

EUROPE IN THE CRISIS OF CULTURES

• Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger •

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are men who make God visible in this world
through their enlightened and lived faith. . . .
We need men like Benedict of Nursia.”

1. Reflections on today's contrasting cultures

We find ourselves at a time of great dangers and great opportunities for man and the world, a moment that also places a great responsibility upon us. During the last century, man's know-how and his dominion over matter have grown in a way that no one could have imagined before. But man's ability to control the world has also given him a power of destruction so great as to be downright terrifying at times. In this connection one cannot help thinking of the new war without borders and without fronts called terrorism. The not unjustified fear that terrorists might get hold of nuclear and biological weapons has led even constitutional states to adopt security measures similar to those that formerly existed only in dictatorial regimes. And yet, when all is said and done, the feeling remains that all these precautions can never really be sufficient, since the sort of world-wide control that would be needed is neither possible nor desirable. Less visible, but not for that reason any less disturbing, are the capacities for self-manipulation that man has acquired. Man has plumbed the recesses of being, he has deciphered the components that make man human, and now he can, so to say,

“construct” man by himself. Man, then, no longer comes into being as a gift of the Creator, but as the product of our action, a product that—for this very reason—can also be selected according to criteria of our own choosing. By the same token, this man is no longer covered by the splendor that comes from his being the image of God, which is what bestows on him his dignity and inviolability, but only by the power of human know-how. He is no longer anything more than the image of man—of which man, though? To this we can add the great planetary problems: inequality in the distribution of the world’s goods; growing poverty, indeed, impoverishment; the exploitation of the earth and its resources; hunger; diseases that threaten the whole world; the clash of cultures. All of this shows that the growth of our possibilities is not matched by an equal development of our moral energy. The power of morality has not kept pace with the growth of science, indeed, it has rather diminished. This is because the technological mindset confines morality to the subjective sphere, whereas what we need is precisely a public morality, a morality that can respond to the threats that cast their shadows over everyone’s existence. The true, and gravest, danger we face in the present moment is just this disequilibrium between technical capacities and moral energy. The security that we need as a basis for our freedom and dignity cannot, in the last analysis, come from technological systems of control, but can spring only from man’s moral strength. Where this strength is lacking, or is only inadequately present, man’s power will increasingly transform itself into a power of destruction.

It is true that there is a new moralism today whose key words are justice, peace, and the conservation of creation—words that evoke some of the essential moral values that we do in fact need. But this moralism remains vague and so slides, almost inevitably, into the sphere of partisan politics. It is above all a claim made on others, and is all too little a personal duty for our daily lives. What, in fact, does “justice” mean? Who defines it? What is conducive to peace? In the last decades we have seen in our streets and in our squares how pacifism can deviate into destructive anarchism and terrorism. The political moralism of the Sixties, whose roots are far from dead, succeeded in drawing young people full of ideals. But its basic thrust was wrong, because it lacked a serene rationality and because, in the end, it valued political utopia above the dignity of the individual man; indeed, it proved capable of going so far as to despise man in the name of its lofty goals. The political moralism that we have lived

through, and are living through still, not only does not open the way to regeneration, it actually blocks it. The same also holds, therefore, for a Christianity and a theology that reduce the core of Jesus' message, the "kingdom of God," to the "values of the kingdom," while identifying these values with the main watchwords of political moralism and proclaiming them, at the same time, to be the synthesis of all religions—all the while forgetting about God, despite the fact that it is precisely He who is the subject and the cause of the kingdom of God. What is left in his place are big words (and values) that are open to every kind of abuse.

