

## Intercultural Dialogue and God's Project for the Family: Dogma, Culture and History

STEPHAN KAMPOWSKI\*

*SUMMARY: In a world of cultural diversity, what sense does it make for the Church to claim that monogamous and indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman appertains to the natural law? Do not all norms, rules or laws have to be interpreted in the light of the cultural context in which they were first expressed? If this were so, the rule of faith, too, would have to be incarnated ever again into different cultures. The Gospel way of life would then differ from country to country, from century to century. However, for Joseph Ratzinger, a view that implies a dualism between faith and culture is Manichean. The Gospel is not an a-cultural reality that takes flesh in a culture only in a second moment. The Christian vision of marriage and family is a particularly good example for the workings of what Ratzinger calls "inter-culturality". The proposal of a complete relativity of cultures without any reference to human nature is not at all plausible. The different human cultures are the different ways of making the one human nature thrive. Some make human nature thrive more than others; some may even contain elements that impede such thriving. A historical culture can blind itself to some quite fundamental truths of our existence. It ever needs to be confronted with the culture of the Gospel that brings the light of God's revelation to those areas where the human intellect is obscured. Faith indeed generates culture.*

---

\* Ordinary Professor of Philosophical Anthropology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, Rome.

## 1. CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE HISTORICITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

«It is well known that, in very rare cases, family bonds cannot be claimed to exist. A telling example comes from the Nayar, a very large group living on the Malabar coast of India. In former times, the warlike type of life of the Nayar men did not allow them to found a family. Marriage was a purely symbolical ceremony which did not result in a permanent tie between a man and a woman. As a matter of fact, married women were permitted to have as many lovers as they wished»<sup>1</sup>. This is the example cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss adduces to contradict what he calls the extreme position held by a number of his colleagues, namely the idea that «the family, consisting of a more or less durable union, socially approved, of a man, a woman, and their children, is a universal phenomenon, present in each and every type of society»<sup>2</sup>. In his essay he presents cases of socially sanctioned polygamy and polyandry<sup>3</sup>, of group marriages<sup>4</sup> and even of instances in which highly ranked women are allowed to marry other women<sup>5</sup>. For him, this is proof that monogamy is not inscribed in human nature<sup>6</sup>. As is well known, for him the *one* universal cultural norm governing marriage is the incest taboo<sup>7</sup>, which, however, is itself subject to divergent interpretations. Thus, certain groups distinguish between different types of cousins, and while

1 C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, "The Family", in H.L. SHAPIRO (ed.), *Man, Culture and Society*, rev. ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1971, 334-335.

2 *Ibid.*, 334.

3 Cfr. *ibid.*, 336-337.

4 Cfr. *ibid.*, 338.

5 Cfr. *ibid.*, 345-346: «In several parts of Africa, women of high rank were allowed to marry other women and have them bear children through the services of unacknowledged male lovers, the noble woman being then entitled to become the "father" of her children and to transmit to them, according to the prevalent father's right, her own name, status and wealth».

6 Cfr. *ibid.*, 340: «That monogamy is not inscribed in the nature of man is sufficiently evidenced by the fact that polygamy exists in widely different forms and in many types of societies».

7 Cfr. *ibid.*, 350: «It will never be sufficiently emphasized that, if social organization had a beginning, this could only have consisted in the incest prohibition since, as we have just shown, the incest prohibition is, in fact, a kind of remodeling of the biological conditions of mating and procreation [...] compelling them to become perpetuated, only in an artificial framework of taboos and obligations. It is there, and only there, that we find a passage from nature to culture, from animal to human life».

making the same distinctions, these tribes come to opposite conclusions: for one group a certain kind of cousin makes a preferable spouse, while for the other tribe marrying the same kind of cousin constitutes a sin to which death would be preferable<sup>8</sup>.

