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Europe, America, and the Continental Drift

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Europe, unlike America, is on a collision course with its own history. Often it voices an almost visceral denial of any possible public dimension for Christian values.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

Europe's Triple Crisis

The view I will present to you is that Europe today is going through a moral and spiritual *crisis of identity*. As I see it, this crisis is probably the cause of, and it is certainly connected to, both the economic weakness and the political failure of the European Union. Moreover, Europe is dragged by a sort of political continental drift with respect to America. This, too, in my view, is connected to the European identity crisis.

What in particular I would like to discuss with you are these three questions:

1. What are the symptoms and the sources of the European crisis?
2. Why is the identity crisis stronger in Europe than in America?
3. What remedies, if any, can we use to overcome this crisis?

As a way of introduction, let me first mention the two main phenomena that, I believe, reveal the European identity crisis.

The first is that European society is becoming increasingly secularized. As a consequence, it is losing its religious traditions, and with them not only the sense of limit, of the forbidden, the morally unfeasible

Talking Points

- Europe today is going through a moral and spiritual crisis of identity. This crisis is probably the cause of, and it is certainly connected to, both the economic weakness and the political failure of the European Union.
- It is one thing to separate State and Church; it is quite a different thing to separate religion from the lives of the people. In Europe today, religion is not allowed to express itself in public. As a consequence, religion cannot nourish our civil customs, provide a spiritual ground for our societies, or act in support of our public rules and behavior.
- I believe that the sense of a religious faith is indispensable for social cohesion. The most powerful glue of society comes from identity, in particular an identity of principles and values. The more these principles and values are believed in and cultivated as a faith, the stronger society is.

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ble, but also the feeling of belonging to one same community of values and principles. What is Europe? What does it believe in? What is the European Union for? These are questions to which the European intellectual and political elites either provide no answers or offer weak answers. It is not an answer to say that Europe is “the country of human rights.” It is a weak and misleading answer to say that the European Union is “for peace.” That these stereotypes are repeated as a refrain is good evidence that Europe is avoiding looking at the concrete situation because it is avoiding looking into itself. The ideal is a shelter to hide the reality.

The reaction to immigration and Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism is the second phenomenon revealing the European crisis. In this connection typical problems of comparison and sometimes of confrontation and, as a consequence, questions of self-reflection and identity have cropped up. Who are “we” and who are “they”? What do “we” believe in and what do “they” profess? How can it be that “they” hate “us” so deeply? Here, too, Europe’s standard answers are not answers. Saying that we are for dialogue, tolerance, solidarity, peaceful coexistence—which are the preferred terms of Europe’s politically correct dictionary and the favored forms of its policies—is another way of avoiding a sad reality and taking shelter in a comfortable ideal.

This situation has effects not only on the morale of European citizens but on their pockets and political role as well. He who is not confident in himself sooner or later gets depressed and wrong-footed.

From the economic point of view, Europe today is suffering a series of diseases, especially if compared to America and to the new emerging economies. The list is long and well known. A rigid labor market; a high level of legally enforced protection of workers; a large scale role of unions; an expensive welfare state; excessive public spending; low social mobility; high fiscal pressure: these, and many others, are the main factors that prevent Europe from being more competitive on the world scene.

Language reveals much about the cultural origin of this state of affairs. In the United States, if you get sick, you have not been mindful and you have to

provide for yourself; in Europe, if you get sick, something or somebody is responsible for it, and the state has to take care of you. In the United States, if you have children, you help yourself; in Europe, the state or public sector has to provide assistance and social services free or at a low cost. In the United States, if you are not educated or do not make progress in your career, then you are probably lazy; in Europe, the state, or some public body, has not provided you with a good education. Meanings change. In the United States, “opportunity” means individual chances; in Europe, it stands for state facilities. In the former, inequality is a state of affairs; in the latter, it is a social injustice. What may be politically wrong on one side of the ocean is a moral guilt on the other side. The prevailing mixture of Marxist—in its many varieties—and Catholic cultures has led the European society to be state-dependent, state-assisted, and state-centered. The state is the new God to be cherished when it is benevolent, and to be blamed when things go wrong.

