



Claudio Magris

The Fair of Tolerance

Essay for the Erasmus Prize 2001

Tolerance and its contradictions constitute a universal problem, which today confronts both conscience and legislation with an urgency hitherto unparalleled in history, writes Claudio Magris. A united Europe will find its universal principles – the core of a tolerance that is more than nobly rhetorical – put to a severe test. Only if the objective difficulties are not underrated can one hope to overcome them.

In September 1988, when thanks to Anton Haakman's Dutch translation my *Danube* flowed into the IJsselmeer, I made a trip to Holland. One day I found myself in The Hague. It was a Sunday, I think. In the main square there was a kind of festival or fair of universal tolerance. Countless pavilions, stands, stalls, booths, kiosks, one beside the other, were displaying, presenting, preaching, spreading each its own Word, its own unique Gospel. Political parties, churches, associations, clubs, movements, groups rattling off differing and sometimes totally opposite formulas for spiritual, physical, social, metaphysical, sexual, cultural, gastronomic salvation; each was having his say and proclaiming his own truth, the anti-militarists, the veterans, the health freaks, the champions of weird culinary diets or erotic techniques, of esoteric cults and gymnastic exercises, of ascetic or orgiastic practices, of collectivisation and wild, anarchic *laissez faire*; they were expounding the advantages of social assistance and of doing away with it, of strict racial segregation and intermingling. Unfortunately, the world was not yet talking of bio-engineering and cloning, which in that bazaar would certainly have found enthusiastic supporters of the more disquieting genetic manipulations, of the creation of new, semi-human species, and of new crossbreeding between *homo sapiens* and other animals, and prophets convinced of the inevitable triumphal march of Progress, and apocalyptic defenders of the abolition of all scientific experiment and of science itself, evil fruit of original sin and the expulsion from the Earthly Paradise.

I don't remember the name of that impressive Universal Exhibition announcing Salvation, and curiously none of the Dutch friends I have consulted in recent months have been able to give me any precise information; it seems to me decidedly odd that this spectacular event should have lapsed into oblivion, for it is deeply engraved in my own memory, leaving it with intense, and contradictory, impressions.

The first impression was a thrilling sensation of tolerance and freedom. The ancient, traditional, almost stereotyped image of Holland – country of liberty, civil rights, dialogue – took on a real face, seemed incarnate in that square and that enthusiasm. One felt that each, whether individual or movement, was entitled to speak; that there were no dominant, jealous gods ready to silence

every other voice, but that each god cherished in the heart of man – whether that god be small or great, sublime or bizarre, dressed gorgeously or in rags, majestic as a monarch or tattered as a tramp – found there his altar and his faithful who, undisturbed, paid him joyful homage.

One noticed, almost physically, that truth can never be the dominion and the imposition of one sole doctrine that brooks no discussion, admits no joint dialogue with differing opinions. As Lessing teaches: truth is an endless search for truth. Lessing stated that if God had shown truth in His right hand, and in His left hand simply the need to look for it, even at the price of continual mistakes, he would have asked for the gift held in the left hand, convinced that pure truth belongs to the Divinity alone.

The public display of that tolerance also gave rise to other feelings, less solemn and lofty but equally redeeming, and amiable besides. From those booths were being proclaimed not solely the great religious and political Creeds, messages of Salvation, the ultimate concerns of life and man. Also on show were peculiar manias, miraculous ointments, delirious myths, comic fictions, eccentric passions. Somewhat in the style of London's Hyde Park, there everyone could discuss not only problems of universal relevance – Christianity and Socialism, peace and war, the proliferation or the prohibition of nuclear arms – but also his own private obsessions, those tics, phobias, vagaries, fixations, those impassioned and incoherent longings which in a man's existence do not count for less than his faith in the fatherland or freedom of the press.

For some, a tin soldier can be more important than the *Mona Lisa*, playing with the cat more adventurous than playing with love, a game of cards in the pub more meaningful than reading *The Divine Comedy*. Tolerance means also this freedom of expression in matters apparently small or trivial, this sense of the world as a puppet theatre where all do as they can, comic and clumsy as is each one of us in his mortal existence, grounded like Baudelaire's albatross. Life is also a circus in which we are all clowns, and tolerance means also extempore performance, respecting the improvisations of others as well as one's own, and accepting that whoever is acting with us may unexpectedly change his lines and reply, for example, to a declaration of love with a kitchen recipe. It was also this sense of the world as puppet theatre which gave me, that morning in The Hague, a pleasant feeling of gypsy freedom while I wandered about at random, with no particular aim or interest, among those pavilions, not unlike those stray dogs in Tati's film *Mon oncle*.

