The "Christian Roots of Europe":
The Role of Christianity in the History of Europe
according to Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)

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In an earlier article on the notion of the Christian heritage of European culture as a common theme found in the public speeches of Pope Benedict XVI, I examined the major speeches and addresses which he has given in various academic, ecclesiastical, and public settings throughout his pontificate. Both as leader of the Catholic Church and as the head of state of Vatican City, Benedict has addressed the importance of Christianity in European history within the context of the ongoing movement of European integration. That article showed how Benedict understands Europe’s "Christian roots" as providing the fundamental human values underlying modern society: the equal dignity of human beings, freedom, peace, active development of society as a God-given vocation, and a sense of history. It is precisely these "Christian roots" that allow Christianity to remain a source of identity and inspiration for the ongoing project of European cultural unity and integration. These same "Christian roots" of Europe justify the active role of the Catholic Church in the movement for European unity and integration through active engagement with those institutions seeking to advance cooperation and realize unity among the European nations and among the nations of the world. In essence, for Benedict, the Christian roots of Europe provide it with its "identity," which it is in danger of losing by forgetting those roots.¹

Apart from his speeches and addresses, Benedict’s engagement with this theme of the Christian heritage of Europe and his concern for the future of Europe is evident from the very name he chose for himself upon his election as pope. In an address given on April 27, 2005 at the first general audience after his election, he gave two reasons for choosing the name Benedict.

First, he wished to identify himself with Benedict XV, who reigned as pope
from 1914 to 1922, and is known for his sincere yet failed attempts to mediate peace during World War I and his efforts to alleviate the suffering it caused. "He was a courageous and authentic prophet of peace and strove with brave courage first of all to avert the tragedy of the war and then to limit its harmful consequences. Treading in his footsteps, I would like to place my ministry at the service of reconciliation and harmony between persons and peoples." 2

The second reason for choosing the name was to honor and gain inspiration from St. Benedict of Nursia 480-547, known and revered as the founder of western monasticism, which contributed greatly to the spread of Christianity and its culture throughout European history: "The gradual expansion of the Benedictine Order that he founded had an enormous influence on the spread of Christianity across the Continent.... He is a fundamental reference point for European unity and a powerful reminder of the indispensable Christian roots of his culture and civilization." 3

Thus, by calling himself "Benedict," the new pope was able to indicate simultaneously two major goals to which he wished to dedicate his papal ministry. In the spirit of Benedict XVI, he declared his intention to work for the promotion of peace and reconciliation among peoples, while at the same time by drawing on inspiration from St. Benedict of Nursia, he stated his wish to promote European unity by recalling and reaffirming the basis of its Christian cultural heritage, that is, its "Christian roots."

However, even before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, there is a special concern for Europe in his writings and public addresses. Ratzinger was professor of theology at the Universities of Bonn (1959-1963), Münster (1963-66), Tübingen (1966-69), and Regensburg (1969-1977), and served as Archbishop of Munich and Freising (1977-1982), until he was appointed Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, serving from 1981 until his election as pope in 2005. In this latter capacity he was one of the John Paul II's closest and most influential advisors. It thus came as no surprise when he was elected pope upon the death of John Paul II in 2005.

This present article aims to shed light on how Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI understands the role of Christianity in present day European society by examining his understanding of the concept of "Europe" and his understanding of the historical role of Christianity in the development of Europe.
Ratzinger’s Understanding of "Europe"

As I pointed out in my previous article, as Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger has referred time and again in his speeches and addresses to the theme of the "Christian roots" of Europe. However, even before he became Pope, he has referred to the same theme in his various writings. As a theologian and pastor, he has a basic understanding of history which underlies his analysis of the present situation of the Church and the world as well as his interpretation of how the present event will shape the future. His understanding of history can be seen especially in three lectures that were later published in two books. The contents will be summarized here in order to give an orientation to his basic thought.

The first is a lecture that dates from 1979 that has been reprinted several times in German, as well as in French and English translation. Here, Ratzinger gives a succinct outline of his view of the span of European history, and offers several theses for Christian engagement with the modern European society.

Ratzinger begins with the observation that many scholars, such as Heinz Gollwitzer, have pointed out, namely, that Europeans best come to know their identity when they are confronted with some danger from outside, and that the term Europe passed from scholarly into popular use in the modern period, not only due to the influence of humanistic thought, but also due to the danger represented by the Turks. As Franco Cardini observes: "If we delve beyond the descriptions given by the ancient geographers, however, and ask ourselves how and when the modern notion of Europe and the European identity was born, we realize the extent to which Islam was a factor (albeit a negative one) in its creation." Although some would even go so far as to claim that the contribution of Islam to the creation of European identity was as significant as that of Christianity, and while it is true that Islamic culture has influenced the development of European science and philosophy, it is also true that it is Christian values, and not Islamic ones, that form the basis of European legal and social institutions.

Ratzinger, for his part, sees European identity as an urgent issue in view of the destruction caused by the two World Wars of the twentieth century and the movement for a restoration of European unity, but finds discussion on European identity difficult because is not always clear what one means by "Europe." Ratzinger’s own understanding of Europe proceeds first from a description of what Europe is not, by outlining three trends that he calls "counter-images"
representing "an historical departure from the historical dynamic of the European thing," and second from a description of positive components of European identity.  