From the political point of view, Europe is suffering a similar crisis. Here, too, the list of defects is long. European institutions are an inextricable web of organisms where it is almost impossible to establish who is responsible for what. The European Council, which is to be distinguished from the Council of Europe, which, in its turn, is to be distinguished from the Council of the European Union, is such a decision-making body that it can be blocked by the veto of a country as big as Colorado Springs; the European parliament is an assembly where there is no real political fight because there is no real political power to strive for; the European bureaucracy is so pervasive that in the last five years of the Nineties it has churned out more than ten thousand directives—nobody knows where they are coming from or what they are for; a single European foreign and military policy does not exist, unless to invoke peace and dialogue, which are often the European newspeak terms for surrender or appeasement. Given this situation, it is no wonder that the European Constitution turned out to be a failure. Finally put to the test of the people, it proved to be a sort of political cold fusion experiment ignited by as much as a cold sense of membership. The idea of “constitu-

tional patriotism” with which the intellectual European elites—especially the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the German minister of foreign affairs Joschka Fischer—tried to fill the gap of a lacking European nationalism is a case in point. It shows that at the political and institutional level, too, Europe is avoiding reality.

The European crisis is so serious that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, wrote: “There is a clear comparison between today’s situation and the decline of the Roman Empire. In its final days, Rome still functioned as a great historical framework, but in practice it was already subsisting on models that were destined to fail. Its vital energy had been depleted.”¹

With this dark and hopefully erroneous prediction in mind, let me go back to the three questions I intend to discuss here. I will begin with the symptoms of the European identity crisis, and I will limit myself to three of them.

The Symptoms of the European Identity Crisis

The first symptom is Europe’s refusal to mention its Judeo-Christian roots in the Preamble to the European Constitutional Treaty, which, following the French and Dutch referendums, has now failed. The title itself is revealing of an ambiguity. A Treaty is not a Constitution and a Constitution cannot be a Treaty. The European Constitutional Treaty is something in between, a document hanging in limbo with no precise form, despite its more than 400 pages, running from major principles to the most analytic norms.

Regarding Europe’s cultural and spiritual origins, the Treaty adopts two slightly different formulations which were accepted after a long debate and many quarrels. One states that “the peoples of Europe... [are] conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage.” The other refers to the “cultural, religious and humanistic heritage of Europe.” It is patent that both statements are extremely poor and reticent, because neither of them defines exactly *what* heritage and

what religion Europe stems from. The question then is: Can Europe unify economically, socially, and politically if it lacks the strength even to mention that Judeo-Christian religion without which it would not even exist? My answer is: No, it cannot.

The second symptom of the European crisis is the antecedent of the first. What role is played by religion in European society? After the wars of religion, Europe slowly attained the separation between State and Church. This separation—which actually stems from the Gospels—is a civil achievement of which we should be proud but about which we should not be confused. It refers to *political institutions* and their mutual relations, not to *personal dimensions* and their autonomy of expression. In other words, the separation between State and Church, sets limits to the legislation of them both, in the sense that one is forbidden to pass norms over the domain of the other, but it does *not* imply that religion must be expelled from social life, or that it should be considered only a private affair. In still other words, the *secularity* of the state, which is a juridical regime, does not imply the *secularism* of the society, which is an ideological philosophy. It is one thing to separate State and Church; it is quite a different thing to separate religion from the lives of the people.

This is however what is happening in Europe. Today, religion is not allowed to express itself in public. As a consequence, religion cannot nourish our civil customs, provide a spiritual ground for our societies, or act in support of our public rules and behavior. And, of course, once the links with the religious tradition are severed, the allegiance to the very same values which are the core of our living together starts losing its strength and gets weaker and weaker.

Consider the French situation. On February 3, 2004, Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin made a speech before the National Assembly in defense of the Stasi report about the Islamic veil and in support of the principle of secularity. He said: “Today all the great religions in France’s history have

1. Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 66–67. The book was originally published in Italian in 2004, before Cardinal Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI.

adapted to this principle. For the most recent arrivals, I mean Islam, secularity is an opportunity to be a French religion.” Less than two years later, after the riots in Paris’s periphery, France found out that its prime minister was wrong. You can impose a European Constitution without religious roots, but you cannot presume that people can live without a religious identity.

There is something even worse. Not only is the Judeo-Christian religion deprived of any significant social role, it is actually discriminated against with respect to other religions.

After the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a fanatic Islamist, the storm that spread across Europe following the publication by a Danish newspaper of a few satirical comics about Muhammad, and most of all after the Pope’s lecture at the University of Regensburg, is the best evidence of how feeble Europe’s religious identity has become and how ineffectively it intends to defend it. Cardinal Ratzinger was prophetic when he wrote: “In our contemporary society, thank goodness, anyone who dishonors the faith of Israel, its image of God, or its great figures must pay a fine. The same holds true for anyone who dishonors the Koran and the convictions of Islam. But when it comes to Jesus Christ and that which is sacred to Christians, instead, freedom of speech becomes the supreme good.”²