Given this great cultural variety, what sense does it make for the Church to claim that monogamous and indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman appertains to the natural law? What meaning could any appeal to a truth about the human being have in a world of cultural diversity? Isn't the insistence on the Christian ideal of marriage as the basis of the family a kind of cultural colonialism that imposes one particular way of living on other people and cultures? Do not all the different forms of living together that are described by Lévi-Strauss in their particular contexts have a certain justification and reasonableness, expressing something valid about the ultimately incomprehensible mystery that is the human person? In an essay written at the turn of the millennium, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger formulates the issue in these terms:

Christianity's claim to universality, which is based on the universality of truth, is often countered in our day with the argument of the relativity of cultures. It is maintained that, in fact, the Christian missionary effort did not disseminate a truth which is the same for all people, but instead subjugated indigenous cultures to the particular culture of Europe, thus damaging the richness of those cultures that had evolved among a variety of peoples.

The Christian missionary effort thus appears as another of the great European sins, as the original form of colonialism and thus as the spiritual despoiling of other peoples<sup>9</sup>.

On top of this, to ask about culture is also to ask about history. As Ratzinger puts it elsewhere: «Society marches onward, and therefore culture also has to do with history. On its journey through time, culture develops through its encounter with new reality and the arrival of

8 Cfr. *ibid.*, 353.

9 J. RATZINGER, "Culture and Truth: Some Reflections on the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*", in J.F. THORNTON - S.B. VARENNE (eds.), *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, HarperCollins, New York 2007, 369.

new insights»<sup>10</sup>. Cultures are open to meet and to progress. Particularly «the Judaeo-Christian cultural world [...] understands the way with God as history. History is thus fundamental to it»<sup>11</sup>. Historical existence means existence in time, which is an insight that has been very much emphasized by contemporary philosophy. Thus, for Martin Heidegger temporality is at the core not only of human culture but of human existence as such: «The being of Da-sein finds its meaning in temporality. But temporality is at the same time the condition of the possibility of historicity»<sup>12</sup>.

The question of course arises where this and similar reflections on human temporality and historicity leave us with respect to human nature. Some see in the fact that the person's existence is temporal and historical sufficient grounds for denying human nature altogether. For José Ortega y Gasset, for instance, the whole point of history is to replace nature: «*Man, in a word, has no nature: what he has is ... history*. Expressed differently: what nature is to things, history, *res gestae*, is to man»<sup>13</sup>. If that is so, it will hardly be possible to define immutable dogmas and norms, inasmuch as they are meant to apply to the way of life of an essentially temporal being that is continually changing. Isn't the working document of the 2015 Synod of Bishops right when it appeals to the Church's need of a *twofold* fidelity, both to «the signs of God and to human history»?<sup>14</sup> Is it not reasonable to assume that the universal law of love that Jesus taught finds different expressions and concrete applications in different historical and cultural contexts?

Cultural diversity, in any case, is a fact that needs to be reckoned with<sup>15</sup>. No doubt, in some cultures it is expected that men and women

10 J. RATZINGER, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures", in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), April 26, 1995, 5-8, here 5.

11 *Ibid.*

12 M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996, 17 (§ 6).

13 J. ORTEGA Y GASSET, *History as a System and Other Essays toward a Philosophy of History*, trans. H. Weyl, W.W. Norton, New York 1962, 217 (original emphasis and ellipses).

14 Cfr. SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Instrumentum laboris - The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World*, June 23, 2015, n. 3: «The task at hand [is]: to read both the signs of God and human history, in a twofold yet unique faithfulness which this reading involves».

15 FRANCIS, *Address on the Occasion of the Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops*, October 24, 2015: «What seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and

shake hands, while in others that is contrary to proper etiquette. There are cultures in which any public display of affection – including a couple's holding hands – is considered scandalous, while in others, holding hands or a fleeting good-bye kiss are looked upon as completely acceptable. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, cultural differences go extremely deep, even down to the way we not only express, but *have* emotions: «The behavior associated with anger or love is not the same in a Japanese and an Occidental. Or, to be more precise, the difference of behavior corresponds to a difference in the emotions themselves. It is not only the gesture which is contingent in relation to the body's organization, it is the manner itself in which we meet the situation and live it. The angry Japanese smiles, the westerner goes red and stamps his foot or else goes pale and hisses his words»<sup>16</sup>.

