

Origins of Christian democracy - the concept of *Abendland*

Ádám Darabos

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Abstract: *The roots of Christian democracy stretch far, at least to the beginnings of the 19th century. In our former article entitled the [Forgotten Origins of Christian Democracy](#), published in the Hungarian Conservative, we focused on the Catholic papal and non-papal traditions in the 19th century. At the same time, in our [previous research](#), we investigated the non-papal side until the middle of the 20th century. This paper – primarily based on the findings of the researcher Rosario Forlenza – wishes to provide an insight into the concept of Abendland.*

Keywords: *History of political thought, Christian democracy, Christian politics, Abendland*

Introduction

In 2010, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen suggested that research on Christian democracy – contrary to its crucial importance and compared to the volume of scientific investigations made on socialism and social democracy – is deficient. To be clear, these two researchers made strenuous efforts in the past decades to fill this theoretical gap. Still, a fascinating phenomenon remains, which stems from the fact that the scientific elaborations are written in English, while the past of Christian democracy is far from the English-speaking world: it is primarily based in Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. This leads to the fact that even though there are discussions and different conceptualisations on several critical issues regarding Christian democracy (for instance, its definition and central characteristics), some continental European concepts – partly based on language differences – are hidden from the solely English-language researchers. This has been the case for a

long time with the idea of *Abendland*, which is rarely found in intellectual elaborations even though it is a widely known German term with rich cultural and political meaning^a. Fortunately, in the past five years, researcher Rosario Forlenza introduced this crucial concept to the English-language literature on Christian democracy. This allows us to shortly summarise the aspects and relevance of the concept of *Abendland*, which is not only exciting but also significant since it shares several critical intellectual-spiritual arguments of Christian democracy.

The concept of *Abendland*

The German word, *Abendland* in loan translation means “evening country”, but it is used as a term for the “occident”, the “Western world”, the “land in the West”, or the “Christian West”. In one of its short summaries, the German *Christian Democratic Union’s* (CDU’s) main party foundation, the *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, writes that it should primarily not be understood as a geographical term but rather as the designation for the cultural commonness and peculiarity of the Latin West.¹ First, it appeared as a counter term of the *Morgenland* (“morning land”) spread by the Luther Bible, which meant “orient”, for instance, the Byzantine region of Eastern Christianity and other eastern territories and civilisations.^b It is claimed that first the plural form “*Abendlender*” was used in the chronicle of Caspar Hedio of Strasburg in 1529, referring to the western territories after the division of the Roman empire in 395.² So, there is a kind of equivalency with Europe but only with the Western part, where Latin culture dominated.

The term was used by French Catholic counter-revolutionists such as Novalis, Chateaubriand and De Maistre as a picture of a united Europe, the Europe of Charlemagne and Pope Gregory the Great “as an organic contrast to the pretensions of the Enlightenment Europe, atheism and contemporary fragmentation.”³ In 19th-century German historicist debates, the term was present with positive and negative connotations. In short, the positive was emphasised by, among others, Leopold von Ranke, who highlighted the rich historical legacy of the (Latin and Catholic) European

^a It is also interesting that – contrary to its popularity in Germany – it does not have a Wikipedia article in English.

^b Naturally, the terms reflect the idea that in the East the sun rises and – before the American discoveries – Western Europe was thought to be the place where the sun sets.

Middle Ages. At the same time, the negative point – represented by, for instance, Johann Gustav Droysen – viewed Reformation and the Enlightenment as the catalysts of human development and referred to the “Dark” Middle Ages as an aberration.⁴

The organisation of German Catholic intellectuals related to the concept of *Abendland* already began in 1913 with the foundation of *Katholische Akademikverband*, including the humanist Theodore Abele and Hermann Platz (author, Romanist, and cultural philosopher) as founders and Robert Schuman as a member.⁵ Still, the upsurge of the term *Abendland* came only after the First World War in Germany, not independently from the fact that Oswald Spengler’s famous book *The Decline of the West* (or *The Downfall of the Christian West* - depends on translation) was published, titled initially *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* in German. Spengler gave a new interpretation to the *Abendland*, an anti-Christian and anti-Catholic, not necessarily covering Europe only. This has led to a violent counterattack from the Catholics, and the reactions resulted in the fact that a genuinely Catholic *Abendland* discourse was founded, which remained until the 1960s.⁶

In 1925 Platz together with the philosopher Alois Dempf founded the journal called *Abendland: A German Monthly for European Culture Politics and Economics* (*Abendland: Deutsche Monatsschrift für europäische Kultur, Politik und Wirtschaft*). As Forlenza writes, “the subject of the journal was to be a ‘Christian West’ that transcended the twin horrors of American and Soviet materialism without falling into nationalism and German revanchism. A Christian West that would heal the wounds inflicted on Europe by the Revolution and the ideas of 1789, the Enlightenment and Protestantism, liberalism and individualism, materialism and secularism and eventually atheism.”⁷