The first of these counter-images is the trend to return to a pre-Christian world. Here he cites two examples, the first being the present resurgence of Islam and confrontation with Europe, which he sees as a continuation in modified form of the ancient contrast between "Erebos" (evening) and "Oriens" (morning). For Ratzinger, "Islam is a return to a monotheism that does not accept the Christian turn to God who has become man, and it likewise shuts itself off from Greek rationality and the resulting culture, which by way of the idea of God’s incarnation had become a component of Christian monotheism." Furthermore, Ratzinger notes, Islam is defined not by nationality but by a legal system that "fixes its ethnic and cultural features and sets limits to its rationality, where the Christian synthesis sees that reason has its place."  

However, as Ratzinger points out later, the modern European legal system has departed from this Christian synthesis and has presented itself as purely rational, which from the viewpoint of Islam can only be perceived as godless: "Considering the unity of religion and ethnicity, they appear to be an attack that is both ethnic and religious, to be an alienation not only from what is one’s own but from what is real. The combination of these two affronts causes the vehemence of the reaction we can observe today." Actually, others have also pointed out that the present tensions caused by the presence of large Muslim populations in Europe have much to do with the Islam rejection of secularism. The so-called "Islamic threat" is perceived as such because Europeans are "shocked by a political participation that takes place along religious lines," and because the claim to a place for religion in the public sphere "seem to shake the very foundations of the secularized, though diverse, Western context."  

Another example of the attempt to return to a pre-Christian world is found in the ideology of Nazism. "For in keeping with its basic tendency, National Socialism was a renunciation of Christianity as alienation from the 'beautiful' Germanic 'savagery' and the desire to go back to a time before the Judeo-Christian 'alienation,' when such savagery was celebrated as the true culture."  

The second counter-image is what Ratzinger terms an "escape into the future" and is represented by a separation of faith and reason and the autonomy of reason that has now become the predominant political thought in contemporary Western
society. According to Ratzinger, in European society there has been a separation of faith and law in which the rationality of law and its relative autonomy with respect to religion has been recognized. However, in the modern era, reason has become totally emancipated and has an unlimited autonomy, taking the form of positive reason in the sense of Comte, whereby reason takes as its standard what can be experimentally verified. The result of this independence of reason has serious ramifications for Ratzinger: "The radical consequence of this, however, is that the entire realm of values, the entire realm of what 'is above us' drops out of the sphere of reason, that the sole binding standard of reason, and thus for man, politically as well as individually, becomes what 'is under him', namely the mechanical forces of nature that can be manipulated experimentally. Granted, God is not rejected absolutely, but he belongs to the realm of what is purely and private and subjective."13

In keeping with his designation of the second counter-image of Europe as an escape to the future, Ratzinger terms present day society as "post-European."

A society in which the movement we have just described has taken over completely, I would call "post-European." In such a society, the things that constituted Europe as a spiritual reality have been abandoned....The plurality of values that is legitimate and European is noticeably exaggerated into a pluralism that increasingly excludes every moral mainstay of law and every public embodiment of the sacred, of reverence for God and as a value that is communal, too. Even to question this is considered, in most circles, an offense against tolerance and against the society founded on reason alone. But a society in which this is radically the case cannot, I am convinced, remain a society of law for long. It will open the door to tyranny when it is sufficiently weary of anarchy.14

As we shall see, this point is central to Ratzinger's understanding of the Christian roots of Europe and the continued relevance and importance of Christianity today. Ratzinger maintains that there is a harmony between faith and reason, both of which are necessary for a rational morality. It is also the central element is his understanding of the "dictatorship of relativism," a phrase he used in his homily given at the Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice" on 18 April 2005 before the conclave in which he was elected Pope and a theme that he has also addressed as Pope.

Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as
fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine”, seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.\textsuperscript{15}

The third counter-image of Europe that Ratzinger describes is Marxism, “the most impressive form of turning away from the historical sphere of Europe,” which he sees as a reaching back to the pre-Christian messianic hope of Israel but without the religious heritage. Instead, Marxism links this hope with the totally emancipated reason of the modern world, freed from any metaphysical connection whatever, and with revolution as an absolute value. World revolution has become the \textit{summum bonum}, the rejection of the world as it has been until now and the overcoming of the past in a progressive action will lead history towards its goal. "Accordingly, Marxism is the product of Europe but at the same time the most decisive rejection of Europe, in the sense that of inner identity which it has developed over the course of its history."\textsuperscript{16}

After describing what Europe is not, Ratzinger then proceeds to consider four positive components of the concept of Europe – the Greek, Christian, Latin, and modern heritage.

First, after Ratzinger points out that the word “Europe” itself as well as the geographical and cultural concept goes back to the Greeks, he describes its discovery of democracy as something valid for all ages, although it has various connotations. However, he also points out that democracy, “as Plato explained, is essentially connected with \textit{eunomia}, with the validity of good law, and which can remain democracy only in that connection. Thus democracy is never majority rule, and the mechanism by which majorities are established must be subject to the common rule of the \textit{nomos}, of what is intrinsically right, that is, to the recognition of values that are an obligatory prerequisite for the majority also.”

