

Europe: What is Pope Benedict Thinking?

James Corkery SJ

Ahead of the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty next week, Jesuit theologian James Corkery presents the perspectives on Europe of Pope Benedict XVI and John Paul II, and looks at how their vision can inform the development of the European Union. How has Europe drifted away from its Christian roots, and why is the future of the continent dependent on the rediscovery of its identity as ‘a way of being together by different peoples that is founded on a mutual ordering of faith and reason’?

It may seem strange, as Ireland prepares for its second vote on the Lisbon Treaty on 2 October 2009, to focus on the vision of Europe of the current pope. After all, are his views not essentially religious and are Ireland’s concerns with Lisbon not, in the main, economic, social and political? At first glance, this may appear to be the case, but on closer inspection it becomes evident that Irish people are concerned about a very wide range of issues with which the Treaty of Lisbon is, or is perceived to be, connected. And the pope is concerned, as he observes the growth and development of the European Union, with the principles and the vision of humanity that underlie the advance of the EU and with how these are related to the religious and cultural heritage of the continent of Europe as a whole. Popes, and not only the present one, have a pastoral interest in Europe – and thus in the values, freedoms, opportunities, possibilities and challenges that it presents to its peoples. Indeed, before homing in on Benedict XVI’s vision of Europe, it will be instructive to glance back at the approach to Europe taken by his predecessor, John Paul II, who dominated the papal scene for over a quarter of a century, from 1978 to 2005.

Europe As Conceived by John Paul II

John Paul II was the first Slav pope ever and the first non-Italian pope in 455 years. He was not a Western



European; but he had no doubt that he was European. In his early years as pope, he saw his country cast off the shackles of communist rule. In his final years he saw Poland acquire membership of the European Union. Speaking in those early years (when the Soviet bloc was still just about intact but its fate increasingly evident), in May 1987 at Spire in France, John Paul II referred to the continent of Europe, geographically, as reaching ‘from the Atlantic to the Urals’.¹ But he had already made it known earlier, when addressing members of the European parliament in 1979, just a few months after becoming pope – and he reiterated the point in 1988, when addressing them again – that he did not equate Europe with *Western* Europe, and certainly not just with the nations represented in the European Parliament on those occasions, but considered Europe to include also the states of the East and saw those states as legitimate and worthy aspirants to membership of the European Economic Community (as it was still called at that time). If the members of the European parliament who were listening to John Paul II were inclined to think of Europe in political and economic terms – more or less as a legal entity constituted essentially by the member-states that composed it – the pope made it clear that he was thinking of Europe not only in broader geographical terms, but also in much wider historical and cultural dimensions.

In his speech, in 1988, to the European Parliament, John Paul II referred to the Slav peoples as “that other ‘lung’ of our common European motherland”, expressing the hope that Europe “might one day extend to the dimensions it has been given by geography and still more by history”.² From these words it is clear that to speak of Europe was, for him, to go behind, or to go deeper than, the European Union (as a relatively recent creation) to a more fundamental reality: to what Europe is as a continent, to what makes it distinctively itself – historically, culturally and religiously. In other words, it was the overall identity of Europe, the entire historical and cultural heritage of Europe, that was the pope’s main concern.

This was already evident from remarks addressed by him to the Polish bishops in his home country at the very start of his pontificate. He said that Europe still needed to seek its fundamental unity and had to turn to Christianity in order to do so. Included in his words were these: “Christianity must commit itself anew to the formation of the spiritual unity of Europe. Economic and political reasons alone are not enough. We must go deeper to the ethical reasons”.³ These words form an easy bridge to the thought of the present pope, Benedict XVI, on the subject of Europe, since he too focuses on European identity – on the cultural and spiritual foundations on which it rests – and seeks to articulate what Europe is in order to tease out the contribution it can be expected to make to the future of its peoples.

