

## OLIMPIADI DELLA FILOSOFIA

«Nowhere is it written that good exists, that we must be honest or must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by men. Dostoevsky once wrote: "If God does not exist, everything is permissible"» (J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*)

### *What does it mean to be good?*

"If God does not exist, everything is permissible" Dostoevsky, a Russian author of the 1900 once wrote. Considering this statement and looking back at a time where societies believed in Gods that they feared or used for political purposes (Cicero) there is a big difference between the behavior of mankind then and now.

In Ancient Babel, for example, there was one main law: "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth", so the only thing this city knew was vendetta and especially no mercy. This way of living thrived in a society that feared their Gods.

With the arrival of Jesus and the Christian-phenomenon a whole new set of laws and moral codes were born.

Mercy and forgiveness were introduced as well as kindness and sacrifice as a result of Jesus' words: "Love the next person as much as you love yourself".

People started to realize that the other person wasn't a burden or a danger anymore but a real possibility of happiness.

With the birth of the new religion also came the opportunity to prove this new way of thinking rationally through philosophy.

Two very important philosophers attempted to explain what "good" is and its characteristics.

Saint Augustine once wrote that good is in us in different measures (we participate of his nature in different ways) because we come from God who is good.

Many contested the fact that man was, is and will always be tempted to commit evil.

Saint Thomas explained this a quarrel between what we know is right and what we want to do. Many times we are mistaken by our own minds who misunderstand what is good (this is called error of intellect), or we are tricked by our will, which chooses to ignore what our intellect has decided as righteous.

A philosopher of Ancient Greece, Socrates made a great statement that in some ways anticipates this entire way of thinking: "A person will always make bad choices

when they do not behold and know what good is".

Considering both Socrates' and Saint Thomas' statements, we can conclude that making the wrong decisions and committing bad actions is due to the fact that man or decides to ignore or eliminate the truth from his mind.

So Dostoevsky was correct in saying "If God [...] permissible" or better when God is just an instrument of political power or worshipped by man because afraid of the consequences, fear and indifference define you while aspiration doesn't.

The Christian-phenomenon made mankind desire to be good and godlike instead of afraid.

Nowadays, maybe because of the Church's misconduct, maybe because of skepticism, many people feel that religion is oppressive and narrow-minded, but the values of the Christian phenomenon are still very present in our society.

This may seem like an unlikely statement until we compare the western civilization to the eastern societies.

For example in Europe there are many places made for people with disabilities while in the eastern part of the world where the Christian moral code never arrived and the belief in karma is strong, children born with both mental and physical problems are left to die on the street because their parents believe they are a result of bad karma.

A lady named Maria Angela Bertelli created a safe haven for these children and their families called "House of Angels" where she provides them with home, food and treatments for their illnesses. Also in Turin there is a place called "Sermig, arsenale della pace" that is a homeless shelter, a missionary center and a school for first and second generation immigrants that live in a very difficult area called Porta Palazzo. A few days ago I went there and saw first hand that the "good" in people still exists. On the other hand, during the 1900 many different cultural and philosophical ideas were born that professed skepticism and atheism.

Nowadays there are many different opinions about what is good and what is not; but one thing is certain: the western civilization is still under the influence of Christian values.

In my opinion a very interesting and ironic example to prove this is illustrated by Benigni in one of his productions.

He performed a dialogue between God and the German philosopher Karl Marx.

In a scene Marx interrogates God about the reason why he ended up in Hell instead of Heaven.

He explained his ideas and theories to God: for example he said that he wanted all men to be equal and there was to be no more discrimination toward the poor. God sarcastically replied that they were very good ideas in fact he was the first one to profess them many centuries before.

Marx very upset continued to ask why he was damned and not in Heaven, so God replied on last time: "The reason why you are damned is simple, you had great ideas but you just did not believe in me".

This iconic performance illustrates the condition of a great part of the western way of thinking.

So «what does "being good" mean in the western civilization?»

It is following the law and good manners, it is having many different opinions on where "good" comes from (God, no one, many Gods, someone) but it is living the Christian values that our ancestors strongly believed in.