The second positive component for Ratzinger is the Christian heritage. As the origins of the Christian faith are to be found in the religion of Israel, the preaching of the Gospel towards the West has resulted in a synthesis of the Orient with Western, that is Greek, thought: “Christianity, accordingly, is the synthesis brought about in Jesus Christ between Israel’s faith and the Greek mind…. In my opinion, Europe in the narrower sense originates in this synthesis and is founded upon it.”\textsuperscript{17}
The Latin heritage is the third positive component of the concept of Europe. Ratzinger, again citing Gollwitzer, points out that while in the sixth century "Europe" was considered to be Gaul and later the Carolingian Empire, in the medieval era the notion of Europe as a geographical area was always wider than the largest political structure could encompass, and included the sphere of Latin culture and the Church, the Romance peoples, the Germans, Anglo-Saxons and some of the Slavic peoples. The peoples of the Christian West considered themselves to be the *res publica christiana*, which was not a political structure, but rather a cultural unity, based on a system of laws that transcended tribal and national differences, and reflected in its religious councils, universities, and religious orders, and the intellectual and ecclesial life centered on Rome as its heart.\(^8\)

While one would expect that Ratzinger, as a theologian and Vatican official well-known for his conservative viewpoint, would obviously emphasize the cultural heritage of Europe inspired by Christianity and the Church, he nevertheless sees its contribution as one among others, and specifically recognizes that the modern world, too, has made a positive contribution to Europe. "The medieval *res publica christiana* cannot be restored, and to restore it as such is not a responsible goal, either. History cannot be turned back. A future Europe must carry within itself the fourth dimension also, that of the modern era, and above all must surpass the all-too-narrow-framework of the West, of the Latin world, so as to include the Greek world, and the Eastern Christian World, or at least it will have to be open to them."\(^9\)

The fourth component of Europe that Ratzinger describes is "the indispensable contribution made by spirit of the modern era." This spirit is the separation of faith and law, which was present in medieval times but in a rather hidden way that has been carried out more consistently in the modern era. "As a consequence, freedom of religion gradually and clearly takes shape in a variety of bourgeois legal systems, and thus the interior claims of the faith are distinguished from the fundamental claims of the ethos upon which the law is based." As Ratzinger sees it, it is the values embodied in the Christian world view that have produced a duality of church and state and have provided the basis of a legal system that ensures the protection of the basic human rights of all, while respecting the individual conscience. It is a central set of standard values supplied by Christianity that secures freedom. On the other hand, however, as previously mentioned, the idea of a completely autonomous reason which no longer recognizes anything
but itself, has destroyed its own foundations. "This sort of autonomous reason is, granted, a product of the European mind, but at the same time, it should be regarded as essentially post-European, indeed anti-European, as the inner destruction of what is not only constitutive for Europe, but is the prerequisite for humane society in general." Once again we see Ratzinger's concern for the harmony of faith and reason.

It is perhaps surprising that Ratzinger, who criticizes the absolutizing of freedom and the autonomy of reason, would include this modern spirit of the separation of faith and reason as a positive component that has helped shaped Europe. Actually, Ratzinger recognizes this modern spirit of the Enlightenment, or secular rationality along with Christianity as one of two "cultures" of the West. According to Ratzinger, Christianity does not reject the rationality of the Enlightenment and modernity outright. Rather, Christianity has always had a rational element, by considering itself to be the "religion of the Logos, to be a religion in keeping with reason." However over the ages, this rational aspect of Christian had weakened: Philosophy, as the investigation of the rational element (which includes the rational element in our faith), had always been a positive element in Christianity, but the voice of reason had become excessively tame.

Essentially, Ratzinger sees the Enlightenment as a reaction to a Christianity whose rational element had weakened and actually helped to restore reason to its proper relationship with faith. "In this sense, the Enlightenment has a Christian origin, and it is not by chance that it was born specifically and exclusively within the sphere of the Christian faith, in places where Christianity contrary to its own nature, had unfortunately become mere tradition and the religion of the state.... It was and remains the merit of the Enlightenment to have drawn attention afresh to these original Christian values and to have given reason back its own voice." He also sees the Second Vatican Council recognizing this as well: "In its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Second Vatican Council restated this profound harmony between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking to achieve a genuine reconciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great patrimony of which both parties must take care."

It is important to note that when speaking of this harmony between Enlightenment thought and Christian faith, Ratzinger does not mean a tolerant coexistence, but a more positive, almost symbiotic relationship in which both can and must learn from each other. He describes the inherent dangers in rationality
as "pathologies of reason," which faith can help correct. At the same time, he also refers to "pathologies of religion," which reason can help correct. Ratzinger addresses this issue in his famous dialogue concerning the foundations of modern secular society with Jürgen Habermas held at the invitation of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria in Munich on 19 January 2004. In that dialogue, Habermas suggests that "we should understand cultural and societal secularization as a double learning process that compels both the traditions of the Enlightenment and the religious doctrines to reflect on their own respective limits."35 For his part, Ratzinger states that he is in broad agreement with Habermas and suggests that faith and reason can learn from each other. For example, there are "pathologies of religion," such as religious fanaticism that produces false universalisms leading to intolerance and even terrorism, while the "pathologies of reason" in the form of technological progress that allows man to make human beings in test-tubes turns man into a product that alienates him from his very nature as a creation of God, or that allows man to create an atomic bomb that can destroy himself.37