## 2. "INCULTURATION" – THE FAITH AS FORMAL PRINCIPLE OF MATERIAL CULTURE?

Given the great cultural diversity that is found among human beings, what is the role of the Gospel? What is the relationship between the Christian faith and human cultures? In this context it has become customary to speak about "inculturation", which suggests that the faith is inserted into cultures as an immaterial form gives shape to matter. Ratzinger proposes that some indeed look at the question in this way: «One might think that the culture is the affair of the individual historical country [...], while faith for its part is in search of cultural expression. The individual cultures would allocate, as it were, a body to faith. Accordingly, faith would always have to live from borrowed cultures which remain in the end somehow external and capable of being cast off. Above all, one borrowed cultural form would not speak to someone who lives in another culture»<sup>17</sup>. It is then thinkable that there could be cultures, all informed by the Gospel, which nonetheless have very different mores,

---

almost scandalous – almost! – for a bishop from another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another; what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion».

16 M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Routledge, London 2002, 219.

17 RATZINGER, "Christ, Faith", cit., 6.

depending on which “material” culture had initially lent the body to a merely formal faith. Contraception, abortion, adultery, murder, stealing and lying could be grave sins in one culture informed by the faith, while in another culture, informed by the same faith, all or some of these could be considered tolerable or even virtuous. Faith would then be allocated only on the formal level of the transcendental intention. It tells us that God’s plan for human persons is to love each other. It does *not* tell us what the loving thing to do actually is. This depends on the cultural context and may vary greatly. For this approach, in one culture the deliberate killing of an innocent victim may under given circumstances be quite in accord with the love that God commands, while in another culture it may not be.

And it is true that the Church has indeed interpreted a certain number of norms contained in Scripture in more or less this way: that women should cover their head when praying (*1 Cor* 11,5) and be silent in Church (*1 Cor* 14,34), for instance, is usually being interpreted as a rule conditioned by the cultural context of ancient Palestinian or Greco-Roman society, which has lost its binding force for other times and places. The formal level of the norm expressed in St. Paul’s indications would simply seem to be: when assembling in Church, women, and presumably men, too, should always act in a decorous way. It will have to be granted that what it means concretely to act decorously will vary – at times significantly – from culture to culture. Now no one has ever claimed that a woman’s covering her head is a moral question pertaining to the natural moral law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. And what St. Paul had in mind when he exhorted women to be silent in Church is not an easy exegetical question at all. Evidently he allowed for women to pray publically and even to prophesize (these are precisely the occasions he thinks they should cover their head). Indeed, maybe all he meant was that they should not be chatting during the liturgy.

For cultural relativists, however, *all* norms, rules or laws expressed in Scripture and taught by the Church – including the Ten Commandments – can and must be interpreted in the light of the cultural context in which they were first expressed. Then they need to be translated into a different context. While moral norms tend to promote people’s good, one cannot discern what this good actually is without looking at the

given historical and cultural contexts. On these terms, the rule of faith would always have to be incarnated ever again into different cultures. The Gospel way of life will differ from country to country, from century to century. What was valid there and then is not valid here and now. What is binding on us in Europe today was not necessarily binding in Asia two centuries ago. To say it with Ratzinger, «Universality would thereby finally become fictitious»<sup>18</sup>. The local episcopal conferences should then decide about moral issues just as they decide about which feast days should be counted among the holidays of obligation.

