

*The Crisis of Religion in Europe: Christianity, Judaism, Islam . . . and Secularism?*

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I want to talk to you today about traditions, namely religious traditions and how they are forcing an identity crisis in Europe. This is odd because the continent has never been more unified than it is today. Europe has been unified in the past, but always under the rule of one man, be it Caesar, Charlemagne, Napoleon, or Hitler. Today's European Union, the latest iteration of a commonwealth of nations that began in the early 1950s as a coal and steel trading partnership, has become a state-like entity. Though not a country, it has courts and parliaments and councils and even a world wide web address—.eu.

But one thing Europe does not have is a constitution. (Neither do some of its member countries, for that matter: the United Kingdom has a constitutional tradition but no actual constitution; Germany has a Basic Law that was intended to be provisional but which has taken on the role of a constitution.) In the absence of broadly shared political or cultural traditions, a constitution would seem necessary to establish a common definition of European identity. Europe's attempt to adopt a constitution was derailed a couple of years ago by France and Holland's rejection of the first draft, but the project continues.

A sticking point for some has been the absence of God in the constitution. In his apostolic exhortation "Ecclesia in europa" from June, 2003, Pope John Paul II called upon the drafters to "include a reference to the religious and in particular the Christian heritage of Europe." They did not. Instead a formulation was arrived at referring to "the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe." A decidedly secular preamble that bases its legitimacy on rational human values and gives no primacy to a Christian legacy.

Is this rational secularism enough to sustain an entity like Europe? Many view the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the turning point in human history towards modernity, when the Western world gained the wherewithal to shake off the fetters of religious dogma and rely on its own wits to manage human affairs. One could say, tongue firmly in cheek, that some countries—France comes most readily to mind here—made a religion out of this secularist approach. And I think it is safe to say that contemporary Europe sets an example of a society governed along rational-secular principles. Human reason, not divine intervention, has allowed this society to determine what is right, proper, and good.

But there are those who feel that the lack of a prominent role for religion in the public sphere lessens humanity's . . . humanity. Consider this statement: "Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization" (Siemon-Netto). That wasn't a cleric or some far-right apologist for a Christian Europe speaking, but rather Jürgen Habermas, perhaps Europe's most influential living philosopher and normally no friend of organized religion. In 2004, Habermas and the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger held a debate on the moral foundations of civil society. In that dialogue Habermas argued that a liberal state "finds a self-satisfying legitimation [sic] . . . independent of religious and metaphysical traditions"

(Nemoianu 25). But by his own admission Habermas acknowledged the existence of a “post-secular age” and cautioned that a complete banishment of religion—a project also known as “exclusive humanism”—would rob society of insights offered by religious traditions. For example, the belief that human beings are created in the likeness of God can encourage respect for human life.

A little more than a year after this dialogue Habermas’ interlocutor would become Pope Benedict XVI. Observers attach great significance to a Pope’s new name. For example, John Paul I did not choose his name in homage to the Beatles song writing duo of Lennon and McCartney, but in order to praise his two immediate predecessors, John XXIII and Paul VI. Many commentators assumed that Ratzinger, in a sense a war-time Pope due to the conflict in Iraq, wanted to honour Benedict XV, the pope during the First World War who tried to arrange an armistice in 1914. But keener observers realized that he was more likely making reference to St. Benedict, the founder of the monastic tradition and commonly known as the patron saint of Europe. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—head theologian of the Catholic Church, if you will—Ratzinger had grown increasingly anxious about the turn away from Christianity in Europe. “One gets the impression,” Ratzinger said, “that the very world of European values—the things upon which Europe bases its identity, its culture and its faith—has arrived at its end and has actually already left the scene” (23). In another speech in 2001 he acknowledged that “rationality is an essential hallmark of European culture. With it, from a certain perspective, it has conquered the world, because the form of rationality developed first of all in Europe informs the life of every continent today” (43). But in a manner that parallels Habermas to some extent, he argued that Europe needs the collected wisdom of its history and its religion to fully understand nature and the human being’s place within it.

Christianity and secularism have been wrestling for the soul of Europe. But both face another challenge: the rise of Islam. When I began my talk today I spoke of a German professor of theology making a speech last year. That speech took place in Regensburg, and the professor was none other than His Holiness Benedict XVI. After his opening reminiscences about his time in Bonn he referred to a dialogue from 1391 between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a learned Persian. The Pope was roundly criticized for his remarks. Many felt that the dialogue’s description of the work of the Prophet Muhammad as “evil and inhuman” was derogatory, and that the Pope was making a veiled (but not very subtle) attack on Islam. Benedict quoted from this dialogue because it dealt with the issues surrounding faith and reason and demonstrated, as he put it, that not acting “in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature . . . For the emperor, as a Byzantine shaped by Greek philosophy, this statement is self-evident. But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality.” Benedict used the rest of the speech to develop the point started here that Christianity, thanks to the influence of Greek philosophy starting with the writing of the Gospels, was a Hellenized or Greek religion and ipso facto a European religion. Thus Benedict not only stamps Europe with a Christian heritage, but Christianity with a European heritage. We can extrapolate from Benedict’s speech that Islam’s disinterest in human rationality makes it non-European.

