

A fulbrighter observes Lithuania going West

John F. X. Knasas

*Center for Thomistic Studies,
University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas,
E-mail: jknasas@stthom.edu*

To be Western now is to be democratic; but to be democratic one must profess tolerance, and tolerance means the exclusion of characteristic claims in regard to religion, nation, culture, philosophy, etc. In the West the ideal of tolerance has gained in popularity from the realization that the cataclysms of the last century were caused by people who believed that their way was the only true way. In sum, the idea of truth was the problem. I appeal to Lithuania's Catholic heritage to present two strategies to solve the problem of truth and tolerance. Lithuania's going West need not mean neutering itself culturally by going secular and sceptical.

Key words: Lithuanian identity, democracy, tolerance, truth, nationalism, globalization, analogy, Catholicism, Aquinas, natural law

During the first half of 2004, I was in Vilnius teaching philosophy on a U.S. Fulbright Grant. In that time the Seimas, or parliament, impeached the just elected president, Rolandas Paksas, for violations of national security and held elections for a new president in June. Lithuanians elected the former president, the Lithuanian American Valdas Adamkus. Also, at the beginning of April Lithuania was admitted into NATO and at the beginning of May joined the European Union. So my time coincided with many interesting events. The common thread is Lithuania's interest in going West. Even amidst its political troubles, Lithuania was interested in showing that it was a smooth running democracy that dealt with crises according to the provisions of its constitution. The interest to be "Western" goes back centuries to the time Lithuania was the last European country to be Christianized. To resist the aggression of the Teutonic Knights, King Mindaugas did not turn to an alliance with Moscow but to Poland. That partnership brought Lithuania into Christian Europe. The desire has remained to this day.

The topic of Westernization brings me to my observations. Before I had left the U. S., I read "Identity and the Revival of Tradition in Lithuania, an Insider's View" by a then Vilnius University professor of ethnology, Vytytis Ciubrinskas¹. Prof. Ciubrinskas notes that the Soviets attacked the identity of the Lithuanian people by attacking their language and their religion. He says:

The Third idea promoted by Brezhnev in the 1970s was "the new historical community": the creation of the Soviet people as a consequence of the "mature socialism" achieved in the Soviet Union. Thus, the inven-

tion of a "super-modern" type of society, more advanced than the nation-state, was proclaimed. This was said to be a "monolithically united community" which had already overcome "the national question" by eliminating all the social and most of the cultural differences among the nations within the Soviet Union. The new community would be brought about by the introduction of Russian as the lingua franca and then imposing total linguistic Russification. From the late 1970s Moscow initiated a series of policies aimed at greater cultural standardization. These included the decree that Russian be taught in kindergartens, schools and universities. Such policies did much to heighten concern over the future of the local language and culture... Administration, communication and accounting in virtually all institutions was carried out in the language of "Big Brother". This constituted a serious challenge to one of the most powerful sources of Lithuanian pride and identity, "the unique and ancient Lithuanian language".

Another cornerstone of "the new community" was the aggressive imposition of atheism. The Criminal Code declared "the organization and systematic teaching of religion to minors to be a criminal act"... the public sphere was totally closed to religious and church life. Part of the Church was driven underground (convents, even entire orders, not to speak of religious teaching, were suppressed)... Dozens of churches were converted into public buildings, and thousands of folk-art monuments, particularly wayside crosses, were destroyed "as signs of religious propaganda". Of course the Lithuanians, who had not been exposed to modern secularization and had no institutions such as civil marriage until the Soviet occupation, were shocked by this policy, which undermined a fundamental tenet of their national identity: being "a proper Lithuanian" meant to be a Roman Catholic. The result was that by the 1970s

¹ Ciubrinskas, V. 2000. "Identity and the revival of Tradition in Lithuania: an Insider's View", *Folk* 42: 19–40.

two thirds of all manifestations of dissent in Lithuania were of a religious nature and only one third dealt with the topic of national rights... The largest underground periodical publication in Eastern Europe, the Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania, focused exclusively on the suppression of religion.

So the core of Lithuanian national culture – language and religion – had been threatened into virtual disappearance from public life. There was almost no room left for them in the new historical community².

Ciubrinskas goes on to describe the various strategies that Lithuanians developed to protect this core of national culture. But what is especially poignant to me is his autobiographical conclusion.

By the 1990s I had shifted from an essentialist and ascriptive approach to the question of identity, to a more critical view of “constructed” identity.

This deconstruction of my original “Baltophile”, folklore-orientated, nationalist view of identity and the move to a more critical and individual vision took a long time to happen...