For Hermann Platz, *Abendland* denoted not just a synthesis of antiquity, Christianity and Germanism but a model of an order of universal community built on the combination of these three values that formerly characterised the Christian European Middle Ages. The determination to return to the historical roots of Western Europe could adequately distinguish the opposition from the nationalist and *völkish* thinking of Nazism.⁸ Therefore, during the Weimar Republic, this historical concept transformed into an achievable ideal in the present and the future. Moreover, it could serve as a unifying power for Christian democrats after World War II. Rosario Forlenza’s journal

article, *The Politics of the Abendland: Christian Democracy and the Idea of Europe after the Second World War*⁹, also elaborates on this issue; what *Abendland* was and how the idea survived and evolved to be a crucial cultural component of Christian democracy after the War. Instead of focusing on the changes of meaning concerning the *Abendland*, we would like to highlight one central aspect, its *universalism*.

As mentioned above, *Abendland* had a close association with the Catholic thought, which – etymologically as well – refers to universalism. Naturally, the intellectual and spiritual source was Western Europe and, most specifically, the Rhine region (the borderland between Germany and France), but it was an inclusive concept compared to the system of nation-states which was associated with Protestant thought. In short, the idea of the *Abendland* was anti-nationalist. And obviously, the greatest evils were the extreme forms, like fascism and Nazism, but its proponents opposed nationalist sentiments already in the 19th century.

The stance of *Abendland* concerning the notion of sovereignty could also help us clarify this question. As Forlenza writes, “Abendland was conceived against the secular occupation of the religious realm, and the twin ideas of sovereignty: the sovereignty of the individual over his/her conscience and sovereignty of the nation-state, engendered by a ‘contract’ (or a ‘constitution’) between ‘atomised’ and free individuals.”¹⁰ So *Abendland* was a religiously, or more specifically, mostly Catholically inspired notion that feared any sovereignty that is not attributed to God. In this respect, it is familiar with later Christian Democratic thought.¹¹

But what kind of territorial units should be endorsed in the framework of *Abendland*? The model was the Holy Roman Empire which was united in Christian culture and had several overlapping jurisdictional levels. Forlenza quotes the following from Robert Schuman in this regard: “The original outline of a united Europe was that of Christian, medieval Europe under a twin authority – a spiritual one personified by the Papacy, a temporal one embodied by the Emperor, head of the Holy Roman Empire. This unity withered after more than six centuries of existence when the Renaissance weakened religious ties; the Reformation likewise disrupted religious unity, and the Empire lost its prestige to newly sovereign nations. Europe split into a large group of states whose interests and aims conflicted to such a degree that fierce battles ensued.”¹²

Between the two Wars, Europe found itself between two expanding forces, the United States, which symbolised the essence of modernism, individualism and capitalistic materialism and Soviet Russia with its barbaric Marxian materialism and paganism. The proposed solution was to return to medieval Europe, a cultural-spiritual endeavour and not a materialistic one. For instance, those who wished to live in an *Abendland* refused Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-European plans since that named economic interests as a uniting force.¹³ In short, the outcome, which has been transferred with minor changes to the post-war thought, and was suggested by the Christian democrats, was not internationalism but integration and supranationalism. In 1951, Schuman still referred to "the international system of the nation-states in theological terms as a 'heresy', endorsing the *Abendland* charge against Protestant nation builders."¹⁴

Conclusion

It is clear that after the Second World War, Christian Democrats had to take part in national politics to acquire power. This was not unattainable since – although *Abendland* is not necessarily democratic and liberal – the Christian democratic movement had become a democratic force by that time.¹⁵ Moreover, several elements, such as *personalism*, *solidarism* and *popularism*, came from other sources and not the concept of *Abendland*. Still, it is crucial to understand how a historical idea of Europe became a Christian vision of Europe in the interwar period and how the image of Europe, the universalistic thread of Catholicism and the notion of anti-materialism survived the Second World War to become a crucial part of Christian democratic ideology and politics, including Adenauer's *Abendlander* politics.

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Endnotes

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¹⁰ Ibid. p. 264.

¹¹ INVERNIZZI ACCETTI, Carlo: *What is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology*. Cambridge - New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019., 385 pp.

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¹³ Ibid p. 276.

¹⁴ Ibid p. 273.

¹⁵ LYON, Margot: Christian Democratic Parties and Politics. In: *Journal of Contemporary History*. 2/4, 1967, pp. 69-87.