For Ratzinger, faith is not only compatible with reason, but needs it as a corrective. "God or the Divinity can become a way of making absolute claims for one's own authority and interests. Such a partisan image of God, which identifies God's absolute character with a particular community or its areas of interests and thereby raises things that are empirical and relative to the status of absolutes, dissolves law and morality. Good is then whatever serves my own power." On the other hand, reason also needs the corrective of a rational faith. Ratzinger believes that Christians can correct the pathologies of reason by refusing to "reduce it to the level of practical reason and to defend instead its ability to perceive good and the One who is Good, what is holy and the One who is Holy.... Only reason that is still open to God, only reason that does not banish morality to the subjective sphere and does not reduce it to a calculus can counter the manipulation of the idea of God and the pathologies of religion and offer remedies."38

Based upon his description of the meaning of Europe, Ratzinger proposes four theses for a future Europe. The first thesis is based on the constitutive element derived from the Greek heritage described above, namely, "the intrinsic correlation of democracy and eunomia, that is, laws that cannot be manipulated." Here Ratzinger maintains that transparency and limitations in the exercise of power are constitutive elements of European society. "As a prerequisite for these, the law must be immune to manipulation and must have its own inviolate sphere
of action. The prerequisite for this in turn, is what the Greeks called *eunomia*, which means that the law is based on moral standards.”

The second thesis follows from the first. "The fundamental prerequisite for *eunomia* is a common — and for public law, obligatory — reverence for moral values and for God." Here, while emphasizing the need for toleration of differing expressions of the Christian faith and for no faith at all, Ratzinger warns again of the dangers of the complete autonomy of law and the growing prevailing political thought that excludes faith from the public sphere, relegating it to the realm of private opinion, which, however, does not tolerate faith in its essence. As Ratzinger concludes, "I likewise venture to declare that democracy is capable of functioning only when conscience is functioning and that the latter has nothing to say if it is not oriented to the validity of the fundamental moral values of Christianity, which can be put into action even without a Christian profession of faith, indeed even in the context of a non-Christian religion.”

The third thesis, following from the second, calls for a rejection of both nationalism and Marxism: The rejection of the dogma of atheism as a pre-requisite for public law and the formation of a state along with a publicly recognized reverence for God as the basis for ethics and the law, means rejecting both the nation and also the world revolution as the *summum bonum*." Here Ratzinger defines the role of international political, economic and legal institutions for the future Europe, which should serve not to establish a "super-nation," but form the basis of an appropriate identity for Europe as a region in which regional, national, and supranational institutions can cooperate in a way that excludes both centralism and particularism. In the medieval era, such European-wide institutions as universities, religious orders, and Church councils, provided a concrete and non-government reality where scholars like Thomas Aquinas could teach as readily in Naples, as in Paris or Cologne.

Ratzinger's fourth thesis reads: "For Europe, the recognition and the preservation of freedom of conscience, human rights, academic freedom, and hence of a free human society must be constitutive." Yet again, Ratzinger points out that freedom is not unlimited, but must be grounded in a rationalism based upon transcendent values. "These achievements of the modern era should be safeguarded and developed without falling into the bottomless pit of a rationalism devoid of transcendence, which abolishes its own freedom from within. By these standards, the Christian will evaluate European policy and based on them he will fulfill his
political task."³²

Ratzinger's Understanding of European History

Having examined Ratzinger's understanding of the concept "Europe," let us now turn our attention to his understanding of European History. A good view into how Ratzinger understands the meaning of European history can be found in the text of a lecture first given at a conference in Berlin in 2000 and later reworked for a conference given at the invitation of the president of the Senate of the Italian Republic, Marcello Pera on May 13, 2004 and later published in a collection of Ratzinger's essays as well as in a book featuring a lecture by Pera as well as Ratzinger's address.³¹ In this text Ratzinger gives a sweeping outline of the entire course of European history, focusing on its spiritual foundations and proposing some elements of European identity that can and should provide the moral foundations for a Europe of the future.

Here, Ratzinger proceeds from the premise that Europe is a cultural and historical concept and cannot be comprehended only in geographical terms. Giving a brief overview of how the geographical concept has changed over the centuries, Ratzinger points out how Herodotus distinguished between an Asia that belonged to the Persians and was separate from Europe and the Greeks. Later Europe was considered to be the Mediterranean shores bound together by trade, commerce, cultural ties and political system. With the advance of Islam in the seventh and eight centuries, the Mediterranean world was divided into the separate areas of Asia, Africa, and Europe. In the West, with the transformation of the Roman Empire by Christianity to form a *Sacrum Imperium Romanum*, or Holy Roman Empire, Europe referred to the Carolingian Empire, whose continuity with the past was considered to constitute a mission to care for the future. After the end of Carolingian rule, the concept passed into disuse except as a scholarly term until, in modern times, it became part of the popular language with the rise of the Turks, as a means of self-identification.³⁴

According to Ratzinger, there is a second, Eastern, root of Europe—Byzantium. After the transfer of the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople, the East considered itself the true Rome, continuing to assert its position over against the West, while resisting the onslaught of migrant peoples and the Islamic world, and extending its influence northward to the Slavic peoples. Thus, a
Greco-Roman world flourished in the East, but which differed from the West in liturgy, alphabet, and ecclesiastical constitution. One important difference was the identification of Empire and Church in the East, with the Emperor serving as its head. In the West, the departure of the Emperor gave the Bishop of Rome, as successor to Saint Peter, an opportunity to develop an autonomous position. A doctrine of the duality of powers of the emperor and pope was eventually formulated by Pope Gelasius I, whereby it came to be understood that the temporal powers and offices were to be exercised by the emperor and his officials, while spiritual matters were to be entrusted to the priests. According to Ratzinger, this separation and distinction of political and religious powers became important for the subsequent history of Europe and laid the foundations for that which is typical of the West. Unfortunately, as Ratzinger also points out, the desire to assert oneself and one’s power over the other remained in both temporal and spiritual rulers, so that this separation also because the source of much trouble.  