After some idle, enjoyable turns among those stalls, lending a cursory ear to the touts' haranguing and glancing at some leaflets abounding in Good News, I experienced a third impression, slightly unpleasant and in the end almost disquieting. It was as if the fine feeling that everyone and everything fairly had the right to speak suddenly became a feeling of suffocation, evoking a vague and murky swamp; as if, alongside the anti-racist stand, there could appear that of the nazi skins, or even one in which a cloned Dr Mengele could defend the meritorious usefulness of his experiments at Auschwitz. That beautiful, innocent morning made me realise, vividly and forcefully, the need for, and yet the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, certainly the inextricably problematical nature, of tolerance and its bounds. Voltaire's great statement, in which he declares that he is ready to fight to the death to guarantee freedom to express the opinions against which he *did* fight to the death, is echoed – in ironic contrast – by that witticism that speaks of one so passionately tolerant as to be ready to shoot all the intolerant. However – at least in Italian – ambiguity is

probable: *tolerance* is a positive term which indicates a joint regard for all faiths and opinions; *tolerant* indicates an attitude of superior, condescending indulgence; *to tolerate* indicates an almost offensive, arrogant endurance of behaviour and opinions different from one's own.

Tolerance and its contradictions constitute a universal problem, which today confronts conscience – and also legislation – with an urgency hitherto unparalleled in history. In this regard our culture seems, perhaps, unprepared for the disturbing world-transformations that are assailing our life, our society, our values. With these enormous changes there are no longer, as in the past, close-knit cultures withdrawn into themselves and the structure of their own values, hardly aware of the existence of the other, different value-systems of other cultures. Today civilisations shift and mingle, peoples and distant races meet and their visions of the world – religious, political, social – live side by side, like those stalls in The Hague, in a polytheism of values, meanings, traditions, customs and institutions that no one can ignore. It is a process that enriches our cultures and at the same time awakens fears and obsessions with defence. With globalisation every identity feels threatened, is afraid it will dissolve and disappear, and so exacerbates its own particularity as to make of its difference a primitive absolute, an idol – which, like all idols, leads readily on to violence and blood sacrifice. Something of the sort occurred in Greece in the Fifth Century BC, with the breaking up of the ancient family-tribal communities into the State, the *Polis* – a process which in part gave birth to Greek tragedy.

The intolerant responses to current world changes are highly dangerous, barbaric, and seriously hinder – with every kind of closing-off – the process of forming a new and more genuine universality; an exciting process, since for the first time in history there is being born, or could be born, albeit amid a thousand dangers and horrific distortions, a universality truly universal, the expression of the civilisations of the entire world and not solely of the West or the East.

It is easy to condemn intolerance intellectually – even though it is so difficult to oppose it on a practical level – but what could the response of tolerance be, in terms not simply abstract and nobly rhetorical but real?

In cultural terms it becomes Europe's task to renew the awareness and the defence of the principle of value, that need for universal principles which for more than two millennia has constituted the essence of its civilisation. They are the "unwritten laws of the gods", as Antigone calls them, or the moral commandments which – in contrast to those historically and socially influenced – present themselves as absolutes that cannot at any price be violated. This universality – threatened both by the levelling out of differences and by their primitive atomisation – is the foundation of European civilisation, which in this sense is not restrictedly European but also calls to judgement Europe's own misdeeds, and the West's.

From its very beginnings European culture has placed the emphasis upon the individual rather than the whole; from the Stoic and Christian concepts of the person to Roman law, from the guarantees of liberalism and democracy to the freedom from need championed by Socialism; the individual – in his irreplaceable uniqueness – is the leading figure, he whom the Gospel bids us love, whom Kant considered the end and never a means, whose inalienable liberties the law safeguards and whose passions literature places at the world's centre.

