the development of Europe, requires the introduction of a third element which, although frequently not accounted for, is not insignificant to the history of early and contemporary Europe. This is the problem of military actions from Asian territory directed against Europe.

That event, or rather series of events, fundamentally differs from the episodes of creative penetration which occurred during the first Millennium, above all on that section of the border between Europe and Asia running along the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Those events were connected in a certain way with

the process of evangelization. The military actions launched against Europe from Asian territory, however, were motivated by a desire to subordinate and enslave peoples which in that era (the thirteenth century) began to acquire their own political and cultural profiles.

The invasions of the Tartars, which in the first half of the thirteenth century had already convulsed Russia (Ukraine), subsequently destroyed the Polish lands, reducing cities and villages to the ground. The Mongols, defeated in the Legnica Valley by the son of St. Hedwig, Henry the Pious, retreated to the east of the Dnieper, settling on the territory of today's Russia.

With the same sympathy that he and other Poles felt towards Russia, Adam Mickiewicz spoke out carefully (in his Parisian Lectures of 1840-41 delivered at the Sorbonne) on the subject of the influences of the Asiatic peoples (which included the former Mongols) in shaping the mentalities of the Slavic peoples who, on the territory of later Russia (i.e., after 1450, in the Russia of the Tsars) remained for over two centuries under Asiatic influence.⁴ Karamzin, the historian of imperial Russia, expressed himself even more radically on this subject.⁵

In this way the eastern border of Europe was, above all, the boundary of the influence of the Gospel. It was later the boundary of invasions from Asian lands seeking to enslave the peoples of Europe.

Simultaneously with this strange dialectic of historical events, amid the ashes of numerous borders demarcated and moved by history, one must carefully examine the ways in which that border runs through peoples themselves. How deeply in them does the sense of humanity and of human dignity, drawn from the Gospels, dwell? Where does servile passivity, flowing from centuries of slavery, begin? We must take this into account when posing the question: "Where is Europe's border?"

⁴ See A. M i c k i e w i c z, *Literatura słowiańska* [Slavic Literature], Lvov, 1900.

⁵ "It was not the crowd alone in its fury that killed and burned people. [...] It was also the punishments envisioned by the law which were expressions of cruel barbarism. From that time on, even wealthy and powerful people accused of real crimes against the state, were publicly flogged. We inherited this custom, unworthy of man, from the Mongols. Mongol traders, thieves, and other pickpockets, treated us like slaves who were worthy only of contempt. [...] Losing our national dignity we learned the base passivity of slaves, which replaces the strength of people who are inadequate. We learned from the cheating Tartars to cheat each other. [...] From the thirst for money arose arrogance. The feelings of repression, fear, and hatred ruling in [our] souls gave birth to severe and dark customs" (*Ibid.*, p. 413n).

THE DIALECTIC OF EUROPE'S BORDERS: THE WEST

When one asks this question of people from Western Europe one must immediately remember that the borders in that part of Europe from which the question comes, i.e., in the West, are obvious and raise no doubts.

If however, we are speaking about borders not only in a geographical but also in psychological and ethical senses, then it is not hard to realize that Western Europe is in a deep shock which one might define as a crisis of its borders.

This is not a question of state borders because they seem today to be peaceful (although not too long ago they were not). Rather, it is a question of the phenomenon of post-colonialism, which might be characterized as Europe's return to its original borders. The colonial era had expanded those borders, placing them on other continents. The contemporary phenomenon of the so-called shrinkage of the borders of Western Europe is ultimately also a problem of an ethical nature. It contains in itself not only satisfaction atonement, but at the same time a pang of conscience and a warning:⁶

– Satisfaction, because the colonial nations and states of western Europe are trying to demonstrate by their actions that they are gradually preparing the peoples of the colonial lands once subject to them for national independence and political sovereignty.

– A pang, because without a doubt the colonial states exploited natural and human riches to such a degree that their former subjects, now independent, do not cease to reproach them for this.

– A warning, because colonialism is being born again in various forms of neo-colonialism.

Studying the western border of Europe as understood under this double aspect (spatio-temporally and simultaneously essentially humanly, i.e., ethically) we must therefore look at the eastern border, trying to understand its whole historico-anthropological uniqueness and vice versa.

Furthermore, when we make ourselves aware of the fact of the existence of two "worlds," above all in an ideological and political sense, i.e., the existence of two blocs, one ought to see them as a whole with a profound complexity which is today masked by division.

That complexity is deep and multivalent because historical periods as well as the deeds of individual persons and of whole nations cannot be treated in a mechanical way. It is possible that European man is not identical with the processes of the exploitation of others, of production and consumerism set up in one way or another.

⁶ In the theological sense of atoning for one's sins. (Trans.)

IDENTITY AND FREEDOM GO TOGETHER

We should not, however, depart from our subject. It seems that in response to the question: "Where are Europe's borders?" we can, as a result of our considerations, draw the following conclusions (expressing them at the same time in the form of propositions):

1. A recognition is needed today more than ever of the two different versions of "Europeanism" which were formed under the influence of different traditions. (This should occur without regard to given ideological concerns or systems).

2. A recognition is needed today more than ever that respect for human dignity and authentic freedom cannot be halted at any border, and above all, at any border on the European continent.

3. A recognition is needed today more than ever that Europe can only build its future within its geographical borders and its heritage of civilization/culture on the basis of permanent moral norms, and only under the condition that the creative ferment of the Gospel does not perish there because of the enslavement of individuals and nations.

Translated by *Dr. John M. Grondelski*