Moving on to the modern period, Ratzinger points to several events that proved to be important turning points in European history. In the East, it was the displacement of the Byzantine European culture towards the North and towards Moscow after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which resulted in further distancing from the West. In the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, the West was separated into a mostly Protestant north and a predominantly Catholic south. A second important event was the discovery of the American continent. Just as the expansion of Byzantine culture to the Slavic lands and Russia had extended the borders of Europe Eastward, so the colonization of the New World led to an extension of the new “enlightened” Protestant and traditional Latin European world towards the West. The Americas, originally extensions of the European world, eventually established themselves as independent countries and developed their own character.  

According to Ratzinger, a third turning point in modern European history is the French Revolution, which for him represents the formal disintegration of the spiritual framework of the Holy Roman Empire that had already begun to fall apart in the late medieval period. Specifically, the French Revolution was a rejection of the sacred foundations of history and the existence of a state based on the idea of a pre-existent God. The state was now considered to be a purely secular thing, founded on reason and the will of the people, no longer founded on a divine guarantee or divinely instituted order. Religion and faith were relegated to the
realm of feelings, not reason; God and religion were no longer considered to be a relevant part of the public life. As a result, a new schism arose in Europe. Not a schism between religious bodies, but rather a schism between Christians and secular persons. The issue of secularization and the role of religion in society is related to the problem of the autonomy of reason, as we have seen in our discussion of Ratzinger’s understanding of the meaning of the Enlightenment.

The last stage of modern history is European colonial expansion and domination of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the effects of which have lasted until the present age with the result that many parts of the world have readily adopted a modern life style based on European science and technology. This has produced a certain universalization of European culture which has also brought a crisis in its wake. For example, Ratzinger sees the rebirth of Islam and Eastern religions as a reaction to the lack of spiritual values in modern secularized society. European culture that spread throughout the world, the civilization of technology and commerce, has lost its spiritual foundations, and now other spiritual value systems are being sought. "I see here a paradoxical coincidence: with the triumph of the post-European technological-secular world, with the globalization of its way of life and its manner of thinking, one gets the impression everywhere in the world, but especially in the strictly non-European worlds of Asia and Africa, that the very world of European values—the things upon which Europe bases its identity, its culture, its faith—has arrived at its end and has actually already left the scene; that now the hour has come for the value systems of other worlds, of pre-Columbian America, of Islam, of Asian mysticism." For Ratzinger, with its culture hollowed out and emptied of spiritual values, Europe seems to have reached "a crisis of its circulatory system" that has undermined its sense of identity, its will and hope for the future, as evidenced by the attitude toward children, who are seen as a threat, a limitation on the present and no longer a hope for the future. In this sense, modern Europe can be compared to the Roman Empire in decline: it had to depend on other peoples who would eventually destroy it, because it no longer had any vital energy of its own.

After this description of the course of European history, Ratzinger next turns his attention to the present situation of Europe and makes some observations on how he sees its future development. He outlines two possible scenarios for the future of Europe. The first is the "biologist" thesis of Oswald Spengler, which holds that all civilizations follow a natural law of birth, growth, flowering,
decline, aging and death. Accordingly, Europe is now at the end of its epoch.\textsuperscript{41} Spengler’s negative diagnosis is countered by the interpretation of history of Arnold Toynbee\textsuperscript{42} that highlights the difference between material and real progress, which he defines as spiritualization. According to Toynbee, the crisis of Europe’s crisis is caused by a fall from religion to a worship of technology, nation and militarism, or as Ratzinger calls it, it is a crisis of secularization. In opposition to Spengler’s thesis of decline, Toynbee maintains that the crisis can be met by a reintroduction of the religious element. This is the “voluntaristic” thesis, which emphasizes the power of creative minorities and exceptional individuals to shape society and sees the breakdown of civilizations as a result of the deterioration of the creative minority.\textsuperscript{43}

While Ratzinger reserves judgment on the question of whether Spengler or Toynbee was right, since it is impossible to foretell the future, at the end of his address he does say that Toynbee was right in a least one regard, namely “that the destiny of a society always depends on creative minorities. Believing Christians should think of themselves as one such creative minority and contribute to Europe’s recovery of the best of its heritage and thus to the service of all mankind.”\textsuperscript{44}

It is also clear from Ratzinger’s various writings and speeches that he shares Toynbee’s interpretation of the present crisis in European civilization as one of forgetting its religious roots and spiritual foundations. In fact, Ratzinger sees the efforts of such creative minorities as an essential element in meeting this crisis. In a letter Ratzinger wrote to Marcello Pera after his lecture on relativism in 2004 at the Pontifical Lateran University, given the day before Ratzinger’s own address to the Italian Senate, he responds to Pera’s idea of civil religion and addresses the question of how Europe can attain a Christian civil religion that overcomes denominational boundaries. For Ratzinger, it can only come from a small, committed core of believers, who “in their encounters with Christ have discovered the precious pearl that gives value to all life (Matthew 13: 45ff),…”Therefore my first thesis is that a civil religion that truly has the moral force to sustain all people presupposes the existence of convinced minorities that have ‘discovered’ the pearl and live it in a manner that is also convincing to others.”\textsuperscript{45}

To return to Ratzinger’s address to the Italian Senate, he maintains that when confronting the future, the task is to define what it is that can help Europe preserve its identity. “But independently of that debate, we are obliged to ask
ourselves what can guarantee the future and what is capable of keeping alive the intrinsic identity of Europe through all the historical metamorphoses. Or to put it even more simply: What is there, today and tomorrow, that promises human dignity and a life in conformity with it?  