Such pre-eminence of the individual presupposes the principle of equal dignity and equal rights for all men, and thus presupposes a reciprocal tolerance of differences and dialogue between cultures. The unification of Europe is a great step in this direction, an extension of the dialogue and the feeling of belonging together. But a united Europe will find those basic principles of its civilisation being put to a severe test, for it will increasingly find itself confronting – on the inside, with the introduction of new peoples from other worlds and other cultures – systems of values that at times will conflict with its own.

The growing contacts between different peoples and cultures, destined to increase, constitute a vital enrichment, but can create difficult situations in which the choice between proper cultural relativism and the assertion of inalienable values could pose itself dramatically. The peoples coming from other cultures will have to become European yet still retain their distinctiveness, not be brutally standardised to our model. Only if Europe is capable of carrying out this task resolutely and open-mindedly will it continue to develop, in a new form, the great role it has played in world history. We should not deceive ourselves that it will be an easy task, and that the obstacles to this process will spring solely from retrograde narrow-mindedness or obtuse racism. Only if the objective difficulties are not underrated can one hope to overcome them.

Almost all the differences – habits, customs, traditions, values – can and must be overcome, against all rancorous, blinkered stupidity, in a fraternal dialogue. But there may occur situations in which cultures, groups, individuals feel certain values to be inalienable which to others appear unacceptable and inhumane. One should always aim at dialogue, but also be aware that one will possibly find oneself facing dramatic alternatives which will hinder it. If the member of a sect that forbids blood transfusion objects to its being practised upon his young son, who needs it in order to survive, one must decide whether to respect his faith and wish – as would always seem proper – thereby leaving the child to die, or to forcibly impose that transfusion in the name of an authority which in this case appears right, but could be the first step on a road at the end of which we find church-going either mandatory or prohibited.

Tolerance presupposes ethical relativism, does not presume to be the sole repository of an absolute value, which induces whoever thinks he has it to impose it upon others, perhaps for their salvation. In the name of such conviction acts of the most horrible violence have been, and are, committed. But we can find ourselves – and both did and will do so – in situations which morally prohibit agreement, dialogue, toleration. When some fifty years ago the first black student obtained the right to attend university in one of the southern states of America – I don't recall whether Alabama or Mississippi – such a decision was felt by the white population of that state to be an offence against their own culture and values, and they were prepared to use violence to prevent that student – I think his name was Meredith – from exercising his right.

That university's defence of its all-whiteness was felt to be a value by the culture of the Old South, and it could have been propagandised from one of those stands in The Hague. In that case dialogue and tolerance were not possible: either one respected the racist culture, sacrificing the black student and his right to its violence, or one forcibly prevented the violence, thereby disrespecting the culture behind it, and forcibly imposed – with violence, if necessary – the exercising of his right by the black student. In the event the American government had him accompanied to the university by an escort of

federal soldiers ready, if need be, to fire upon whoever wanted to lynch him, to silence whoever wanted to silence him.

We could – we can – find ourselves in extremely difficult situations, in which we must choose values at others' expense, must decide what are the *unwritten laws of the gods* to which Antigone appeals and which may in no case be violated. The plural, unstable society of the future will presumably often find itself facing such choices, the necessity for, and at the same time the impossibility of, or at least the extreme difficulty in, agreeing to a minimum, a *quantum* of inalienable ethical universalism. It is a difficult task, but unavoidable. Difficult, because dialogue and confrontation seem increasingly to dissolve into an undifferentiated equalising of everything with whatever else, in a sort of bazaar in which the universal principle of barter places everything on the same level, as if Kant and the Black Mass were equally worthy of note or as if solidarity and racism were optional, side by side in the shop window and in the mind like opinions in the papers.

European culture, which will endure in a Europe rich in variety and contrast, will have laboriously to work out, in continuous confrontation and dialogue with the cultures of the new Europeans, a minimum of non-negotiable common values, which entails an always painful yet inevitable hierarchy of values. In this working out, essential contributions will certainly come from the new cultures settled in Europe, no less holders of universal values than Europe itself. Democracy, the daughter of the European tradition and its essence, consists in the continuous and never-ending effort to distinguish between positions that, even though strongly opposed, nevertheless have the right to confront each other as equals, and positions that, unhappily, must be excluded from this free dialogue – just as one permits a political group to champion the economy, public or private, but not persecution or racial segregation. With those who condemned Rushdie to death, for example, there can be no discussion, as if that position were worthy of dialogue.