One thing is certain, the change was “programmed” by my personal development and to a large extent by my numerous and extensive periods of study at Western universities. ... That I have had access to Western scholarly books, which had been almost prohibited during the Soviet period, and to modern scholarly discourses on national identity and nationalism has undoubtedly influenced and eventually changed my perspective on my own national identity. Finally, my new perspective on the concept of identity fits well into the framework of post-Communist academic life at my university in Vilnius. But it remains inimical to the numerous institutions, social networks and even politicians still engaged in the revival of ethnic culture and confronting a new enemy now – Americanization and globalization³.

Ciubrinskas mentions that the deconstruction of his Baltophile identity was programmed by his study of Western books on national identity. Undoubtedly involved here is familiarity with Benedict Anderson’s reflections on nationalism in which nation identity is an ephemeral product of the printing industry exploited and manipulated by the power elites or the would-be power elites⁴. Previous talk about Lithuania’s glorious past as a nation turns out to be a fiction that a small group used to manipulate society to throw off Czarist domination. National identity has no deep grounding in truth. Rather its basis lies simply in the game of acquiring

power. With its deprecation of nationalism and its emphasis on the dynamics of print-capitalism, Anderson’s work might be described as neo-Marxian. And so that quality might explain Anderson’s grip over Ciubrinskas and his colleagues. For Anderson’s analysis runs afoul of the fact that the 19th century Lithuanian national revival was driven by Lithuanian peasants who wanted to be Catholic and not Russian Orthodox but also no longer the serfs of the Polish or Polonized gentry and landlords. The solution was to be Catholic and Lithuanian. But, in my opinion, the problem of preserving a Baltophile identity is more endemic than current academic research by former Soviet Lithuanians.

To be Western now is to be democratic; but to be democratic one must profess tolerance, and tolerance means the exclusion of characteristic claims in regard to religion, nation, culture, philosophy, etc. In the West the ideal of tolerance has gained in popularity from the realization that the cataclysms of the last century were caused by people who believed that their way was the only true way. In sum, the idea of truth was the problem. Hence, if you thought that you knew the truth, you turn out to be the most socially dangerous of individuals. As American post-modern Richard Rorty says, proponents of a commensuration discourse are, socially speaking, proponents of intolerance⁵. With this diagnosis, many people saw skepticism as the cure for the disease. We will all get along if we all realize that no one can ever say that he possesses the truth.

And so it is supremely and sadly ironic to many that the previously mentioned rocks of Lithuanian national identity, religion and language, must now be tempered in order to Westernize. To enter the West, Lithuania must pay the price of neutering herself religiously and culturally. What the Soviets could not eradicate, the West is eradicating. What during Soviet times were so dear and precious to Lithuanians are now regarded as fictions that were used for manipulation. Also, when you add the great material prosperity of the West, the temptation to downsize one’s ideals becomes irresistible. Recently on the occasion of the appointment of the new Lithuanian ambassador to the Vatican, John Paul II encouraged Lithuanian Catholics “to collaborate with all persons of good will to see that Lithuanian society avoids being strongly influenced by the secular hedonistic model of life with its fallacious seductions”.

So as I observed Lithuanians go West it was the problem of truth and tolerance that was on my mind –

² Ibid., 26.

³ Ibid., 39–40.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: London, 1991). In his “Between Soup and Soap: Iconic Nationality, Mass Media and Pop Culture in Contemporary Lithuania”, *Lituanus* 46 (2000): 16, Arturas Tereškinas echoes views similar to Ciubrinskas and also notes an indebtedness to Anderson.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 367. Likewise, Richard J. Bernstein, “[Today] there is a deep suspicion, hostility and ridicule of any aspiration to unity, reconciliation, harmony, totality, the whole, the one. There is widespread bias that these signifiers mask repression and violence; that there is an inevitable slippage from totality to totalitarianism and terror”. “Metaphysics, Critique, and Utopia”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 42 (1988): 259.

viz., how can you believe that you possess something true and good, and not morph into fascism. I believe that at least two strategies exist to address the issue of how Lithuania, without having its identity deconstructed, might move into a Western environment that prizes skepticism as a way to establish tolerance. First, the problem of truth and tolerance skips a beat in its claim that tolerance excludes characteristic claims because tolerance must be based on skepticism. Characteristic claims vs. tolerance is a false dilemma. A Catholic can insist that for theological reasons Catholicism embraces tolerance not just in the sense of non-interference but in the sense of fraternity. As the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)* succinctly explains in paragraph 24, because God as Father has called all of us to Himself, then we are all brothers and should treat ourselves accordingly. So in its Catholic heritage Lithuania has a better reason than skepticism for the tolerance so treasured by current Western democracy. So instead of disconnecting Lithuania with the pillars of her identity, Lithuania's move West can reconnect Lithuania with these pillars.

