

Cardinal Ratzinger on What Is Behind the Proposed Constitution of the European Union

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The ever growing complexity of the collaboration of the different states composing the European Union, questions of competence, of representation, of the division of the burdens to be imposed on the individual countries and the compensation payments each of them should receive has led to the idea of working out a sort of constitution which for the next years would regulate and even partly determine the economic, social and political life in the union states. On April 1, 2005, at Subiaco, the cradle of the Benedictine order, just a few weeks before his election as Pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger held an important conference on the spiritual problems of Europe today, which textually refers to the proposed constitution.¹ Meanwhile, the citizens of France and The Netherlands voted this project down. Juridically it is finished, but nevertheless the Commission in Brussels, which never cared very much about the feelings of the people, who—so it thought—could not understand anyhow the complexity of things, seems inclined to go on as if nothing ever happened. It is precisely this arrogance which made many citizens of the above two countries vote against the text. Other factors which led to the negative vote were the fear of losing one's national prerogatives, juridical system, educational policy, social protection, fear of globalization and delocalizations, an enormous increase in bureaucratic administration, and for some voters, their opposition against the refusal of the promoters of the text, to acknowledge the Christian roots of our European culture. This question was often seen as connected with the attempts of the Commission, probably prodded by large companies and some government leaders, to let Turkey with its 80,000,000 people enter into the community, very much against the will of the majority of the population in several countries.

Now earlier already Cardinal Ratzinger had issued a warning that Turkey is not a European country and that, at best, a sort of economic association should be proposed to it. In this difficult situation the conference of the Cardinal who had been until the death of John-Paul II the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is of importance and may foreshadow the future stand of the Holy See in this question. Besides being an in-depth analysis of our modern Western laicist culture, it indirectly is an invitation to Christians to fight for the preservation of the Christian heritage in Western culture over and against a pervasive secularist culture.

At the beginning of his conference, the Cardinal depicts the spiritual situation of contemporary Western Europe: moral strength has not kept pace with the growth in economic prosperity, although one could say that in our new cultural situation a certain new morality has emerged: human rights are on the lips of all, as is the cause of peace and the preservation of our natural environment. But this new morality is above all a morality addressed to others, of far too little appeal, however, to ourselves. This new morality is in several ways deprived of a serene rationality and comes close to being a utopia. However, Europe had once been Christian. Not that Christianity originated in Europe, but in Europe it has received its cultural and intellectual characteristics, and so it remains related in a very special way to Europe. It is also true, the Cardinal goes on, that the same Europe developed a scientific rationality which made possible the rise of the sciences and technology and brought about a certain unification of the world.

However, precisely in the line of this rationality “Europe has developed a culture which, in a way hitherto unknown to man, excludes God or is felt to belong to the domain of private choice”. The Cardinal notes that this exclusion of God from public life has led to profound changes in people’s views about morality. The morality of our actions is now measured and calculated by the yardstick of the results obtained and the amount of freedom we act with.

Actions are no longer good or bad by themselves, but only because of their consequences. “If on the one hand Christianity has found its most efficacious form in Europe, we must admit that, on the other hand, in Europe a culture has developed which is the most radical contradiction not only of Christianity but also of the religious traditions of mankind”. This shows the urgency of taking part in the discussion about Europe: the issue is not that of some nostalgic feelings about the past or a sort of battle of the rearguard, but one of the greatest responsibilities of mankind today.

Cardinal Ratzinger points out that, although the new constitution guarantees the institutional rights of the churches, in the text about the foundations of Europe, no mention is made of them. It was argued that recalling the Christian roots of Europe would hurt the feelings of many non-Christians now living in Europe. But he brushes aside this argument: in the first place these Christian roots are a historical fact. Who can reasonably deny it? Whose identity would be threatened by such a reference? The Moslems do not feel threatened by the moral doctrine of Christianity but by the cynical mentality of a secularized culture. Our Jewish citizens could hardly feel offended by such a reference which in the last analysis points back to the Decalogue. It is not the reference to God in the text which would offend the members of other religions but rather the attempt to construct a human society without God.