At this point, Ratzinger returns to his description of the course of European history, which he had left off at the French Revolution. He describes three modern models that developed to deal with the new understanding of the state based not on religious principles but on the basis of reason and the will of the people. First, there is the laicist model found in the Latin countries, or countries where Romance languages are spoken. Here the state renounced all connections with religion, which became a private matter, and claimed reason as its basis. Due to the frailty of reason, however, they have sometimes succumbed to dictatorship, surviving only because enough of the old moral consciousness has remained to form a basic consensus. The second model is that of the Germanic, or Anglo-Saxon lands, where an "enlightened" Protestant Christianity with a clear moral consciousness and guaranteed by the state, formed a broad moral consensus in society. A third model is that of the United States, which is somewhere between the first two, a system where free churches exist in a society which was founded on the premise of a strict separation of Church and State. While the United States is a nation of free churches, it has a predominantly Protestant Christian consensus which has given it a sense of mission in its dealings with other countries and has made it possible for religion to have a strong religious influence on political and social life. The Catholic Church, the largest religious denomination, has accepted this tradition of the free churches, since it recognizes that a Church unaffiliated with the state is better able to serve as a moral foundation of society, and Catholics consider the support of democracy as a moral duty that is compatible with the faith. Ratzinger also sees this American model as a continuation of the model of the doctrine of separation of temporal and spiritual powers of Pope Gelasius I.  

Ratzinger also refers to this American model in the above mentioned letter to Marcello Pera. Here, Ratzinger responds to Pera’s idea of a non-denominational Christian religion by describing his own understanding of the relationship between civil religion, "which subsumes differences between the single denominations," and faith in the Catholic Church. While recognizing that the phenomenon of secularization is also present in the United States, Ratzinger maintains that "there is a much clearer and more implicit sense in America than Europe that the
religious and moral foundation bequeathed by Christianity is greater than that of any single denomination." Furthermore, unlike in Europe, the separation of church and state is a positive one, "since it is meant to allow religion to be itself, a religion that respects and protects its own living space distinctly from the state and its ordinances." Thus unlike Europe, religion has a place in the public sphere in America.\(^8\)

However, it is clear that Ratzinger also finds problems with the American model in view of recent developments in the United States, where the government has mandated that every private institution, including religious ones, must provide its employees with insurance coverage that includes contraceptive services. In a recent address to bishops of the United States on their "ad limina" visit in 2012 to the Vatican, Pope Benedict, while recalling his visit to the country and his esteem for America’s historical religious freedom and society based on a consensus concerning ethical principles derived from nature and nature’s God, he goes on to criticize "grave threats to the Church’s public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres .... Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. Many of you have pointed out that concerted efforts have been made to deny the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices. Others have spoken to me of a worrying tendency to reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience."\(^9\)

There is another post-French Revolution model, added in the nineteenth century, namely, socialism, which, in its totalitarian form became associated with a materialist and atheistic understanding of history, in which history progressed deterministically through a religious and liberal phase to arrive at a final stage where religion would become superfluous and material production would guarantee happiness for all. "Here the values that had built Europe were completely overturned. Even worse, there is a rupture here with the complex moral tradition of mankind: there are no longer any values apart from the goals of progress."\(^10\)

Furthermore, as Ratzinger points out, in the public discussion of the recent collapse of the communist systems in Russia and Europe, attention has been given only to the false economic dogmatism that led to the failure of the economic system, while mostly ignoring other factors such as "their contempt for human
rights, their subjection of morality to the demands of the system and to their promises for the future." While acknowledging the economic weaknesses of communism, people dismiss the moral and religious problems, that is, the loss of intangible moral values. According to Ratzinger, this loss can lead to the self-destruction of the European consciousness.⁵¹

Ratzinger made the same point in early 1990, after the momentous collapse of the communist regimes in East Europe. In analyzing the crisis brought on by the collapse of Marxist political systems, he maintains that the collapse was more than the failure of economic theory and practice. At a deeper level, he claims, it was also the result of considering human beings merely in materialistic and economic terms, while excluding freedom. This is not an abuse of political power, but rather a logical outcome of materialistic and deterministic thought. According to Ratzinger, the recent events in Eastern Europe have challenged not only Marxist thought, but any way of thinking about human nature that bases itself on principles that exclude the element of human freedom. Similarly, these events are also a challenge to the idea of progress which takes as its highest value anything that furthers socialism, or technological advancement.⁵²

Furthermore, when enumerating the more proximate causes of the collapse of the socialist states, he lists the religious factor along with the failure of the economic system and the role of the media, whose reporting of events cast doubts on the credibility of the governments. For Ratzinger, the religious factor was also important, since it showed that people realized that materialism alone could not answer all the questions. Religious belief, as one example of freedom, was a source of strength outside of the government that relativized its power and in the long run proved to be stronger.⁵³

Having outlined the course of European history up to the modern day, Ratzinger then turns his attention to the question of the future identity of Europe and makes a few observations on what he thinks ought to be included in a European constitution. The first of these "foundational moral elements" is the unconditional character of human dignity and human rights, namely, that rights are not conferred by the state, but exist in their own right.