Let us apply this kind of thinking to the norm “Do not commit adultery”, which is proposed by the Jewish-Christian faith. For ancient Jewish culture, this norm was compatible with polygamy, divorce and remarriage, for Christian culture it was not. Evidently there has been a development here toward a stricter reading of the commandment, though according to the words of Jesus himself, his way of explaining the commandment is not the newer but the older one, corresponding to its original sense: «From the beginning it was not so» (*Mt* 19,8). Jesus thus did not practice any cultural hermeneutics but referred to the original plan of God, from which the culture in which he lived had deviated. Once we get caught, however, in what Ratzinger calls a «hall of mirrors of interpretations»<sup>19</sup>, we will of course interpret the evangelist's account itself as culturally conditioned. Relating given norms to the truth of God's original plan with humankind will then just be one culturally conditioned way in which people of a particular place and time tended to interpret moral norms. Thus we will be back to where we've started.

Given human beings' cultural, temporal and historical existence, who says that an exclusive and indissoluble marital relationship is really the best for them in all contexts, times and places? According to cultural relativists, to interpret “Do not commit adultery” in the sense of “Do not have non-marital relations” might have made sense in other times; it still might make sense in *some* cultures today. It will probably have changed in the West. In any case, on the categorical level of

18 *Ibid.*

19 Cfr. RATZINGER, “Culture and Truth”, cit., 368: «Man is not trapped in a hall of mirrors of interpretations; one can and must seek a breakthrough to what is really true. Man must ask who he really is and what he is to do. He must ask whether there is a God, who God is, and what the world is».

concrete application, it will mean something different in each cultural and historical context. Only on the formal level, i.e., on the level of the general intention of doing good, “Do not commit adultery” will have a universal significance. It will simply mean something like “Treat your sexual partner fairly”. And what that means will always vary. Given the relatively recent acquisitions of ready access to contraception and abortion or the new understanding of the role of women in society, treating one’s sexual partner fairly in the West of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is perhaps quite compatible with pre- and extramarital relationships or may even require them. Isn’t it irresponsible, and hence unloving, to marry someone one hasn’t tried out? If Robert really loves his wife Jane, should he not occasionally try out other women and also allow her to try out other men so as to give a new boost to their relationship? After all, some sociologists suggest that open relationships are often experienced as more satisfying than exclusive ones<sup>20</sup>.

For Ratzinger, a view that implies a dualism between faith and culture «is at root Manichean. Culture is debased, becoming a mere exchangeable shell. Faith is reduced to disincarnated spirit ultimately void of reality»<sup>21</sup>. It is true that Christians also always belong to the cultural context of their nation. It is also the case, however, that faith itself is a culture and creates and informs a culture. The people of God is itself a cultural subject, though «as a Christian, one remains a Frenchman, a German, an American, an Indian, etc».<sup>22</sup> The fact is that with Christianity a “doubling of cultures” arises, «such that man now lives in two cultural worlds, his historic culture and in the new one of faith, both of which permeate him»<sup>23</sup>. However, to say that there are two interacting cultures that mutually permeate each other – the culture of the Church as the people of God and any given historical culture – is quite different from saying that «faith would always have to live from borrowed

20 Cfr. A. GIDDENS, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 1993, 147: «Episodic sexuality may usually be a way of avoiding intimacy, but it also offers a means of furthering or elaborating upon it. For sexual exclusiveness is only one way in which commitment to another is protected and integrity achieved».

21 RATZINGER, “Christ, Faith”, cit., 6.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*



cultures»<sup>24</sup>, which, again, would be a Manichean approach that sees the faith as something abstract and disincarnate. The culture of faith can stand in a fruitful tension with the historical cultures that it meets for the first time. It can profit from them and deepen its insights and renew its expressions. It can cleanse and heal them where they do not completely correspond to the truth of our humanity. As Ratzinger puts it:

When the faith and its culture meet another culture hitherto foreign to it, it cannot be a question of dissolving the duality of the cultures to the advantage of the one or the other. Gaining a Christianity deprived of its concrete human complexion at the cost of losing one's own cultural heritage would be as mistaken as surrendering faith's own cultural physiognomy. Indeed the tension is fruitful; it renews faith and heals culture. It would therefore be nonsensical to offer a sort of pre-cultural or de-cultured Christianity which would rob itself of its own historical force and degrade itself to an empty collection of ideas<sup>25</sup>.