But my suggestion might raise a question. Supposedly I am defending Lithuanian identity, but what I have just defended is a Catholic identity. Though a Lithuanian may be a Catholic, a Catholic does not have to be a Lithuanian. The logical gap in my thesis requires going deeper into the brotherly love to which the Catholic faith impels its adherents. In a word, this love is analogous, a sameness in difference. Consider sanctity among the saints. Christian holiness assumes a wild and crazy array of examples that defies stereotyping. Just when we think that we have seen all that there is to sanctity, a new and different way of doing the same emerges. In Augustine's time, a Christian would have already known Christian heroes. But could he have envisaged a Bonaventure, Francis, Benedict, Ignatius, Therese of Lisieux? Today, after centuries, we are in the same situation. Sanctity, or brotherly love, continually bursts stereotyping.

Obviously the Catholic religion does not entail a Lithuanian identity just as it does not entail a Jesuit, Franciscan, Carmelite, or Benedictine identity. But all of these, such a system permits and encourages. In a word, within Catholicism, an entire people can find a refuge for an identity. Just as Bonaventure found his unique way of being a saint within Catholicism, an entire people can do the same. Was this not the case in the drive for Lithuania's first independence in the last century? Clerics and lay people saw that there was a Lithuanian way of being a Catholic, not just the Polish way. This realization led to the Lithuanian nation. So, if Lithuanians are mindful of their Catholic heritage, they should remember the analogous character of holiness and so be justifiably proud of their own identity and be most respectful of others. In that way also Lithuanians should merit from others tolerance for their own identity.

My second strategy follows the question, "Is Lithuania still a Catholic country?". Can Lithuania appeal to its Catholicism now as easily as it did during her previous independence? Between then and now was almost 50 years of Soviet atheist ideology. Has that not had an effect both on the *intelligentia* and the people? I have gone to Lithuania many times besides the spring of 2004. So, I have had good exposure of both students and professors. The general attitude that I find is that if you want to philosophize, you do not go to a Catholic thinker like Aquinas but to a non-Catholic like Kant or Husserl or Russell. Catholic thinkers are members of an authoritatively teaching Church and so cannot be trusted to do honest philosophy. As an aside, let me say that this attitude must be branded for what it is, namely crass *ad hominem* reasoning and unbecoming professional academics. *Ad hominem* reasoning criticizes what is said simply on the basis of the one saying it. And so I guess that we would have to doubt that $2 + 2 = 4$ simply because the Pope uttered it. No, religious people can also philosophize. Aquinas is as good a philosopher as Kant, Husserl, Russell, or Heidegger think that they are.

But you do not have to trust my observations of the Lithuanian academic scene; Ciubrinskas himself notes the current predominant attitude of Western skepticism among his fellow academics at Vilnius University. As he concluded: "Finally, my new perspective on the concept of identity fits well into the framework of post-Communist academic life at my university in Vilnius. But it remains inimical to the numerous institutions, social networks and even politicians still engaged in the revival of ethnic culture and confronting a new enemy now – Americanization and globalization". What Ciubrinskas is talking about as his new concept of identity is the post-modern attitude that identity is a voluntaristic phenomenon and so is any thing that you, or the power elites, want it to be. In short, Ciubrinskas and his colleagues are exactly in the dilemma that I sketched in my opening remarks – we defend tolerance by skepticism. But then we have no logical defense against someone who decides to be intolerant. But I do not want to be unfair to my Lithuanian colleagues. One can also wonder about the Catholic commitment of politicians and business men. If Lithuanians really lived their faith, they would treat themselves as brothers. Do they? Has not independence meant money for the few and poverty for the many?

Given the disaffection with Catholicism among leading portions of the Lithuanian population, I do not think that one can just appeal to people to turn to their Catholicism to resist the acid bath of Westernization. Not enough people believe in Catholicism to make the appeal effective. I know a few religiously minded academics who are pleased by a situation in which unbelievers precipitate into a pool of skepticism. These thinkers follow Kant's strategy of denying reason to make room for faith. The more defeated the unbeliever is,

the more the unbeliever will understand that he must submit to religion. This type of thinking generates theocracies and Ayatollahs; it has no pedigree in Catholicism for which grace builds on nature. And so I come to my second answer to the question "Can Lithuania resist the neutering effects of Westernization without becoming intolerant?". This question expresses a problem that by its nature is philosophical. It is the problem of truth and tolerance. As philosophical, the problem requires a philosophical answer. To the philosophical problem of truth and tolerance, Aquinas offers a philosophical solution. Aquinas grounds human dignity on the fact that each person is or can be "an intellector of being". This intelligible object is so rich that Aquinas also refers to being as "the good". Hence, each human stands forth as a particularly intense or heightened presentation of the good. From such a presentation there issues a command to my freedom to be respectful and solicitous in my dealing with others. Obviously, Aquinas' ethical principles do not suppose his religious beliefs. What believers speak of the intellectual intuition of being? Rather, Aquinas' remarks engage Western philosophical discussion on being that runs through Aristotle, Hegel, Heidegger and Sartre. Hence, as philosophical, Aquinas' principles are addressed to everyone of good will. People may stop being Catholic and they may stop being reasonable. But they usually do the first before doing the second. Aquinas' philosophical thinking is there to catch them at that point.

