

Salvatore Settis
Europe and Its Many Identities

(Excerpt)

"By its own nature, the European cultural identity is manifold, in the art forms as in literature, in religion as in the institutions and laws. It must be based on diversity and difference, as well as on the relation between different peoples, in Europe as much as outside of Europe. It is precisely at this point that qualified intellectuals are called to an important and significant task, if they will be willing to facilitate the comprehension and to reveal the history of these diversities and exchanges, avoiding to keep for themselves the moment of research and consideration. Academic culture must communicate with popular culture on the great themes of civil society, especially in the urgency of choices and political definitions that implicate all citizens, who could benefit from a higher degree of information and awareness. The definition of cultural identity calls for a multidisciplinary and concerted effort, something that inevitably retains a political dimension, which is most evident at the present moment in time, when this theme is applied to Europe during such a formative a founding moment. In Europe, the various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups have combined with each other with millenary dynamics. The single European cultural identities were formed by means of processes of osmosis and exchange; each of them cannot be defined by distinguishing it from the others, but rather via an analysis of the elements that make it up, many of which are present in other cultures. In other words, one can argue that the cultural identity is decomposable because it results from a process of exchange during which each culture "receives" and "gives". It is thus important to recall the past occurrences to comprehend that one's own culture embraces significant elements originating from other cultures. If underscored with the most effective and well-timed means, this simple and indisputable fact carries with it a cultural and political message that our world utterly needs: a message of opening and tolerance."