Thus the Gospel is not an a-cultural reality that takes flesh in a culture only in a second moment. Rather, the Gospel creates culture, it is the source of culture. The Christian vision of marriage and family is a particularly good example for the workings of what Ratzinger prefers to call "inter-culturality" rather than inculturation<sup>26</sup>. Marriage is a reality of the created order and can virtually be witnessed in any known cultural context<sup>27</sup>. It is the culture of faith that brings this reality to its fullness, strengthening what is good and pruning away what is imperfect. As the Gospel is the source of culture that has repercussions, for instance, on the way people live marriage and family, so the family itself, we may say, generates culture. The family guards the person's origin, it transmits

---

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 Cfr. *ibid.*: «We should no longer speak of inculturation but of the meeting of cultures or "inter-culturality", to coin a new phrase. For inculturation presumes that a faith stripped of culture is transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture whereby two subjects, formally unknown to each other, meet and fuse. But such a notion is first of all artificial and unrealistic, for with the exception of modern technological civilization, there is no such thing as faith devoid of culture or culture devoid of faith».

27 Cfr. LÉVI-STRAUSS, "Family", cit., 340: All the cultural differences that he observed notwithstanding, Lévi-Strauss testifies that «every society has some way to operate a distinction between free unions and legitimate ones».

language, symbols and narrations. If culture is indeed, «the historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterize the life of a community»<sup>28</sup>, then it is evident that the crisis of the family will be tantamount to a crisis of culture.

Social customs, arrangements and approaches as they are prevalent in post-modern societies, which deconstruct traditions, values, and people's bond with the past are at once anti-cultural and anti-family. At the same time, this postmodern "culture" claims its own universality. It makes the universal claim that there are no universals; it claims as immutable truth that there is no truth. It spreads from the West also to Asian and African cultures. Its gospel is that human persons are autonomous and independent. Just as they can dare know for themselves, they can live by themselves, which inevitably leads to isolation and alienation. People do not only live alone, they also die alone. It is not unusual to read in the papers about people found dead in their houses months after they had died. No one had missed them. Is this really a cultural achievement? Can one really not say anything about this? If instead we are convinced that cultures can and must be judged, then what would be a better criterion for evaluating them than looking at how they treat the root of culture, that is, marriage and the family?

### 3. HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN CULTURE

The proposal of a complete relativity of cultures without any reference to human nature is not at all plausible. To claim that there is a human nature is to claim that something true can be said about the meaning of human existence and behavior, something that has universal validity throughout all times and places. On what grounds can one claim the existence of a human nature? Insofar as this discussion is going on also within the Church, among theologians and bishops, it is important to remember what is at stake here theologically. Evidently Christ can be the redeemer of humankind only if there actually *is* a humankind. The Word became flesh (*Joh* 1,14). By assuming our nature, he elevated it and made us sharers of the divine nature (*2 Pet* 1,4). All this is possible

---

28 RATZINGER, "Christ, Faith", cit., 5.

only if there is an “us”, if it actually makes sense to speak of humans and humanity. On the nominalist position that denies human nature, there is no humanity that could be saved and elevated. There are as many modes of being as there are individuals who at most have a certain resemblance. If we deny human nature, we deny that there is a common humanity and with that one of the basic conditions for redemption.

Apart from the theological implications, there are grave political ones as well. Without a common human nature, a common humanity, there is no humankind. Now the denial of our common humanity is of course the necessary premise of racism if not its very definition.