This refusal is painful, because it is always painful to exclude men or ideas from dialogue, but it is inevitable. Obviously each one of us could fall into these aberrations, since unacceptable differences are not necessarily more the product of other continents or overseas than of our own house; nothing has denied the unwritten laws of the gods so like Auschwitz, and Auschwitz was our creation.

The conflict is tragic; not for nothing is *Antigone* a tragedy. The *Antigone* is in the first place a conflict between Antigone and Creon, between the two laws which confront each other in their persons. Tragedy does not mean, from this point of view, the setting up of good against evil, of a pure innocence against a bludgeoning savagery, but rather a conflict wherein it is not possible to take up a position that does not inevitably entail, even in heroic sacrifice, guilt as well.

The tragedy is a conflict between law and moral commandment, both of which have their value. But the *Antigone* is the tragedy, perennially contemporary, of having to choose between these values, with all the difficulties, mistakes and also the sins which this choice, in the particular historical circumstances, involves. In itself the positive law is not legitimate – not even when it is born of a democratic system, or of the mind and will of a majority – if it tramples upon the moral; for example, a racial law which sanctions the persecution or the extermination of a category of person does not become just, not even if it is democratically voted for by a majority in a regularly elected parliament – something which could happen and has happened.

Violence inflicted upon an individual does not become just, simply because so-called common feeling approves it, as a mistaken sociology would have us believe. The anti-Semitism in Germany during the Nazi era, or the violence against the blacks in Alabama, certainly reflected the feelings of a large part of the populations of those countries, but they were not thereby any the more just. Sometimes it can be true, what Dr. Stockmann cries out in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*: "The majority have the power, but they are not right!" And so it is necessary to obey the *unwritten laws of the gods* that Antigone obeys, even if such obedience – or disobedience to the unjust laws of the State – can have tragic consequences.

At this point a terrible question arises, tragic in its turn: how does one come to know that those unwritten laws are indeed of the gods, namely universal principles, and not instead archaic prejudices, blind, obscure drives of feeling conditioned by who knows what atavistic obligations? We are rightly convinced that the Christian love for one's neighbour, the postulates of the Kantian ethic which admonish us to consider each individual always as an end and never as a means, the values – liberty and tolerance – of the Enlightenment and democracy, the ideals of social justice, equal rights for all men throughout the world, are basic universals that no Creon, no State, can violate. But we also know that frequently civilisations – our own included – have violently imposed on other civilisations values that they considered universal-human but which were instead the secular product of their own culture, history, tradition, which simply happened to be stronger. When a God speaks to our heart, we must needs be ready to follow it at any cost, but only after questioning ourselves as searchingly as possible as to whether it is a universal God who is speaking or an idol of our own dark, inner vortex. If the majority is not right, as Stockmann asseverates, it is easy to fall into the temptation of imposing by force another *right*, which in its turn has only force. To disobey Creon often has tragic consequences, not only for those disobeying but also for others who are innocent, yet are swept away notwithstanding.

Both tragedy and human dignity, too, consist in the fact that there is no pre-established answer to this dilemma; there is only a difficult search, not without risks – moral ones as well.

One cannot shirk the responsibility of choosing universal values and behaving accordingly; if one refuses to take on this responsibility, in the name of a cultural relativism which places every attitude on the same level, Antigone's *unwritten laws of the gods* are betrayed and we collude with barbarism. But one must realise how grave, how tragic this responsibility is, and how difficult it is to resolve such contradictions. Todorov finds in Montesquieu an ideal middle way between the right cultural relativism, respectful of differences, and the necessary *quantum* of ethical universalism without which a political, civil, and moral life is unthinkable.

Too often one prefers to escape the laborious search for such a *quantum* by taking refuge in the convenient ethos of the *optional*, a parody of true tolerance. Our era could perhaps be defined, by reason of an attitude that characterises it in all sorts of areas in life and thought, as the age of the optional. Religions, philosophies, systems of values, political concepts are lined up in good order on the shelves of a supermarket and everyone, according to need or passing whim, takes from one shelf or another whatever he fancies – two packets of Christianity, three of Zen Buddhism, a couple of hundred grams of ultra-laissez faire, a cube of Socialism – and mixes them at will into his own private cocktail.

