Multiculturalism and Church-State Concordats

Maurizio Ragazzi*

In necessariis unitas,

in dubiis libertas,

in omnibus caritas.1

1. Introduction

Although being today on everybody’s lips and having enjoyed widespread popularity for quite some time, the term “multiculturalism” remains ambiguous. This was the recurrent refrain in a volume on the topic published at the end of the 1990s.2 As ambiguity does not seem to have vanished in the ensuing period,

*  Senior Counsel (International Law) at the World Bank in Washington, DC. The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the writer and should not be attributed to the institution for which he works.

1  “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.” The origin of this maxim is unclear and has been attributed to several authors belonging to different epochs. The maxim was “recalled with approval” by Pope John XXIII in para. 72 of his 1959 encyclical on truth, unity and peace, in a spirit of charity (Ad Petri Cathedram), the official Latin text of which is in Acta Apostolicae Sedis 51 (1959), 497-531, and an English translation of which is electronically available at the Vatican web site: <www.vatican.va>. The same maxim, with a citation of John XXIII’s passage, was repeated in para. 92 of the Second Vatican Council’s pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world (Gaudium et spes), reproduced in an English translation from the Latin original in Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II. Volume 1: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents (new revised edn., Northport and Dublin, 1998), 1000.

2  Pierre Savard and Brunello Vigezzi (eds.), Multiculturalism and the History of
it is necessary to clarify, at the outset, the sense in which the terms “culture” and “multiculturalism” will be used here, and explain the reason for the particular perspective that has been chosen.

If, in the words of the former Cardinal Ratzinger (now the reigning Roman Pontiff), culture is the “social form of expression, as it has grown up in history, of those experiences and evaluations that have left their mark on a community and have shaped it”, the existence of many cultures, hence the phenomenon of “multiculturalism” in time and through time, is an undisputable fact. Beyond this static dimension of the plurality of cultures, there is the dynamic exchange between cultures (“interculturality”) and the animation of culture by faith (“inculturation”). Christianity brings the mark of “interculturality” since its very origins in the Near East, at the geographical point of contact among Asia, Africa and Europe. Likewise, in her missionary activity to all the peoples of the earth, the Catholic Church has not embraced any particular culture to the exclusion of all the others, but has taken what is

International Relations from the 18th Century up to the Present (Milan and Ottawa, 1999), xx (Pierre Savard: “For want of a definition universally accepted among historians, ‘multiculturalism’ has been taken to signify many different realities”), 483 (Claudio Visentin: “it does not seem to have a single meaning, since it changes according to the subjects and the contexts in which it is used”), 511 (Alessandro Colombo: “The ambiguity of the term ‘multiculturalism’ takes on an even greater dimension in international politics”).


4 Ratzinger’s Truth and Tolerance presents a sustained reflection on the relationship between faith and culture in chapter 2 of part one (pages 55-109). To appreciate this reflection in all its depth, it may be helpful to recall the chapter on culture (paras. 53-62) in Gaudium et spes, in Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II. Volume 1, 958-68. Among the many pronouncements on Christianity and culture, see also Pope John Paul II’s June 2, 1980 speech at UNESCO and November 25, 2002 message for the 50th anniversary of the Permanent Mission of the Holy See to UNESCO. (Both documents are electronically available at the Vatican web site.) The Pontifical Council for Culture, a dicastery of the Roman Curia, publishes a quarterly review entitled Cultures and Faith and has issued several documents on the theme. Most notable among them, for present purposes, is the one issued in 1999 and headed Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture, electronically available at the Vatican web site.