Beside the theological and political necessity of positing it, what else speaks in favor of a universal human nature common to all called by the name of human, independent of place, time and culture? There is for one the marvelous fact that, all the justified concerns of modern hermeneutics notwithstanding, we do tend to be able to understand ancient texts. Quite remarkably, script writers of the Hollywood of the twentieth and twenty-first century keep using a 2300 year old manual for successful and appealing story-telling: Aristotle's *Poetics* is one of their key references<sup>29</sup>. Who decided that Aristotle's ideas are still relevant today? Is this simply an arbitrary choice or the result of bribery from the part of the Greek ministry of culture? No, the Philosopher's relevance simply derives from the fact that he was able to say something *true* about writing a story, something that corresponds to who we are and how we work as human beings. Martians may or may not compose a story differently. Humans of all ages, in any case, have been finding Aristotle's remarks on story-telling quite to the point.

Similarly, when we read historical accounts, we can generally empathize with the actors' hopes and motivations, their doubts and struggles. Despite centuries or millennia that separate us from them and the texts that describe their actions, we recognize our own humanity in them: we'd be frightened by the same threats they were afraid of; we'd be appalled by the same things that outraged them; we'd be attracted by the same goods they were drawn by. It is true, today we wage battles differently than in ancient times, but the reasons why we fight are essentially the same. We use different tools to till the ground and dress in

---

29 Cfr. A. HILTUNEN, *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Intellect Books, Portland, Oregon 2002.

different types of clothes than people did in the Middle Ages. And yet we still work the field and care about the way we dress. All this would not be possible if human nature were completely transient or inexistent. Indeed, as Francesco Botturi puts it, “It is clear that, if one starts with the presupposition that human nature means *univocity of behavior* – as Montaigne thought – then the result of the research will be negative; if, instead, nature is rather understood as a *tendency that is fundamentally structured*, then the variety of forms regarding the identical interest and the same care, instead of being an objection, can be its most reasonable indirect documentation”<sup>30</sup>.

Perhaps even more importantly, without a human nature there could not be any human culture in the first place. As Robert Spaemann points out, «The word “culture” comes originally from agriculture; culture is nature humanized, not abrogated»<sup>31</sup>. The farmer is first of all confronted with a given: the field and the seed. Cultivating these means to create the best conditions to make the crops flourish and yield abundant fruit. And while nature needs culture to be brought to its fullness, it is evident that without nature culture would not have anything to cultivate. Once a field and seeds are at hand, the cultivating activity must respect their particular way of being. One can use different ways of proceeding. One can do intensive or extensive farming; one can use a tractor or a horse to pull the plow; there are different types of fertilizers. All the while farmers have to respect the nature of the field and the nature of the seed. Different types of ground need different forms of tilling; different seeds need different fertilizers and different amounts of water. Some ways of cultivating a field work better than others.

Analogously, the different human cultures are the different ways of making human nature thrive. Some make human nature thrive more than others; some may even contain elements that impede such thriving, although if a culture were completely against human nature, it would simply self-destruct and no longer be transmitted to future generations. It would become an “anti-culture”. All of us live within a culture, as it is part of our nature to be cultivated. According to St. John Paul II,

30 F. BOTTURI, *La generazione del bene. Gratuità ed esperienza morale*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2009, 326 (my own translation; italics original).

31 R. SPAEMANN, *Happiness and Benevolence*, trans. J. Alberg, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 2000, 167.

human culture is «that through which man as man, becomes more man, “is” more, has more access to “being”»<sup>32</sup>. Culture brings nature to its fullness. It is «characteristic of human life as such. Man lives a really human life thanks to culture»<sup>33</sup>. For instance, human beings do not just feed, they eat, they dine. As Spaemann puts it, «Eating and drinking, as free actions, [...] enter into a cultural context. They are cultivated, culturally remade. In many cultures the cooking of meals is, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown, the basic paradigm of culture itself. Eating and drinking become more the meal, the family meal the meal with friends, the marriage banquet. In religion it becomes a sacrament, and even eternal life is presented by the image of the heavenly marriage banquet»<sup>34</sup>. We may also think of the reality of language, which is both among the clearest expressions of *culture* and a defining element of human *nature*, contradistinguished by its capacity for the word<sup>35</sup>.