This validity of human dignity, prior to any political action or decision, is ultimately derived from the Creator: only God can establish values that are based on the nature of man and are inviolable. The fact that there are values that cannot be manipulated by anyone is the real guarantee of our liberty and of human greatness: Christian
faith sees in this the mystery of the Creator and of the status that he has conferred upon man as the image of God.\textsuperscript{54}

The second area of European identity that Ratzinger suggest is marriage and the family, specifically monogamous marriage based on biblical faith, which Ratzinger acknowledges is controversial but insists is essential: Europe would no longer be Europe if this fundamental cell of its social edifice were to disappear or if its nature were to be changed. Ratzinger criticizes the demand for legally recognized domestic partnerships of homosexuals, which he claims is a trend that "departs completely from the moral history of mankind." Ratzinger denies that the traditional definition of marriage is discriminatory; rather, it has to do "with the question of what the human person is, as man or as woman, and of how the common life of man and woman can acquire a legal form....\[If\] homosexual unions are seen more and more as having the same status as marriage, then we are confronted with a disintegration of the image of man, which can only have serious consequences."\textsuperscript{55}

As Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger has frequently defended the sanctity of marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman against claims to the right of homosexuals to marry, most recently in an address to members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Vatican held on 9 January 2012. The annual meeting with the diplomatic corps traditionally takes place at the end of the Christmas season and Benedict made use of the occasion to address the various crises—economic, political, and social—that have brought disquiet to the present day world. During the address he points out the importance of maintaining proper "settings" for the education of youth. "Among these, pride of place goes to the family, based on the marriage of a man and a woman. This is not a simple social convention, but rather the fundamental cell of every society. Consequently, policies which undermine the family threaten human dignity and the future of humanity itself."\textsuperscript{56}

A third element of European unity that Ratzinger describes is religion, which at the time was the subject of a heated debate over whether a reference to Christianity should be included in the preamble of the European Constitution. The debate eventually reached a conclusion when the wording finally agreed on recognized Europe’s "religious" heritage while avoiding specific mention of Christianity.\textsuperscript{57} This wording was retained in the official text of the subsequent Treaty
of Lisbon, initially known as the Reform Treaty, which was signed and ratified in 2007 and came into force in 2009.

In his 2004 address here, however, Ratzinger avoids the complex issues of the debate, and instead emphasizes the importance of religion for all societies and cultures in general: "respect for what is sacred to someone else and, in particular, respect for the sacred in a more exalted sense, for God, something we are allowed to expect even in a person who is not disposed to believe in God. Where this respect is violated, something essential in a society is lost." Ratzinger goes on to point out an anomaly where disrespect towards the beliefs of Judaism or Islam is publicly censured, but it is considered freedom of opinion to openly disparage Christianity. According to Ratzinger, this is due to "a self-hatred in the Western world that is strange and can be considered pathological; yes the West is making a praiseworthy attempt to be completely open to understanding foreign values, but it no longer loves itself; from now on it sees in its own history only what is blame-worthy and destructive, whereas it is no longer capable of perceiving what is great and pure…. Multiculturalism, which is continually and passionately encouraged and promoted, is sometimes little more than the abandonment and denial of what is one's own, flight from one's own heritage…. But multiculturalism cannot exist without shared constants, without points of reference based on one's own values."

Elsewhere, in a book that appeared shortly before he became pope, Ratzinger argues against the claim that the mention of Christian roots in the Constitution would be offensive to people of non-Christian religions. Ratzinger maintains that no offense can be taken, because the Christian roots of Europe are an indisputable historical fact with present day consequences, namely, the past roots provide the present day moral orientation of European identity. "It is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions; rather it is the attempt to construct the human community in a manner that absolutely excludes God." This is the reason why he sees the "clash of cultures" today not as a conflict between religions, which have actually learned to coexist with each other, but rather between a completely secularized culture and religious cultures: "the coming clash will be between the radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures."

Benedict's criticism of this self-hatred of Europe's religious roots and heritage is echoed by Joseph Weiler, professor of law at New York University and a Jew, who argues that European society cannot be understood apart from Christianity,
and to exclude the role of the Christian heritage in discussion of the European Constitution is a denial of its own identity. He argues that since one purpose of all constitutions is to provide a sense of identity, an inclusion of reference to Christianity and God in the preamble is necessary to show Europe in its unity and variety.  

For Ratzinger, Christianity has not only played an essential role in the past, but continues to make a contribution in the present. In a speech given in the German cemetery of La Cambre in Caen on June 5, 2004, one of four talks he gave on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Allied invasion of France, he emphasizes the essential role of Christianity in Europe: "It is to the great credit of Christianity that it gave birth to Europe after the decline of the Graeco-Roman Empire and after the barbarian invasions. Not only that, but the rebirth of Europe, after World War II was likewise rooted in Christianity, and therefore in man’s responsibility before God."  