This brief survey of the world's situation leads us to reflect on the situation of Christianity today and, for the same reason, on the foundations of Europe—the Europe that was once, we can say, the Christian Continent, but that also became the starting point of the new scientific rationality that has given us great possibilities and equally great threats. Of course, Christianity did not start in Europe, and so cannot be classified as a European religion, the religion of the European cultural realm. But it was precisely in Europe that Christianity received its most historically influential cultural and intellectual form, and it therefore remains intertwined with Europe in a special way. On the other hand, it is also true that, beginning with the Renaissance, and then in complete form with the Enlightenment, this same Europe also developed the scientific rationality that not only led to the geographical unity of the world, to the meeting of continents and cultures in the age of discovery, but that now, thanks to the technological culture made possible by science, much more deeply places its stamp on what is now truly the whole world, indeed, in a certain sense reduces the world to uniformity. And, in the wake of this form of rationality, Europe has developed a culture that, in a way hitherto unknown to humanity, excludes God from public consciousness, whether he is totally denied or whether his existence is judged to be indemonstrable, uncertain, and so is relegated to the domain of subjective choices, as something in any case irrelevant for public life. This purely functional rationality, to give it a name, has revolutionized moral conscience in a way that is equally new with respect to all hitherto existing cultures, inasmuch as it claims that only what is experimentally provable is rational. Since morality belongs to an entirely different sphere, it disappears as a category in its own right, and so has to be identified in some alternative fashion, since no one can deny that, after all, we still do need morality in one form or another. In a world based on calcula-

tion, it is the calculation of consequences that decides what is to count as moral or immoral. And so the category of the good, which Kant had put front and center, disappears. Nothing is good or evil in itself, everything depends on the consequences that can be foreseen for a given action. Although, on the one hand, Christianity found its most influential form in Europe, we must also say, on the other hand, that Europe has developed a culture that most radically contradicts, not only Christianity, but the religious and moral traditions of humanity as well. This helps us understand that Europe is going through a true “stress test”; it also helps us understand the radical nature of the tensions that our continent has to face. But also, and above all, what it brings to light is the responsibility that we Europeans have to assume at this moment in history: what is at stake in the debate about the definition of Europe, about its new political form, is not some nostalgic battle at the “rearguard” of history, but rather a great responsibility for the humanity of today.

Let us take a closer look at this contrast between the two cultures that have marked Europe. This contrast has surfaced in two controverted points of the debate about the Preamble to the European Constitution: shall the Constitution mention God? Shall it mention Europe’s Christian roots? Some say that there is no need to worry, since article 52 of the Constitution guarantees the institutional rights of the Church. However, this means that the Churches find room in European life only in the realm of political compromise, but that when it comes to the foundations of Europe, their actual substance has no room to play any formative role. The arguments given for this clear “No” are superficial, and it is clear that, rather than indicating the real reason, they in fact cover it. The claim that mentioning Europe’s Christian roots would offend the feelings of the many non-Christians who live in Europe is unconvincing, since what we are dealing with is first and foremost a historical fact that no one can seriously deny. Of course, this historical observation also implies something about the present, since to mention roots is also to point to residual sources of moral guidance, and so to something that constitutes the identity of this thing called Europe. Who would be offended? Whose identity would be threatened? Muslims, who are typically used as the favorite examples in this regard, do not feel threatened by our Christian moral foundations, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own bases. Nor do our Jewish fellow citizens feel offended when Europe’s Christian roots are mentioned, since these roots go

back to Mount Sinai: they bear the mark of the voice that resounded on the Mountain of God and they unite us in the great basic guidelines that the Decalogue has given to humanity. The same holds for the reference to God: it is not the mention of God that offends adherents of other religions, but rather the attempt to build the human community without any relationship to God whatsoever.

The reasons for this double “No” are deeper than the arguments that have been advanced for it would suggest. They presuppose the idea that only radical Enlightenment culture, which has reached its full development in our time, is able to define what European culture is. Different religious cultures, each enjoying its respective rights, can therefore co-exist alongside Enlightenment culture—so long and so far as they respect, and subordinate themselves to, its criteria. This culture is substantially defined by the rights of freedom. Its starting point is freedom, which it takes to be a fundamental value that measures everything else: the liberty of religious choice, which includes the religious neutrality of the state; the liberty to express one’s own opinion, as long as it does not call into doubt this canon of freedom; the democratic ordering of the state, hence, parliamentary control over the organisms of the state; the free formation of parties; the independence of the judiciary; and, finally, the protection of the rights of man and the prohibition of discrimination in any form. In this last respect, the canon is still in formation, since the rights of man can also be in conflict, for example, when there is a clash between a woman’s desire for freedom and an unborn baby’s right to life. The concept of discrimination is being continually broadened, and in this way the prohibition of discrimination can find itself increasingly transformed into a limitation on the freedom of opinion and the freedom of religion. We are not far from the time when we will no longer be allowed to state publicly that homosexuality is, as the Catholic Church teaches, an objective disorder in the structuring of human existence. And the Church’s conviction that it does not have the right to give priestly ordination to women is already considered by some to be incompatible with the spirit of the European Constitution. It is obvious that this canon of Enlightenment culture—which is anything but definitive—contains important values that we, precisely as Christians, cannot, and do not wish to, do without. But it is also obvious that the ill-defined, or even simply undefined, conception of freedom on which this culture rests inevitably entails contradictions. And it is obvious that the actual use of this concept—a use that seems