In this cultural climate it is increasingly difficult to be defined in a precise or restricted manner, to choose one thing and to exclude others. If one is Christian one is not a Buddhist, and vice versa, even if one duly venerates, in both cases, the highest teaching of Christ and Buddha and learns much from their example. One respects a conception of the world only if one takes it completely seriously, if one rigorously confronts oneself with the truth it proclaims and with one's own best ability to subscribe to it. To declare oneself blithely to be Moslem or Christian – or maybe both – on the wave of a superficial emotional impulse and think one can dissolve and blend the differences of those two religions into a private sauce is to insult their seriousness and dignity. What a philosophy or a faith stands for is an organic unity, not a salad each of whose individual ingredients is an *optional*, something which one can add or not as one pleases. Now, by contrast, everything seems to be reduced to an *optional*, to an ingredient to be accepted or rejected at will without involving the choice between total adherence and total rejection. The New Age, just to give an example, is a typical expression of such a vague spiritualising attitude that picks here and there from the dishes of the Absolute, whisking up everything into a well-meaning sentimental mush.

Syncretism of this extreme sort is typical of moments of transition from one civilisation to another. Such a syncretism also flourished at the end of the Roman Empire and the old civilisation – an epoch which our own increasingly resembles – when superstitious cults of every sort prospered and new idols were fabricated out of the fragments of the down-at-heel deities of the entire Pantheon. That disintegration then found in Christianity a new idea-force capable of giving meaning and unity to reality. Today it is impossible to know if and what vision of the world will be able to reconstruct a unity; Christianity itself, for the first time, is in very grave danger of finally disappearing.

The tendency to reduce everything to the optional is a defence against the confusion of a world in which it is objectively ever more difficult to see clearly what is necessary and fundamental.

Every concrete ethical choice is dropped into the unforeseeable chaos of existence, into the experience of that moment and of that individual, but that does not signify a priori the occasional adaptation of a moral law to the situation. The existential ethic – so the great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has written in its defence – is passionately aware of the unique concreteness of each experience, but this is different from the passive and conformist ethic of the situation, which simply adapts itself thereto. Simone Weil had an ardent faith, but some doubts about certain statements – not fundamental, but not optional either – by the Church induced her to pause on its threshold and abstain, out of respect, from the sacraments. Such an attitude as this is far more religious than that which takes Communion without even knowing whether one has observed the norms prescribed in order to receive the Eucharist.

The *optional* also inspires moral choices, since it is particularly convenient to choose at will between the commandments and the prohibitions; a eunuch will accept with pleasure and conviction ascetic prohibitions and puritanical strictures, a drunkard will erase gluttony from the list of Deadly Sins, and no tax evader will connect his activities with the seventh commandment *Thou shalt not steal*. The sphere of the *optional* is extending more and more, absorbing new areas one after the other. It has invaded, and is progressively invading, even the realm of the law, of what is – or should be – enforced or forbidden with ineluctable necessity by the Penal Code.

Tolerance is a particularly important and difficult value for those who, like me, were born and grew up in a borderland such as Trieste is, at the crossroads between the Italian, Slav and German worlds. The border can be a stimulant or an obsession, an opportunity or a curse, a place where it is easier to know and love the other or easier to hate and reject him; a place to make contact or to exercise intolerance. One sign of intolerance is the emphasis with which the word *us* is said, not to distinguish oneself from others, nor legitimately to underline a commonality, but to stigmatise and repel the others – *them*. The area I come from – Trieste, its hinterland and the Istrian coast of the Adriatic – is a borderland which, as often happens in these cases, wildly heightens the contrast between *us* and *them*, or rather, educates one to recognise the precariousness of this distinction. At our doors begins what the West has often called *the other Europe* – and not simply because, and when, it was under Soviet rule – as if to exclude it or consider it an irremediably second or third class Europe, less *European*. Sometimes I think that one of the reasons that induce me to write is the desire, the duty, to eliminate this disparaging epithet *other*. Biagio Marin, the Italian poet from Grado who was a Habsburg subject and fought as an Italian volunteer against Austria in the First World War, speaking in the April of 1915 to the Chancellor of the University of Vienna, said that "we Italians wish to destroy the Austro-Hungarian empire;" a few months later, however, having enlisted in the Italian army and being rudely treated by an officer, he protested, saying that "we Austrians are used to a different manner."