Furthermore, intercultural dialogue would be impossible if there were no human nature. What we said about understanding other human beings along the ages is also true about understanding human beings of other cultures. How is it possible that Lévi-Strauss was able to communicate with the tribes he visited? He could dialogue with them only because he was either able to learn their language or find someone who was able to speak both theirs and his. Languages can be translated. People's reasoning can be understood, even if they are from cultures very different from our own. If there were no common nature, people from one culture could not empathize with or understand people from another one. There would not be enough common ground to be able to begin a dialogue. Cultures would just be closed off. Botturi puts it this way: «It is undeniable that, without some meta-relative reference, relativity degenerates into particularism and into incommunicability: the total relativization of differences leads to axiological in-difference and the closure of subjects and cultures»<sup>36</sup>.

Indeed, cultural diversity is not as such an argument for the non-existence of a human nature, which of course needs to be understood in

32 JOHN PAUL II, *Address to UNESCO*, June 2, 1980, n. 7.

33 *Ibid.*, n. 6.

34 SPAEMANN, *Happiness*, cit., 166.

35 Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 1253a10.

36 BOTTURI, *La generazione*, cit., 337 (my own translation).

an adequate way. In fact, for Botturi, so long as we do not erroneously identify nature «with a prefixed model of behavior or with a rigid and fixed frame», the evidence gathered by cultural anthropology actually speaks in favor of its existence, inasmuch as cultural anthropology «everywhere documents the efforts to regulate sexual, familial and social relations and in general the search for the practical ordering of human generation»<sup>37</sup>. Indeed some of the strangest customs Lévi-Strauss relates to us are not based on fundamentally different concerns – as if the people he observed belonged to a different species, unconcerned about “the practical ordering of human generation” – but depend on some very elemental speculative deficiencies. If the members of a given culture are gravely mistaken about where babies come from, not attributing to the male any role in the matter, then it is not surprising that in their culture they will regulate the male-female relationship in a way that is very different from how they would if they were better initiated into the biological mysteries of sexuality<sup>38</sup>.

Cultures are open to learning from each other, as they are all essentially about the same thing, namely about making humans flourish<sup>39</sup>. As Lévi-Strauss points out, their interaction is the most common phenomenon: «It is thus clear that the concept of the diversity of human cultures cannot be static. It is not the diversity of a collection of lifeless samples or the diversity to be found in the arid pages of a catalogue. [...] This would be strictly and absolutely true only if every culture or society had been born and had developed without the slightest contact with any others. Such a case never occurs however. [...] Human societies are never

---

37 *Ibid.*, 325 (my own translation; italics original).

38 Commenting on an Australian tribes, Lévi-Strauss writes: «And since that attitude toward sexual access to a woman existed along with the official dogma that men have no part in physiological procreation (therefore doubly denying any kind of bond between the husband and his wife’s children), the family becomes an economic grouping where man brings the products of his hunt and the woman those of her collecting and gathering». This major mistake regarding the question of where babies come from will necessarily have serious repercussions on the ordering of sexual behavior (LÉVI-STRAUSS, “Family”, cit., 336).

39 As Ratzinger puts it: «Cultures, the expression of man’s one essence, are characterized by the human dynamic, which is to transcend all boundaries. Thus, cultures are not fixed once and for all in a single form; they have the capacity to make progress and to be transformed, as they also face the danger of decadence. Cultures are predisposed to the experience of encounter and reciprocal enrichment» (RATZINGER, “Culture and Truth”, cit., 370.)

alone»<sup>40</sup>. Cultures can encounter each other and interact, only because they have something in common. As Ratzinger puts it, they can meet «because man, despite all the differences of his history and social constructs, remains one and the same being»<sup>41</sup>. Just as individuals are open for each other, so are cultures. This openness «can only be explained by the hidden fact that our souls have been touched by truth, and this explains the essential agreement which exists even between cultures most removed from each other»<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, if we look at the sapiential and legal writings of the great cultures of the most different times and places, much more striking than their diversity is the fundamental concurrence with which they recommend or oppose certain types of behavior<sup>43</sup>.