The refusal of the protagonists of this text to include these references is apparently based on the assumption that only the culture of the Age of Reason which seems to have reached its apex in our time, is the real soul of our civilization. Religions may co-exist with it, provided they respect the criteria of this enlightened culture and remain subordinated to it. Next, Cardinal Ratzinger points out that freedom occupies the center of this new vision, so that everything else is subordinated to it, to such a point that the insistence of the right to freedom may be turned into a weapon against the Church under the pretext of discrimination, e.g. when Christianity is attacked because it teaches that homosexual behavior is, objectively, a serious disturbance of the natural order or when the Magisterium says that the Church does not have the right and the power to admit women to the sacred orders—a doctrine considered by some as being at variance with the spirit of the new constitution.

Furthermore, every country which subscribes to the culture of the Enlightenment can become a member of the European Union, since there no longer is any other criterion of identity, besides perhaps a certain level of prosperity and, of course, the acceptance of this culture of the Enlightenment. However, it is far from certain that the thought and doctrine behind this culture is suited to all nations with their different histories and cultures, just as one does not find in every society the sociological prerequisites for democracy. Likewise, the complete neutrality of the state with regard to religions must be considered an illusion in most historical contexts.

In the following section of his conference the Cardinal gives a fine analysis of certain aspects of this modern culture one can approve of: religion cannot be imposed by the state, but is a matter of free choice of the citizens; respect of man’s fundamental rights; separation of the powers in the state and the control of these powers. Leaving aside the fact that these aspects cannot always be transplanted in totally different cultural areas, it is another question whether this culture of the Enlightenment can be considered the last world of human reason as common to all men. Its philosophical orientation is positivist and even anti-metaphysical, so that in the last analysis God finds no place in it. It is based on a self-imposed restriction of reason to a positivist dimension,

adapted to the sciences and technology, but which leads to a maiming of man. Man no longer acknowledges any moral authority other than his own reason. Outwardly this culture seems to be universal, but in reality it is connected to the particular situation of the West. It cuts itself loose from its roots, and so is in danger of losing its vitality and purposiveness. It leads to the use of people as warehouses of organs, it provokes the phenomenon of terrorism. The protagonists of the sciences even go so far as to say that man is not really free and is not much better than the other forms of living beings on our planet. Cardinal Ratzinger concludes stating that this culture is not sufficient. It is of the expression of an adequate reasonableness; it cannot relegate its historical roots to an irretrievably lost past, for a tree without roots dries out.

The refusal to give God a place in the new constitution, is not just a sign of tolerance in respect of other religions or of atheism. Rather it is the expression of a mentality which wants to wipe the thought of God out from the public life of mankind and shut it up in the restricted area of relics of the past, since it asserts that religion belongs to a stage of history we have now definitively left behind. The Cardinal next dwells on the fact that Christianity is the religion of reason, of the *logos*, of reasonableness. It refused to accept that the state brought religions under its power; it proclaimed the equality of all men, who share the same dignity for having been created after the image of God. In fact, Christianity has always cherished philosophy and promoted the sciences. In this respect it agrees with the thought of the Enlightenment, but it differs in that it teaches that the world owes its origin to the divine Logos, not to irrationality.

The Cardinal invites the Christians to remain faithful to this vision of the Creative Logos and to be open-minded to whatever is supremely reasonable. He appeals to non-believers reminding them of the argument of Kant and Pascal: since without God mankind comes closer to an abysmal disaster, it would be wise for them to live and act *veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God did exist.

Christians who professed their faith in words, but denied God by their deeds, have caused much harm. Only through men touched by God can God come back to us. We need people such as Benedict of Nursia, who in an era of decadence, withdrew into solitude to come back into the open, after a period of purification, to propose the elements of a new order.¹

¹ For the text, see the quarterly *Culture e Fede—Cultures and Faith*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, Vatican City 2005, pp. 88-98: “L’Europa nella crisi della culture.”