Perhaps one of the keys to tolerance is this awareness that *we* are sometimes *them*, the others, and that they are sometimes *us* – equally full of faults and limitations, obnoxious and yet worthy of respect and capable of loving, like us.

Thus one discovers the nearness and the familiarity of what appeared unyieldingly distant and different, and we find that we, too, are different and foreign to ourselves, and so we learn not simply and solely to welcome the foreigner, but to understand that there is always the constant need – wherever, even in our own homes – to be welcomed as foreigners.

In this eastern part of Italy where I come from the Slavs, during the Fascist oppression, were antonomastically *them*. When, after the Second World War, three hundred thousand Italians from Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia fled in the climate of violence and fear of that time – their lands and houses having become Yugoslavian – they found themselves, having lost all, as exiles in Italy, their own country, found themselves regarded by all as *them* rather than *us*; those among them who did not give way, in the wave of resentment at the violence undergone, to nationalist, anti-Slav feeling – and sought to continue to include in the *us* also the Slavs they had lived among – often found themselves isolated by those of their companions in exile who were animated by nationalistic sentiments, found themselves being considered more as *them* than as *us* by their very brothers in misfortune. For misfortune too, unhappily, can foster intolerance, understandably but no less tragically for that.

One of the cornerstones of tolerance is laicality, rightly understood. Laicality is not a subject so much as a way of thinking, a gift for developing a passion for one's own ideas, but also for laughing at them and at oneself, at the caricature they come to resemble in the inevitably awkward, imperfect forms in which we profess them. Such imperfection does not render those ideas any the less worthy of being pursued, but it compels us to cross-examine ourselves at every moment as to their, and our own, limitations. This capacity to laugh at oneself, to see oneself – as regards the truth – as comic and clumsy as Charlot

when he poses as a gentleman, is the best preventive against all autos-da-fé.

Laical, a word so rich in meaning and value, does not not at all signify, as is often ignorantly supposed, the opposite of religious, nor does it indicate in itself either a believer or an agnostic or an atheist. Laicality is not a philosophical subject but rather a mental habit, the ability to distinguish that which is rationally demonstrable from that which is, instead, the object of faith – regardless of the degree of adherence to such faith – and to distinguish the extent of the limits of different spheres of authority, as for example those of the Church and those of the State, that which – in the words of the Gospel – one must render to God and that which one must render to Caesar.

Laicality does not identify itself a priori with any precise creed, any philosophy or ideology, but is the critical aptitude for articulating one's philosophical or religious creed according to logical rules and principles whose consistency no faith can establish, since in such a case it would inevitably collapse into an obscurantist, turbid mess. In this sense religious culture – if it is culture – is always lay; just as logic – whether that of St. Thomas Aquinas or of some atheist thinker – cannot but depend upon criteria of rationality; or the demonstration of a theorem, even if undertaken by a Saint of the Church, cannot but obey the laws of mathematics.

The great religious thinkers have often set the highest example of this clarity, this need to respect reason and its limits. One of the greatest laymen I ever knew was Arturo Carlo Jemolo, teacher of law and of liberty, fervent Catholic, who knew that the Gospel can inspire a vision of the world and so move the spirit to create a more just society, but that that vision cannot be translated directly into articles of a statute, as is demanded by aberrant fundamentalists of every sort. Deeply religious and radically lay, Jemolo had a profound and uncompromising sense of the distinction between State and Church, between what concerns the one and what the other. Laicality means tolerance, doubt turned even upon one's own certainties, self-irony, demystification of all the idols, one's own included; the capacity to believe firmly in certain values, knowing that there exist others, equally respectable. Laicality means reckoning with choices and the renunciations implicit in every choice, means not confusing thought and genuine feeling – which is always exact – with fanatical conviction and visceral emotive reactions. It constitutes a profound morality and is opposed both to sour moralising, ever factious, and to ethical casualness. The layman is he who knows how to adhere to an idea without being dominated by it, to engage himself politically while preserving his critical independence, to laugh and smile at what he loves while continuing to love it; who is free of the need to idolise and to desecrate, who does not fool himself into believing something by finding a thousand ideological justifications for his own shortcomings, who is free of the cult of the self. Once my son, seeing me too self-involved as a result of a spiteful personal attack, reproved me with the words: "Be more laical!"

