CHAPTER FIVE

EUROPE: COMMON VALUES AND A COMMON IDENTITY

1. Preface

For decades we have been witnessing a paradox. Several countries are asking to join the European Union. This may seem quite normal, but it has not always been so. As history has shown, the pendulum often swung in the opposite direction: the stronger states conquered or tried to annex their weaker neighbours. In order to join the European Union, however, a prospective member formally applies, and, if the terms of membership suit both the candidate country and the EU, the candidate country becomes a member.

How can this great innovation in political history be explained? What are the causes of such radical change?

Briefly, everything depends on the Union. The curious thing is that EU member states, the founding countries, have been in constant conflict for centuries. So how do we explain the reasons that had driven them for so long to war and now, instead, urge them to unite as a political community?

There is no straightforward answer. In effect, many unresolved issues are still pending, starting with the Constitutional Treaty. Each nation has its own vision of the Union and its identity. However, the common values underpinning the life of the European Union need to be discussed. At a stage in which there is a marked tendency to emphasize the positive aspects of European civilization, to redress the balance, I will explain its underlying problematic and negative elements.

A methodological critique stems from the fact that the discussion is addressed from within European civilization. In this sense, it is self-referential. However, by means of specific references, we shall take into account how others look at us. Consequently, the perception of European identity that we propose goes beyond how we see it and takes into account the detached vision of how others perceive us.
In his Sociology of Religions, speaking of Judaism, M. Weber claims that the contract between God and man is endorsed between God and the community. This means that for any act an individual makes, every other member of the community is also responsible. It is certainly quite complex. The issue of interpretation is vast. Depending on how this question is asked, other key phenomena relating to the history and identity of the Jewish people can be reconstructed. My argument, remaining in the context of the transformation of the concept of salvation and on the relationship between collective and individual responsibility, leads me to ask: how do we move from the concept of collective salvation to that of personal salvation? How do we move from the concept of collective responsibility to that of personal responsibility? Furthermore, what are the hallmarks of personal responsibility? As a corollary, is the age of salvation and of collective responsibility truly over, or are there still some ‘residues’ in our code to be found?

In the history of the conceptions of responsibility and salvation\(^1\) three phases can be distinguished: the first is characterised by collective responsibility and salvation (identified by Weber as ‘early’ Judaism); the second by collective responsibility and by the salvation of only a part of the people; the third phase is characterised instead by individual responsibility and salvation. On Judgement Day, everyone will be called ‘by name’.

This shift from collective to individual responsibility reaches completion in a millennium. By the first century BC, it was largely achieved thanks to the Essenes.\(^2\)

In Jewish civilization, consequently, a path can be traced from the *ethnos* to the *demos* and a permanent tension between these two forms of human coexistence is revealed.

The shift becomes more evident in Christianity, turning into one of its basic strategies. During the Council of Jerusalem (AD 49–50) where the admission of the Gentiles to the Christian community was debated, the claim of a non circumcised person being Christian was broached. Some of the members wanted the new converts to be circumcised, circumcision being considered a cultural trait of the Jewish population.

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1. On this, see Sacchi (1994) and Beccaccini (1998).
2. Such a contribution is stressed by Beccaccini (1998).