*Europe As Conceived by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI*⁴

Europe, Joseph Ratzinger has written, “is not a continent that can be comprehended neatly in geographical terms; rather it is a cultural and historical concept”.⁵ To think of it simply as an economic, political or legal community is mistaken. “It constitutes, for its citizens, an entire living space, a way of being together by different peoples that is founded on a mutual ordering of faith and reason”.⁶ What exactly is that? Well, Europe arose, in Ratzinger’s view, through the encounter of Christian faith with the heritage of reason coming from Greek (also Roman) thought. This encounter, through which faith became oriented to philosophical reason and reason found its moorings in faith in God (and in Christian moral values), provided a basis for living, a

cultural-spiritual foundation, that served – and must still serve – as the criterion for judging whether something may be deemed authentically European or not.⁷ This mutual ordering of faith and reason expresses the distinctive feature of European identity and is identified by Ratzinger through his consideration of four heritages that are each said to embody it in their own way: the Greek heritage; the heritage of the Christian East; that of the Latin West; and the heritage of the modern period.

These cannot be explored in detail here – in any case this has already been done elsewhere⁸ – but Ratzinger’s illustration of how the second, the heritage of the Christian East (that is, the early Christian heritage) arose and flourished is given expression, beautifully, in what he says about the New Testament text from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 16:9), in which the Macedonian says to Paul: ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’. The Macedonian embodies the Greek spirit of rationality and Paul incarnates early Christian faith; and here the two are drawn into fruitful relationship. Reflecting on this, Ratzinger points out: “Christianity is the synthesis mediated in Jesus Christ between the faith of Israel and the Greek spirit”.⁹ And he sees Europe as being inextricably bound up with (and unthinkable apart from) this same synthesis:

Europe became Europe through the Christian faith, which carries the heritage of Israel in itself, but at the same time has absorbed the best of the Greek and Roman spirit into itself.¹⁰

Joseph Ratzinger knows that Christianity’s immediate origins do not lie in the west but in the east. Nonetheless he is convinced that what occurred when the faith of the Christian East encountered the rationality of the Greek (and Roman) West was what might be called ‘culturally providential’ and enabled Christianity to acquire a distinctive expression and Europe to acquire a distinctive identity that it is incumbent upon it to cherish. Here the thought of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI and John Paul II come so close as to suggest that what the latter wrote in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* owes something, surely, to the influence of his (then) Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger. John Paul II said:

... in engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history.¹¹

Ratzinger is distressed about Europe today because he considers that it *has* rejected its authentic heritage. Like John Paul II in his words (quoted earlier) to the bishops of his own country in 1979, Ratzinger looks also to Christianity to provide Europe with the spiritual unity that it needs; and he sees it as failing in this task today by abandoning the heritage of the mutual ordering of faith and reason upon which it has been founded. Present-day Europe is a continent that is out of kilter with its true self.¹² It has abandoned its heritages that orientate reason to faith and has embraced a radicalized concept of reason that betrays even the Enlightenment, leaving reason (and human freedom) without compass or guide. In other words, as I shall now show, Europe has replaced a Christian culture that is characterised by a mutual ordering of faith and reason with an entirely secular culture that is marked by a radical separation of the two. This results in the destruction of Europe.

Europe Today: A Continent Out of Touch with its Roots

Joseph Ratzinger, in an evening forum on January 19, 2004, at the Catholic Academy of Bavaria with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, argued that there exist today “the two great cultures of the West, that is, the culture of the Christian faith and that of secular rationality.”¹³ While neither is universal, each contributes in its own way to various cultures throughout the world. Each is rooted in Christianity; the first is an authentic expression of Christian tradition, the second is a departure from it, even though its starting-point is Christian Europe. In the first, the mutual ordering of faith and reason, of religion and law, is maintained; in the second, there is a radical severing of reason from faith that claims total autonomy for reason and that relegates faith entirely to the margins of life. The former retains key elements of Europe’s heritages, its fourth – the modern, or Enlightenment, heritage – in particular, which Joseph Ratzinger enumerates as follows: “the relative separation of state and Church, freedom of conscience, human rights and the independent responsibility of reason”¹⁴ (‘independent’ does not mean ‘absolutely autonomous’). The

latter radicalizes Enlightenment principles in a manner antithetical to Europe’s Christian heritage, giving birth, basically, to a now post-Enlightenment – indeed, post-European – culture that is silent about God and that:

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.¹⁵

To exclude God and the voice of Christian faith from public life seems, at first glance, to express an openness to multi-culturalism and a great tolerance for the religious traditions of Europe’s many non-Christians. But Ratzinger thinks it shocks them, since no Muslim, for example, or no other believer has attempted to exclude God and the things of God from public life in the way that Europe has (recall the debate on mentioning God in the attempted draft European Constitution a few years ago).¹⁶ To totally separate reason from faith and the exercise of human freedom from responsibility towards Europe’s Christian moral traditions seems, at first glance, to constitute a major emancipation; but what kind of reason and freedom does it leave? If human reason and freedom become supreme values in themselves, with nothing to guide or orient them; if human beings become the sole measure of their own thoughts and arbiters of their own actions, with no greater truth or good to guide them; then what results from this is a narrowing of reason and freedom, the former to a purely scientific, positive, experimental reason and the latter to a freedom of pure form, empty of content, expressed solely in terms of *absences*: absence of constraint, relational ties, etc. This constricting of reason and freedom, carried out in the name of a radically desired emancipation, achieves the very opposite of what its architects apparently intended. Only when they are joined to the great religious traditions of humanity – Ratzinger often stretches the canvas broader than the Christian heritage – do they find space to put out into the deep, posing the questions and discerning the directions that correspond with the depths of our humanity.

The radical, post-Enlightenment, post-European culture that has developed in Europe in recent times does not accept any standard or measure beyond itself to which it is answerable in the making of its laws and

the fashioning of its freedoms. Yet it has long been clear that pluralist democracies cannot ever be entirely self-referential, indeed relativistic, in character but need, as a foundation for the values that they espouse – for example, freedom of worship for all their citizens – a non-relativistic standard or measure that has to be found beyond themselves. Ratzinger holds that Europe’s fourth, or Enlightenment, heritage not only sees, but espouses, this, thus making possible “a fruitful dualism of state and Church’ in tandem with fundamental Christian humane values supporting, indeed implying, inter alia, a pluralist democracy for Europe, built on its own non-relativistic kernel”.¹⁷

So Joseph Ratzinger calls – not for a return to something that is past – but rather for the building together, as Europeans, of a culture based on our authentic heritage(s) that refuses the total de-coupling of reason from faith that leaves us prey to the pathologies on the side of reason and of religion that arise from doing so. He makes a proposal instead. Recognising that the dominance of religion and religious authority prior to the Enlightenment led thinkers of the Enlightenment, understandably, to propose an exercise of reason that proceeded ‘as if God did not exist’ (*etsi Deus non daretur*), he proposes that, at a time when the dominance of the secular and the setting aside of Europe’s Christian roots reign so supreme that Europeans should live again ‘as if God exists’ (*etsi Deus daretur*). And they should attempt to have confidence in that essential core of Christian Europe’s heritage – the mutual ordering of faith and reason – to contribute towards constructing a humane future for this continent (and from which such a project is still expected and necessary).¹⁸ Here the relevance of these reflections for Ireland and its vote on the Lisbon treaty starts to emerge, since Ireland too, with its own rising, often strident, secularism, will need to recover in imaginative ways the spiritual foundations of Europe that can guide its choices and help its citizens to build a future for their country and for Europe that is really just and good – in accordance with non-relativistic standards that transcend its own mere interests and offer criteria for correct political action.

Conclusion: What about Ireland and Lisbon Round Two?

Thinking out “the criteria for correct political action against the background of the present European and

global situation” has been the main concern of Joseph Ratzinger’s later writings on Europe, according to himself.¹⁹ In his earlier essays, his focus was more on Europe’s identity. In fact, the two go together: the identity of Europe as a synthesis of faith and reason points its architects – and this includes those responsible for shaping the EU also – towards the importance of returning to public consciousness the moral heritage of Christianity and the voice of Christian faith in God.