Not only interfering, intolerant clericalism but also the dominant culture – or quasi-radical, secularised pseudo-culture – is the contrary of this laicality, insofar as it is characterised by an importunate narcissism, yearning to don a noble ideological halo and declaim noble strife. There is no second-rate variety show that does not take itself seriously and is not convinced that it is carrying out a libertarian mission; everyone feels like a Galileo before the Inquisition, even when he restricts himself to innocuous witticisms. There is as little of the laical in this pompousness as there is in religiosity. The sanctimonious who are scandalised by the nudists are as little laical as those

nudists who, instead of undressing for the legitimate pleasure of sunbathing, do so in the grandiloquent conceit that they are fighting against repression.

The laical respect for reason is not guaranteed a priori either by faith or its rejection; many of those who laugh at religion entertain a flashy belief in far more irrational superstitions. The laical spirit is, in fact, threatened today by a deterioration in the intellectual tradition which is in danger of being drained and turned into its opposite, namely intolerance, lack of criticism, aggressive self-assurance. As Pasolini intuited years ago, the struggle against dogmas can be perverted into the elimination of all values and principles which can be opposed to the automatic social mechanism; reason runs the risk of degenerating into mere calculating rationality, a power-technique which recognises no values beyond facts, and of being identified with an anonymous, impersonal society which levels and destroys the responsible individual judgement which is the cornerstone of laicality.

Laicality, just like widespread, prevailing opinion, can sink into indifference, into forgetfulness of the sense of the sacred and of respect, into renouncing personal choice and independence of judgement. Instead of a humanism attentive to moral choices, professed today and always by true lay persons, there supervenes a collective belief that serves as the micro-ideology of power and constitutes the outlook of an indistinct class that keeps itself up to date by passing from the parish cinema to the striptease joint, obeying a conformism as obligatory as it is gregarious. This outlook is a type of cement or ideological glue, which holds together and blends a common feeling seemingly destined to form a new silent majority which, however, as Ibsen had already realised in *An Enemy of the People*, is instead frequently noisy, ready to contradict anyone who thinks differently and shut him up. The social domain, which once relied upon religious traditionalism, now seems to rely upon the multitude of the utterly unprincipled, who pose as emancipated by conforming to new passwords and new hetero-addressed modes of behaviour, in an anonymous, vast and gelatinous social consensus such as is brilliantly portrayed in Altman's film, *Nashville*. In this society tolerance is distorted into something which closely resembles it but which is in fact its opposite: indifference, interchangeability of one thing for another, no matter what; the value of interchange triumphs also in moral choices. All of this takes place under the misleading sign of a false liberalism, in the name of the principle according to which one can and should discuss everything.

Something dubious is happening in our culture, an unobserved, indefinable breakdown. Until a few years ago anti-Semitism, for example, was not even a subject for discussion and cultural assessment; the racist extremists could have been despised, condemned or pitied, but their aberrant ideas were not even considered, scarcely impinged on the horizon of common awareness. This contributed to rendering them politically and socially non-existent, apart from some individual criminal act, quite uneliminable, like every other crime.

Today, however, in so many well-intentioned debates that obviously denounce racial violence, there is creeping in an implicit recognition of it, a way of considering it as a mistaken choice yet nonetheless worthy of being discussed. Society and conscience no longer constitute a wall against these aberrations, a wall the more solid the more it simply bounces them back like so many balls. To take an aberrant hypothesis into consideration means already to pave the way for it; if we began to discuss the lawfulness or otherwise of eliminating the incapable aged, at the start we would meet with outraged rejection, then little by little the idea, at first unthinkable, would become familiar until it

established itself as a possible choice and thus, perhaps, be translated into action, becoming a custom and finally invoking, like every propagated custom, juridical recognition.