A citizenry that accommodates tolerance through the truth of Aquinas' natural law ethics can maintain a cultural identity in a way similar to the Catholic citizenry described above. Though Aquinas' ethics does not logically entail a specific national and cultural identity, nevertheless, his ethics permits and encourages such a thing. Just as the moral response of individuals will generate specific identities, e.g., a fisherman for a caring father in the Pacific islands and a hunter for such a father in Siberia, so too groups of people can do the same. Consider how out of concern for their families, mothers discovered and shared ideas not only for the most nutritional food in their time and place but also for the most pleasing, not only for the most protective clothing but also the most attractive. Is it that difficult to extrapolate these two things into a particular ethnic cuisine and a particular ethnic dress and with other similar things, like music and art, into an entire culture?

And so in Aquinas' ethics a people is presented with the task and inspiration to craft a culture for the time and place in which they live. Through the respect owing to our fellows as intellectors of being, also known as the good, Aquinas' ethics, in a way similar to the previously noted call to holiness, generates new instances of morally good living. Fidelity to the intuition of intelligible being and its call to fraternity is the key. In some way, either implicitly or explicitly, a people must be guided by this intuition. If they are, they will find *ipso facto* that they have formed a distinctive identity.

When a people in some time and place respond to that appeal, they will find that being will repay their fidelity by according them a new and different way of being morally good. Being will have given such a populace the gift of a culture. In short, identity, both personal and cultural, has its source in morality, and morality has its source in the intellection of being. Interestingly, in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II repeatedly laments the eclipse of the intuition of being in modern philosophy.

Aquinas' ethics is a philosophical explanation of the phenomenon of obligation, or moral necessity. In its bases and development, it is non-sectarian and is offered to all people of good will. So even if the people of Lithuania, or at least the leading segments of that people, have lost their Catholicism, they can still find in Aquinas' ethics an intellectual home, a home in truth, for a particular cultural identity. Also, though I cannot go into it now, in its political extrapolation, Aquinas' ethics accommodates tolerance, and so there is no reason why Lithuania must neuter herself culturally in order to go West.

In conclusion, if one understands tolerance in the sense of fraternity to be fundamental to the common good of a democratic society, then Lithuania's going West need not mean neutering itself culturally by going secular and skeptical. That latter defense of tolerance has exhausted itself and is George Bush's biggest problem selling "liberty" to other nations of the world. From the secular perspective liberty appears to many to mean "license". And so when others hear an American say "liberty", what comes to mind is the Hollywood life-style. I have tried to point out that one better preserves tolerance/fraternity by turning to the Catholic heritage, especially as that heritage recommends the ethical thought of Thomas Aquinas. Both of these are in Lithuania's background. I think especially of the philosophy of culture of Stasys Šalkauskas. They are also in the background of other European Catholic countries like Ireland and Poland and, in my opinion, can be used to ground in better fashion a democratic society. Perhaps these newly emergent countries, Ireland economically and the other two politically, should consider taking a lead here. There are more and better *apologiae* for democratic government than the philosophical deconstructions so popularized in Western circles.

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John F. X. Knasas

AMERIKIETIS STEBI LIETUVOS VAKARĖJIMĄ

S a n t r a u k a

Šiandien priklausyti Vakarams reiškia būti demokratišku. Būti demokratišku reiškia ugdyti toleranciją, o tolerancija pašalina nepagrįstas pretenzijas religijos, tautos, kultūros, filosofijos ir kitų dalykų atžvilgiu. Vakaruose tolerancijos idealas išpopuliarėjo supratus, kad praėjusio šimtmečio kataklizmus sukėlė žmonės, tikėję, jog jie veda vieninteliu tiesos keliu. Apskritai tiesos idėja probleminė. Pristatydamas dvi tiesos ir tolerancijos prieštaros problemos sprendimo strategijas, kreipiuosi į Lietuvos katalikus. Lietuvos žengimas į Vakarus nereiškia savęs kultūrinio neutralizavimo, priimant sekuliarias ir skeptines nuostatas.

Raktažodžiai: lietuvių tapatybė, demokratija, tolerancija, tiesa, nacionalizmas, globalizacija, analogija, katalikybė, Tomas Akviniėtis, prigimtinė teisė