#### 4. CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND THE COMMON TRUTH

Among today's cultural relativists inside and outside the Church, among those who consider the faith an essentially cultureless phenomenon that needs to be inculturated into different contexts, one notices a curious fact. Most of their relativism is limited to questions pertaining to the sixth commandment. One needs to remember, though, that the commandments are ten in number. One may at least wonder whether advocates of cultural relativism would as readily apply to the fifth or seventh commandment the cultural hermeneutic they use for the sixth. One will hope, at least, that they will not. Otherwise, what would they say about the ritual murder practiced among the Aztecs and the infanticide common among the Spartans? Could these "cultural" practices ever be consistent with the faith? Do these practices give witness to the fact that the commandment "Do not kill" does not express any universal truth about human nature, that it always needs to be interpreted within a given culture, and that it has to be concretely applied according to the context of

40 C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Race and History*, UNESCO, Paris 1952, 9-10.

41 RATZINGER, "Christ, Faith", cit., 6.

42 *Ibid.*

43 A highly instructive list of sapiential recommendations, legal norms and moral precepts stemming from a great diversity of cultures – such as, for instance, ancient Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Hindu, Greek and Roman cultures – is adduced in the appendix of C.S. LEWIS' outstanding booklet *The Abolition of Man. How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality*, MacMillan, New York 1947, 95-121.

the times? All this our “sixth-commandment-cultural-relativists” would have to affirm to be consistent in their logic by which they conclude from the fact that some cultures practice polygamy or wife-lending to the affirmation that the sixth commandment is not universally binding or takes on different and even contrary meanings, depending on the context. Or do the “cultural” practices of the Aztecs and Spartans not rather give evidence to the fact that cultures can and must indeed be judged by the measure of a truth that is potentially common to all but that can at times become obscured, that historical cultures can be severely wounded and fail to make human nature flourish, thus standing in need of the healing power of the Gospel culture?<sup>44</sup> This is the position that has been advocated in these pages.

Incidentally, those who claim that there is a truth about the human person do not thereby assert that they hold or possess this truth and now intend to impose it on everyone else who is not thus enlightened. Even on the most superficial inspection, it is quite evident that the affirmation, “The question of the human person admits of a truth; there is a good and a bad for human beings; they can flourish and they can perish” is not quite the same as the declaration, “I possess the truth about the human person; the way I say is good for human beings; if they do otherwise, they will perish”. If there is no truth, then there is nothing that is common. There is no ground for dialogue or reasoning. Hence it is precisely those who *negate* the truth – and not those who affirm it – who will have to *impose* their views on others (as long, in any case, as they desire to share them with others). Without truth, arguments have no basis, and “sharing” one’s views inevitably becomes a battle of will and power. Truth is what is common. No human being possesses it, though we can all share in it to greater and lesser degrees. Dialogue, conversation, philosophical argument: all these are ways in which we help each other to participate ever more deeply in the common truth.

At times, indeed, in our heart of hearts, we know much more of this common truth than we want to admit, also because acknowledging this truth may require us to change our ways. How come, for instance, it is

---

44 In the case at hand, the confrontation with any other culture that deserves this name and that does not consider the slaughtering of human beings a practice pleasing to the gods could have potentially helped the Aztecs to become more human and humane, to overcome what are really their *anti*-cultural practices.



so difficult for people of Western cultures to see that the human embryo is a human being with all the substantial capacities that define human nature? How come it is so difficult to derive practical conclusions from this fact, even if it is acknowledged? Doing so would require a fundamentally different way of practically ordering the questions of human generation. People would have to change the way they engage in sexual activity. Here is how a historical culture can blind itself. It ever needs to be confronted with the culture of the Gospel that brings the light of God's revelation to moments in history where the human intellect is obscured and blind even to the most obvious facts, which on principle they could know quite well even with their unaided reason. Faith indeed generates culture, calling us to conversion and reminding us of God's original plan for the human person, for marriage and for the family.