radical—brings with it restrictions on freedom that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. A confused ideology of freedom leads to a dogmatism that turns out to be—more and more—hostile to freedom.

We will, of course, have to come back to the question of the contradictions within the contemporary form of Enlightenment culture. But first we must finish our description of this culture. As a culture where reason has supposedly finally achieved full self-consciousness, it naturally claims universality and imagines that it is complete in itself, with no need to be complemented by any other cultural factors. These two characteristics are abundantly evident in connection with the question about who can become a member of the European Community. This is especially true in the debate surrounding Turkey's possible admission into the European Union. Turkey is a state or, better, a cultural domain that does not have Christian roots, but that has been influenced by Islamic culture. Atatürk later tried to transform Turkey into a secular state, attempting to transplant onto Muslim soil the secularism that grew up in the Christian world of Europe. One can ask whether such an attempt is possible. According to Europe's culture of secular Enlightenment, the norms and contents of this same Enlightenment culture are all that is needed for the definition of European identity, which means that any state that adopts these criteria can belong to Europe. In the end, it does not matter which root system this culture of freedom and democracy is grafted onto. Precisely for this reason, we are told, Europe's roots cannot factor into the definition of its foundations, since they are dead roots that are not part of its contemporary identity. By the same token, this new identity, which depends solely on Enlightenment culture, also implies that God has nothing to do with public life and the foundations of the state.

In this way, the whole affair becomes logical and even, in some sense, plausible. After all, what better outcome could we wish for than universal respect for democracy and human rights? But then we have to ask: is this secularist Enlightenment culture really the culture of a reason common to all men, and has it really proved itself to be definitively universal? Is it really a culture that ought to find access everywhere, even if on a historically and culturally different *humus*? And is it truly complete in itself, and so without need of any root outside of itself?

2. The significance and limits of today's rationalist culture

We must now face these last two questions. With respect to the first question—have we attained the universal, at last fully scientific philosophy that brings to expression mankind's common reason?—we have to answer that we have indeed achieved important gains that can claim a general validity: we have achieved the insight that religion cannot be imposed by the state, but can be welcomed only in freedom; respect for the fundamental rights of man, which are equal for all; the separation of powers and the control of power. We must not imagine, however, that these basic values, though generally valid, can be realized in the same way in every historical context. Not every society has the sociological presuppositions for the sort of party-based democracy that exists in the West. By the same token, complete religious neutrality on the part of the state has to be regarded, in most historical contexts, as an illusion. And with that we come to the problems raised by the second question. But first let us clear up the question as to whether modern Enlightenment philosophies, taken as a whole, can claim to speak the last word for reason as something common to all men. Characteristic of these philosophies is their positivism, hence, their anti-metaphysical posture. Consequently, they end up leaving no room for God. They are based on a self-limitation of positive reason, which is adequate in the technical domain, but which, when it gets generalized, mutilates man. It follows from this that man no longer acknowledges any moral authority outside of his calculations, and, as we have seen, even the concept of freedom, which at first sight might seem to expand here without limit, leads in the end to the self-destruction of freedom. Admittedly, the positivist philosophies contain important elements of truth. But these elements are based on a self-limitation of reason typical of a given cultural situation—that of the modern West—and as such cannot be reason's last word. Although they appear to be totally rational, they are not the voice of reason itself, but are themselves culturally bound; bound, that is, to the situation of today's West. They are, then, not at all the philosophy that, one day, might rightfully claim validity throughout the whole world. But above all we need to say that this Enlightenment philosophy, with its corresponding culture, is incomplete. It consciously severs its own cultural roots, thus depriving itself of the original energies from which it itself sprang, the fundamental memory of humanity, as it were, without which reason loses its compass. Indeed, the principle