To the best of my memory, not one of those politically correct commentators and leaders who blamed the Danish caricatures had ever before blamed those much more blasphemous publications, movies, and publicity about Christianity, Jesus Christ, Moses, that are so widespread in Europe. Nor have any of those who have considered inappropriate the Pope’s lecture ever condemned such violent speeches as the Iranian president’s. In all these cases the principle that we have to combine two values (freedom of speech and respect for the people) or three values (including respect for self-government) has always been invoked. But does this principle hold good for Islam alone? Can Islam be discussed without being

charged of interference or disrespect? Aren’t Christianity and Judaism as respectable religions as Islam? And if they are, why—just to mention the latest episode—has British Airways forbidden a hostess to wear a crucifix whereas the Islamic veil is allowed everywhere in Europe? Or shall we conclude that our traditional religion is less honorable than Islam’s?

The third symptom of the European crisis is a consequence of the first two. It is multiculturalism, the view that communities must have rights over the individuals. Taken as doctrine, multiculturalism is a form of relativism according to which no form of life can be said to be better than another because they are incommensurable. Taken as policy, multiculturalism is the denial of the existence of one single culture—one single set of principles and values—encompassing all the others. By embracing it and by spreading the “anything goes” slogan underlying it, Europe shows that it no longer knows where it comes from, what it is, and where it is going. This is why Europe meets the integration of immigrants with difficulty and risks bringing about precisely that clash of identities and cultures it most wants to avoid. If Europe is not becoming a “melting pot” like America it is because its identity is not strong enough to merge and fuse different cultures and forge them into a single entity.

This is not all. Not only is Europe unwilling to stress its own identity, it is not even reacting to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. Confronted with it, the European culture has developed a sort of what could be called a “guilt-syndrome.” If Islamic terrorists have declared a *jihad* against us, many intellectuals and political leaders argue, they must feel resentful towards us. If they feel resentful, this must be the result of social and economic inequalities. If such inequalities exist, they must be the fault of the West. If it is the fault of the West, it is the fault of the most powerful country of the West, America, because of its economic expansion, military imperialism, and cultural hegemony. Ultimately, if the West is guilty of all this—as indeed it is, because it tries to promote and export its own lifestyle as though it were valid for everyone every-

2. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

where—then the West deserves everything that happens to it. The ultimate conclusion is: It is all our fault. More exactly: It is all America's fault.

This “guilt-syndrome” is matched by a counterfactual “if-reasoning”: If President Reagan had not talked about an “evil empire,” if President Bush had not spoken about the “axis of evil,” if the 2002 National Security Strategy document had not advanced the right to a preemptive war, in a nutshell, if less American faith and more European brain abounded, then—the same European intellectuals and politicians continue to argue—the world would be in better shape. Jürgen Habermas is so proud of European wisdom and so suspicious of what he seems to take as American bigotry that he is happy to write: “in Europe, a president who begins his official functions every day with a public prayer and connects his momentous political decisions to a divine mission is difficult to imagine.”³ In the same vein, another European philosopher and intellectual, John Gray of the London School of Economics, wrote: “American peculiar religiosity is becoming ever more strikingly pronounced. It has by far the most powerful fundamentalist movement in any advanced country. In no otherwise comparable land do politicians regularly invoke the name of Jesus.”⁴ It does not matter that, thanks to Moses and Jesus, we have forged that fundamental moral value—the dignity of the person—from which all human rights stem. What does matter is being secular.

All these symptoms have the same source: a moral and spiritual identity crisis. It is this crisis that pulls Europe away from America. One who does not know who he is does not know where to go either. And he who does not know where to go is bothered if his partner presses him to go somewhere in particular. For Europe, America today is a bothersome partner.

Europe and America

This brings me to the second question I raised. Does the crisis of identity affect only Europe or the whole of the West?

I love America but I do not intend to idealize it, also because, in many respects, the two shores of the Atlantic look like the two sides of the same coin. However, the difference between Europe and America cannot be denied. The split is not just between Europe-Venus and America-Mars, because these two roles can be exchanged and played alternately. The difference is not even that Europe wants to be multi-polar while America, being a super-power, tends to be uni-polar, because these roles, too, can change according to circumstances. After all, if I am not wrong, American policy towards Europe changed after the recent Lebanon war. And this seems to hold true even in the cases of Iran and North Korea.