The issues that research has shown to have been important in the NO vote to Lisbon recently were: military neutrality and defence responsibilities; the family, education, and-right-to life issues; taxation; and social policy and the rights of workers. All of these have ethical dimensions and need to have moral criteria brought to bear upon them. Persons of all religious traditions, and sometimes even of none, recognise the importance of bringing criteria and perspectives from the great ethical and religious traditions of humanity to bear upon such questions; it is only contemporary, post-Enlightenment, post-European, radical secularists who deny this. No pope could be expected to support their views; and indeed Benedict XVI and John Paul II vigorously oppose them. Instead Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI proposes that we dare to wager again upon the possibility that God is there and that the Christian vision of humanity as loved beyond all telling by a God who self-empties on its behalf should act as a guide and orientation for the decisions that we make about our lives together.

Pope Benedict does not tell people *what* to decide about the Lisbon Treaty (even though it is clear enough that he supports, in an overall sense, European integration); but he does point to what he considers should be included in, should inform, the making of our decisions. In other places, such as in his new encyclical about integral human development (*Caritas In Veritate*), he provides principles from the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching that offer guidance on economic and social matters.

Whatever is decided about Lisbon, he is saying to the citizens (and to the government!) of Ireland and all of Europe, let it be informed by Europe’s Christian roots – and thus by Christianity’s vision of the dignity of the human person and the responsibilities that arise

when caring for this dignity in communities with limited resources and with a special duty towards those who are most vulnerable. Europe has little to contribute to the future of humanity, and to rest of the world that sees it as being, historically, the Christian continent, if it rejects the very thing that, despite all its own shortcomings, still has the power to ennoble it.

James Corkery SJ is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Milltown Institute.

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¹ See Michael Walsh, "From Karol Wojtyla to John Paul II: Life and Times", in Gerard Mannion (ed.), *The Vision of John Paul II: Assessing His Thought and Influence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 10-28, at 21.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20. Walsh is quoting the speech published in the collection, John Paul II, *Return to Poland* (London: Collins, 1979).

⁴ Since almost all of Benedict XVI's writings on Europe date from before his election as pope on April 19, 2005 (even if many were re-published after that date), I shall refer to him in these pages mostly as Joseph Ratzinger.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow*, English Translation, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007, p. 11.

⁶ James Corkery, S.J. *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas: Wise Cautions and Legitimate Hopes* (Dublin: Dominican Publications and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), p. 117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, see pp. 117-118.

⁸ See James Corkery, S.J., "The Idea of Europe according to Joseph Ratzinger" in: *Milltown Studies 31* (Spring 1993): 91-111, at pp. 93-97; also J. Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, pp. 110-113.

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, English Translation, New York: Crossroad, 1988, p. 230. See also J. Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, p. 111.

¹⁰ Homily of Ratzinger (13 September 1980), "Wahrer Friede und wahre Kultur: Christlicher Glaube und Europa" in *Christlicher Glaube und Europa. 12 Predigten* (Munich: Pressereferat der Erzdiözese München und Freising), pp. 7-18, at pp. 8-9.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter, para. 72, accessed at www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/_PE.HTM on 29 July 2009. See also Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 111.

¹² Corkery, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-116.

¹³ Ratzinger's talk at the forum was entitled "That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State" and is available in the collection *Europe Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 67-81 (here see p. 79, also p. 81); see also Ratzinger's essay "Europe in the Crisis of Cultures," section 1 ("Reflections on today's contrasting cultures"), pp. 345-350, especially pp. 348f., in: *Communio 32* (Summer 2005): 345-356.

¹⁴ "Europe: A Heritage with Obligations for Christians", p. 232.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, "Europe in the Crisis of Cultures", p. 347.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, see pp. 348-349; also J. Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, p. 114.

¹⁷ See Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, p. 113, and J. Ratzinger's essay, "What is Truth? The Significance of Religious and Ethical Values in a Pluralistic Society" in: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Crossroad and San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 53-72, at p. 55J.

¹⁸ See "Europe in the Crisis of Cultures", pp. 354-355; also p. 348.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 7.