that reigns today says that man is the measure of his action. If we know how to do it, we are allowed to do it. There is no longer any such thing as knowing how to do something without being allowed to do it—such a situation would be contrary to freedom, which is the supreme, absolute value. But man knows how to do many things, indeed, increasingly so, and if this knowledge is not measured by a moral norm, it becomes, as we can already see, a power to destroy. Man knows how to clone men. He knows how to use men as a “warehouse” of organs for other men—and so he does it, he does it because his freedom would seem to require it. Man knows how to build atomic bombs—and so he builds them, which means that he is also willing, in principle, to use them. Even terrorism, in the end, is based on this “self-authorization” of man, and not on the teachings of the Qu’ran. Enlightenment philosophy’s radical severing of its roots becomes, when all is said and done, a way of doing without man. Man, at bottom, has no freedom, the spokesmen of the natural sciences tell us, thus contradicting completely the starting point of the whole discussion. Man mustn’t believe that he is anything special with respect to any other living being, and so he ought to be treated as they are—so we are told precisely by the most advanced spokesmen of a philosophy cleanly cut off from the roots of humanity’s historical memory.

We had asked ourselves two questions: is rationalist (positivist) philosophy strictly rational, and so universally valid? And is it complete? Is it self-sufficient? Can, or even must, it relegate its historical roots to the domain of the mere past, and so to the domain of the merely subjectively valid? We have to answer all of these questions with a clear “No.” This philosophy does not express human reason in its fullness, but only a part of it, and because it thus mutilates reason, it cannot be considered rational. By the same token, it is also incomplete, and it can heal only by re-establishing contact with its roots. A tree without roots withers . . .

In making this claim, we are not denying all the positive and important things that this philosophy has to say. Rather, we are simply stating its need for completeness, its radical incompleteness. The act of setting aside Europe’s Christian roots is not, after all, the expression of a superior tolerance that respects all cultures equally, and refrains from privileging any of them, but rather the absolutization of a way of thinking and living that stands in radical contrast, among other things, to the other historical cultures of humanity. The true antithesis that characterizes today’s world is not that between

different religious cultures, but that between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on the one hand, and the great religious cultures, on the other. If we eventually find ourselves in a clash of cultures, it will not be because of the clash of the great religions—which have always been in conflict with one another, but which, in the end, have always managed to coexist—but it will be because of the clash between this radical emancipation of man and the major cultures of history. In this sense, the refusal to mention God is not the expression of a tolerance that would protect the non-theistic religions and the dignity of atheists and agnostics. It is rather the expression of a mindset that would like to see God erased once and for all from the public life of humanity and relegated to the subjective sphere maintained by residual cultures from the past. Relativism, which is the starting point for all of this, thus becomes a dogmatism that believes itself in possession of the definitive knowledge of reason and of the right to regard everything else as a mere stage of humanity's development that has been fundamentally superseded and that is best treated as a pure relativity. What this really means is that we need roots to survive and that we must not lose sight of God, at the cost of the disappearance of human dignity.

3. The permanent significance of Christian faith

Is this a simple refusal of the Enlightenment and of modernity? Absolutely not. From its very beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the *logos*, as the religion according to reason. It found its precursor, not primarily in the other religions, but in the philosophical enlightenment that cleared the way of traditions in order to devote itself to the pursuit of the true and the good, of the one God who is above all the gods. As a religion of the persecuted, as a universal religion that reached beyond states and peoples, Christianity denied the state the right to regard religion as a part of its own order, and so claimed freedom for faith. It has always defined men, all men without distinction, as creatures of God and images of God, and has always in principle proclaimed their equal dignity, albeit within the inevitable limits of given societies. In this sense, the Enlightenment is of Christian origin and it is not an accident that it came to birth precisely and exclusively in the domain of Christian faith. True, in that very domain Christianity had

unfortunately contradicted its own nature by becoming a state tradition and a state religion. Despite the fact that philosophy, as a quest for rationality—including the rationality of faith—had always been the prerogative of Christianity, the voice of reason had been too much tamed. The merit of the Enlightenment was to insist once again on these original values of Christianity and to give reason back its voice. The Second Vatican Council, in its constitution on the Church and the modern world, reasserted this deep correspondence between Christianity and enlightenment. It sought to achieve a true conciliation between Christianity and modernity, which is the great inheritance that both sides are called upon to protect.