In my view, the true difference—indeed a deep fracture—is that America, unlike Europe, is not going through the same crisis of identity. Chesterton's famous definition of America is probably not up-to-date, and today's America is certainly no longer Tocqueville's America. But something remains that makes a difference. In the United States, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution have a religious foundation, society still has a religious essence, and religion continues to play an important role in the public arena. For a plethora of reasons—the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, state secularism and church clericalism, the spread of Marxism and the philosophical collapse of liberalism, the breakdown of empires and the devastations caused by nationalisms, and many others—this is not the case in Europe. Not only have European states become secularized, European society has become *de-Christianized*. As Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, “Europe, unlike America, is on a collision course with its own history. Often it voices an almost visceral denial of any possible public dimension for Christian values.”⁵

I believe that this has devastating effects on Europe. In the absence of any deep belief, strong faith, spiritual bond, what can we hang on to and how can we justify all those noble values—freedom, democracy,

3. Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2006).

4. John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 23.

5. Ratzinger and Pera, *Without Roots*, p. 109.

tolerance, respect, fraternity, solidarity, etc.—that are nonetheless professed by Europeans? If the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is dead and we want to live as though God did not exist, how can we believe in, and devote our destiny to, anything deserving commitment and sacrifice?

This brings me to my third and final question. What remedies can we use to break free of the crisis of Europe? I will be brief on this point because, unfortunately, I have no special recipes.

The Remedies

First of all a few negative categorical imperatives.

Don't try to resurrect a dead Constitution. As the people know nothing about it, they also are doubtful about it.

Don't continue with the unification process without involving the people. Democracy, not bureaucracy, must be our guiding star.

Don't avoid international responsibilities. A protagonist acts, it is not pulled along.

Don't believe that diplomacy can always make miracles, or that peace has no costs, or that economic growth is free. Changing a style of life is painful even when it is rewarding.

My view is that if Europe does not take American-like economic measures, in terms of welfare state reduction, tax cutting, company privatization, university competition, labor productivity, research investment, and many others, then it is doomed to drift and stay behind. In the same way, I do believe that if Europe does not keep the transatlantic relation strong, then its voice will become anachronistic.

But, as I have stressed, the peculiar crisis of Europe is an identity crisis and this requires cultural answers. First of all we have to go back to our roots. Then we have to understand that the Judeo-Christian tradition is not just a form of culture like any other, but precisely the main basis of our liberal-democratic states. Finally, we have to reject the prevailing relativistic view according to which there can be no value judgments as regards forms of life, cultures, and civilizations. That view prevents Europe from having a sense of mission, including the mission of spreading those human rights it is so

proud of. When America launched the Great Middle East Initiative and the idea of exporting or promoting democracy, Europe reacted as if it were an imposition or a sort of aggression. It was not necessarily so, but Europe's reaction showed how little confidence it has in itself.

I have stressed the importance of religion and quoted the Pope. As I am not a believer—at least not a believer in the personal God of revelation or resurrection, although I am a believer in the values with which the Judeo-Christian God has shaped our history—let me make a final remark on this point.

I do believe that the Judeo-Christian religion is necessary for providing foundations to our liberal and democratic states. Liberalism is the doctrine of the precedence of the individual over society and state. This priority is axiological, that is, it concerns the individual's value, and stems from the Judeo-Christian idea that man was created by God in his own image. Democracy is the doctrine of the equality of rights of all men, independently of their many differences. And this, too, stems from another Judeo-Christian idea, that man, every man, has a dignity *per se*, because he is the son of God.

I also believe that the sense of a religious faith is indispensable for social cohesion. A society is made of individuals who feel that they are members of a single body. Families, communities, states, nations, provide the necessary ingredients. But the most powerful glue of society does not come from blood ties, material interests, common histories or narratives, shared economic and political goals, it comes from identity, in particular an identity of principles and values. The more these principles and values are believed in and cultivated as a faith, the stronger society is.

This is why I stress the importance of a dialogue between believers in different confessions and seculars or non-believers, though not atheists. In this dialogue both have some costs to pay. In the same way it asks believers to reject dogmatism, it implies that many non-believers' ideas current today in Europe and also in the United States have to be rejected or revised. I refer, in particular, to ethnocentrism, according to which fundamental rights are an asset pertaining to Westerners alone; to rela-

tivism, according to which they have no special foundation and are as good as any other; and to positivism, according to which they are valid and legitimate just because they have been embodied into some law passed by some parliament at some time. Are we ready to pay these costs?

Personally, I am, and I am convinced that we should do it. The call that Cardinal Ratzinger made to “creative minorities” on both sides is to be accepted, because the crisis we are facing in the West is deep and the challenge we have to meet is critical.

Nothing less than our future (and the future of our children) is at stake. The work that lies ahead is difficult. It requires being humble and determined, sympathetic and resolute, open-minded and judicious all at the same time. All told not an easy job, but how can creative minorities, including a simple Italian Senator, ask for an easy life?

—*Marcello Pera is a member and former president of the Italian Senate. He is co-author, with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), of Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam.*