There are areas in which it is right that the law should adjust itself to custom – even though such custom is the result not of fate but rather our own actions inspired by the values we believe in – and there are areas in which no propagation can render a custom lawful; even if multitudes commit murder, it remains a crime to be prosecuted, however hard this may be in such circumstances. A liberal society ought to permit an individual almost anything – his ideas, pleasures, desires, fixations – and categorically prohibit those few things that could turn him into a tormentor, great or small, of other individuals; these violent actions have to be tabooed, cut off before they can present themselves to our minds as concrete options. Dostojevski saw arising a terrible world where "everything is permitted;" and when everything is permitted, everything happens. If someone goes to the stadium with a knife in his pocket, sooner or later he will stick it into someone else's stomach; yet if he who is caught at the stadium with a knife in his pocket is sure he will end up with a good spell in prison, gradually no one will any longer entertain the idea, nor even feel the desire, to go around with a knife in his pocket, and no one will feel repressed or frustrated thereby, as if he were compelled to refrain from food or sex.

Violence is an appetite which feeds and also grows, particularly when there is no sufficient deterrent; to hesitate in the face of it, perhaps in the name of one's own delicate spirit or of tolerance, means leaving the victims, defenceless, to its mercy. Even the author of a crime, who is a man never reducible solely to the offence committed, must be treated with respect and dignity, his rights safe-guarded and himself defended against any reprisal, just as one would need to defend Mengele from a crowd wanting to lynch him. But respect for the delinquent should not be confused with that vague willingness to discuss his crime – in itself stupid, like every crime, and the subject of juridical qualification, not ideological disquisition – which seems to be increasing.

The *everything permitted* appears to have made an imperceptible step forward, pointing to possible evil extensions. While one can, it would be well to prevent the illness with diet and other sage practices, but it is also advisable to be aware in time of when surgery is necessary. To help the weak and the defenceless, in the hard years ahead of us, will not be easy nor even always pleasant, but that is no good reason why one should stand idly by while violence runs amok.

The various and contrasting opinions that newspapers often place side by side to demonstrate their impartiality in basic discussions are the opposite of dialogue; frequently they are simply talk, in which everything is played down, diluted, cancelled and neutralised. And sometimes they are caught by a disconcerting doubt, by a real temptation, which it is necessary to combat, and which perhaps today it is more than ever difficult – and therefore so much the more necessary – to combat: the doubt about dialogue itself, its validity. No one has experienced this doubt like Erasmus, the man, the genius of dialogue *par excellence*, as one perceives – in certain pauses, references, silences – in his debate with Luther on free will. He refers to a mysterious feeling that induces him not to believe in the struggle, the debate, the confrontation in which he, too, engages all his forces. Humanist and man of dialogue, Erasmus feels that dialogue – if it is not based upon a previous elective affinity or a

substantial like-mindedness, which renders dialogue superfluous, however – is useless. The philologist and the polemicist, who believes in reason and the word, perceives that the nub of the matter is decided before the word, in the changeable, slippery profundities of life, which inexorably draw men close and drive them apart; one notices that in dialogue one convinces only him who is already convinced and that the fate of the word and of reason is misunderstanding. Such awareness – for those who, like Erasmus, believe humanistically and rationally in the word – is no less tragic than the Lutheran view of sin.

One should not doubt reason on these grounds. Precisely because reason, as those of the Enlightenment used to say, is a tenuous flame in the night, it is so much the more precious; it must be protected, and certainly not extinguished in flirtations with darkness and mystery. Looking at the future, particularly because we realise how strong the pressures are to start it off on an unavoidable, set track, there is nothing left but to continue to be of the Enlightenment, averse to all rhetoric about progress, but ironical, humble, obstinately faithful to the faith in reason, in liberty, and in the possibility of influencing, however modestly, the course of the world, and of working for real human progress.

The greatness of Erasmus lies precisely in the symbiosis he effects between faith and irony, which help one in vicissitude and help one to live. The reticence, the evasion, the ironical smile of Erasmus are the expression of a good nature preserved even when looking upon nothingness – or what at the time seemed nothingness – and are the expression of the extraordinary strength of one who, though aware of the vanity of his reasoning, tenaciously continued to follow reason because he refused to believe that that nothingness was the final truth. This too, perhaps above all, is tolerance.

This is one of the two essays written for the [Praemium Erasmianum Foundation](#) on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Adam Michnik and Claudio Magris, Amsterdam, November 2001.

The authors and the Praemium Erasmianum kindly gave their permission to the [Fund for Central and East European Book Projects](#) to make the essays available to Eurozine.

Published 2001-12-27
Original in Italian
Translation by Nicholas Carter
Contribution by CEEBP
© Claudio Magris and Praemium Erasmium Foundation, 2001