That having been said, the two parties need to reflect on themselves and to be ready for self-correction. Christianity must always remember that it is the religion of the *logos*. It is a faith in the *Creator Spiritus*, the source of all reality. This faith ought to energize Christianity philosophically in our day, since the problem we now face is whether the world comes from the irrational, and reason is therefore nothing but a “byproduct,” and perhaps a harmful one, of its development—or whether the world comes from reason, so that reason is the world’s criterion and aim. The Christian faith tends towards the second position. From the purely philosophical point of view, then, it has a truly strong hand to play, despite the fact that many today consider the first position alone to be “rational” and modern. But a reason that springs forth from the irrational and that, in the end, is itself irrational, is no answer to our problems. Only creative reason, which has manifested itself as love in the crucified God, can show us the way.

In the necessary dialogue between Catholics and the secular-minded, we Christians have to take special care to remain faithful to this basic principle: we have to live a faith that comes from the *logos*, from creative reason, and that is therefore open to all that is truly rational. But at this point I would like, as a believer, to make a proposal to secular folk. The Enlightenment attempted to define the essential norms of morality while claiming that they would be valid *etsi Deus non daretur*, even if God did not exist. In the midst of confessional conflict and the crisis of the image of God, the attempt was made to keep the essential moral values free of contradiction and to undergird them with an evidence that would make them independent of the many divisions and uncertainties of the various philosophies and confessions. The idea was to secure the bases of coexistence and, in general, the bases of humanity. At that time, this

seemed possible, inasmuch as the great basic convictions created by Christianity still held and still seemed undeniable. But this is no longer the case. The quest for a reassuring certitude that could stand uncontested beyond all differences has failed. Not even Kant, for all of his undeniable greatness, was able to create the necessary shared certainty. Kant had denied that God is knowable within the domain of pure reason, but, at the same time, he thought of God, freedom, and immortality as postulates of practical reason, without which it was impossible to act morally in any consistent way. Doesn't the situation of the world today make us wonder whether he might not have been right after all? Let me put it differently: the extreme attempt to fashion the things of man without any reference to God leads us ever closer to the edge of the abyss, to the total abolition of man. We therefore have good reason to turn the Enlightenment axiom on its head and to say that even those who are unable to accept God should nonetheless try to live *veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God existed. This was the advice that Pascal gave to his non-believing friends; it is also the advice that we would like to give to our non-believing friends today as well. Thus, no one's freedom is restricted, but everything human gets the support and the criterion it so urgently needs.

What we most need at this moment of history are men who make God visible in this world through their enlightened and lived faith. The negative witness of Christians who spoke of God but lived against him obscured his image and opened the door to unbelief. We need men who have their eyes fixed straight on God, and who learn from him what true humanity is. We need men whose intellects have been enlightened by the light of God and whose hearts have been opened by God, so that their intellects can speak to others' intellects and their hearts can open others' hearts. God returns among men only through men who are touched by God. We need men like Benedict of Nursia. In a time of dissipation and decadence, he plunged into the most extreme solitude, and then was able, after all the purifications he had to undergo, to re-emerge into the light, to return and to found, at Monte Cassino, the city on the hill that, in the midst of so many ruins, brought together the energies from which a new world took shape. In this way Benedict, like Abraham, became the father of many peoples. His recommendations to his monks at the end of the Rule still show us the way that leads on high, beyond the crises and the massacres:

As there is a bitter zeal that leads us away from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal that leads us away from vices and leads to God and to eternal life. And it is in this zeal that the monks must train themselves with the most ardent love: let them outdo one another in honoring one another, let them put up with one another's physical and moral infirmities with supreme patience. . . . Let them love one another with brotherly affection. . . . Let them fear God in love. . . . Let them put nothing before Christ who is able to lead all to eternal life. (Chapter 72)

—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.*

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JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER was elected Pope Benedict XVI on 19 April 2005.

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