Here Ratzinger is referring to the religious motivations of the statesmen directly involved in the early stages of European reconciliation and integration after World War II. He praises Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schumann Alcide de Gasperi and Charles De Gaulle, as "objective, intelligent men" with a healthy political realism that was "rooted in the firm ground of the Christian ethos, which they recognized as an ethos of reason, an ethos of enlightened, refined reason."  

In another address given on the same day at the Church of St. Etienne in Caen, he comes back to the same topic, mentioning again the examples of such men as Churchill, Adenauer, Schumann and de Gasperi as being motivated specifically by their Christian beliefs. "Let us state it plainly: These politicians drew the moral concept of the State, of peace, of responsibility from their Christian faith, a faith that had overcome the challenges of the Enlightenment land to a great extent had been purified in its confrontation with the distortion of the law of morality caused by the Party…. They developed a politics of reason—of moral reasoning, their Christianity had not distanced them from reason, but rather had illuminated their reason."  

Similarly, in a lecture given to economic experts and politicians at Cernobbio (Como) on September 8, 2001, he pointed out the Christian motivations of those men who were instrumental in beginning the postwar movement for reconciliation and unity. "There can be no doubt that the founding fathers of European unification regarded the Christian heritage as the core of this historical identity,
though naturally not in its confessional forms. That which is common to all Christians, transcending denominational borders seemed to them to supply a force strong enough to harmonize political conduct in the world. And this did not appear incompatible with the great moral impulses of the Enlightenment, which had displayed the rational side of Christianity so to speak and which seemed compatible with the essential impulses derived from the Christian history of Europe, despite all the antipathies of the past."

It is significant that Ratzinger refers to the Enlightenment when describing the Christian orientation of the pioneers of European integration. As we have seen, for Ratzinger, the harmony between faith and reason is the basis for his conviction that Christianity is not only relevant for modern society, but that it alone can provide the moral basis for a truly humane society that has a proper understanding of the nature of man. Essentially, for Ratzinger, only God can guarantee human dignity. "In reality, this means we have need of roots if we are to survive and that we must not lose sight of God if we do not want human dignity to disappear.""

But for Ratzinger, it is not just a question of the role of Christianity in the past, it has an essential role in the present and future as well. Only Christianity can provide the basis for a true European unity that goes beyond economic cooperation. "Even today, responsibility before God and being rooted in the great values and traditions of the Christian faith – values that transcend the individual Christian denominations because they are common to all – are indispensable forces in the constitution of a unified Europe that is much more than a single economic bloc; a community of law, a bastion of law, not only for itself, but for the world.""

Conclusion

Having examined Ratzinger’s understanding of the concept of Europe and his interpretation of the development of Europe in history, what can we conclude? In short, we can say that it is clear that Ratzinger sees the situation of Europe today as a crisis of identity, brought about by the rejection of what he considers to be its Christian roots, and the failure to realize that only a recognition of them can provide for a sense of identity for the present and future. As we have seen, for Ratzinger the Christian heritage is not the only constitutive element of European
culture. Together with the Greek and Latin heritage, there is also a modern element, the spirit of the Enlightenment that has produced a separation of faith and reason, and established the principle of the secular state independent of religion.

While Ratzinger gives a positive evaluation to this rational spirit and maintains a certain compatibility or harmony between both faith and reason, he sees the present situation of secularized Europe to be in crisis for having abandoned the guarantee of basic fundamental truths and moral standards that can only be grounded in its spiritual, that is, Christian roots, in which faith in God provides a basis for the inviolability of human rights. The absolutizing of reason in a secular society takes as its standard only that which can be positively verifiable and ultimately man himself becomes the only criterion for action. Moral judgment of the good is based on whatever promotes human freedom and technological progress. Man himself becomes the final standard of morality, without reference to the inviolable human dignity that can be guaranteed only by something outside of man himself, that is, by God. This is the crux of the problem for Ratzinger.

Ratzinger, as theologian, as guardian of the orthodoxy in his role as Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and as Pope, has often been criticized for his conservatism in ecclesiastical and dogmatic matters, and adherence to a strict sexual morality, that some find old-fashioned, if not intolerant. However, as we have seen, his understanding of the historical role of Christianity in European and his interpretation of the present problems of European unity are based on coherent arguments, and represent a serious effort to offer a positive way for Christian engagement with modern society. In respect to the problem of the future of Europe, his observations are correct in the sense that if Europe wishes to be more than an economic bloc, it will need to have a common spiritual and cultural base.

NOTES

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27 Ibid., pp. 64-65; 77.
28 See also Joseph Ratzinger, "In Search of Peace," in *Europe: Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 93, 96.
30 Ibid., pp. 220-221.
31 Ibid., p. 221.
32 Ibid., p. 222.
36 Ibid., pp. 17-19.
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40 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*. (New York: Knopf, 1939). Spengler's *Der Untergang des Westens*, originally published in 1918, offered a cyclical interpretation of human history based on the rise and fall of civilizations in opposition to one that interprets the history of humanity as one of progress.
42 Arnold Toynbee, *The Study of History*, begun in 1934 and finished in 1961, is a twelve-volume survey describing the origins, growth and decline of the world's major civilizations.
44 Ibid., 34.
46 Joseph Ratzinger, "Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow," in

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68 Joseph Ratzinger, Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures. (Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 44.

69 Joseph Ratzinger, ”The Grace of Reconciliation,” in Europe, Today and Tommorrow, p. 117.