This dovetails with the Western conception of Islam as a fundamentalist faith that is immoderate in its zeal. The word Islam means submission or surrender, and that sums up the attitude that human beings should have toward the divine. In the Islamic worldview,

God is not relegated to specific spheres of human or societal life. God's place is everywhere. Benedict himself has expressed admiration for Islamic traditions, especially the ideal of utter devotion to God's will, and sees Islam as having a similar problem as Christianity: how to instill spiritual values in a secular world. In fact Benedict almost appears jealous of Islam, as here in his speech from 2000: "Islam is capable of offering a valid spiritual basis for the life of the peoples, a basis that seems to have slipped out of the hands of old Europe, which . . . is increasingly viewed as a declining culture condemned to fade away" (22).

But Islamic zeal and single-mindedness scares Europeans. There is the fear that Muslims will soon become the majority in Europe. In 1900 there were 52,000 Muslims in Western Europe; today there are about 15 million, or 4.3% of the population. (By comparison, according to the 2001 census Canada has 600,000 Muslims, roughly 2% of the population; in the United States, 1% of the population—ca. 3 million—are Muslim.) More importantly, many of these Muslims, who emigrated for economic or political reasons, come from countries with a substantially higher birth rate than Europe's. As the European birth rate declines—for some conservatives another sign of Europe's decay—and if the Muslim communities of Europe maintain traditionally higher birth rates, Muslims will outnumber non-Muslims in Europe by the latter half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A lot of "ifs" here, but enough to scare a good many people into thinking that they will become minorities in the countries of their birth. Thus the news this summer that Muhammad is the second most popular name for baby boys in Great Britain struck a certain chord in the heart of the European. This fear has led to some hysteria, too; a reporter for the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* tells of the urban legend in which Muslim women taunt Europeans by yelling "we will outbirth you" (*wir gebären euch kaputt*).

Philip Jenkins writes that if "the Islamic future is so assured, then so is the likelihood of chaos and bloodshed leading to its foundation" (5). This is the next great fear: violence and terrorism. 9/11 looms large in Europe. The attack on America was partly planned in Hamburg, and the large-scale bombings in London and Madrid, as well as the discovery of plots by Islamist extremists throughout Western Europe, most recently in Germany, have made it painfully clear that Europe is a target as well. This terrorism is even more of a threat to secular notions of law and order because there is the temptation to use extralegal means to fight it.

The fears of Europeans concerning the Islamization of the continent stem from the notion that Islam is unable to compromise and to integrate into the secular order of present-day Europe. For some it is the Borg of religions, bent on world domination and assimilation of other faiths, and for this reason to be countered with every possible means. Islam hasn't experienced what Mark Lilla refers to as the "Great Separation," the wedge that divides religion from politics as understood by Thomas Hobbes. According to Lilla, Hobbes reckoned that "in order to escape the destructive passions of messianic faith, political theology centered on God [should be] replaced by political philosophy centered on man. This was the Great Separation." Western society has by and large adopted the Great Separation wholeheartedly, though it took longer for some countries than for others. Muslim countries are having a much more difficult time doing so, and many Muslims living in Europe call for an Islamic approach to governance in a society that has grown morally weak.

This is a direct challenge to European secularism. In practical terms it means that Western societies have to determine to what extent Islamic practices and traditions will be

tolerated or integrated. Some jurisdictions—for example Ontario—have considered introducing limited forms of Shariah law for the arbitration of private matters. But as Lilla points out, “the Muslim Shariah is meant to cover the whole of life, not some arbitrarily demarcated private sphere, and its legal system has few theological resources for establishing the independence of politics from detailed divine commands.” Many Westerners reject traditions such as Shariah or the veiling of women because they violate women’s rights and serve as potent reminders of Islam’s rejection of Western values. France banned headscarves outright in schools—in fact all clothing that can be associated with a particular religion; other jurisdictions have tried to find compromise solutions (Bavaria for example is trying to discourage headscarves while still keeping crucifixes hanging on classroom walls).

There have also been clashes with Islam over freedom of expression. Ekin Deligöz, a Turkish-born member of the German parliament, received death threats when she called on Muslim women in Germany to throw off their headscarves and enter the historical present. A French high school teacher, Robert Redeker, had to go into hiding after writing in the newspaper *Le Figaro* that “Jesus is a master of love, Muhammad is a master of hatred” (qtd. in Wolin). Theo van Gogh, a Dutch filmmaker, was murdered on the street by a Dutch Muslim who was enraged by the director’s critical documentary about Islam. The film, *Submission*, was made with the feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali to highlight their criticism of Islam’s treatment of women, but it insulted many Muslims with its provocative cinematography (for example, verses from the Qur’an on the role of women in society were superimposed on the bodies of naked women). The worldwide riots that greeted the publication in a Danish newspaper of satirical caricatures of the prophet Muhammad gave witness yet again to Muslim outrage over slights to their religion.

While the reactions of Muslims in each of these cases deserve criticism, one also has to ask whether the right to freedom of speech also gives artists and others the right to dishonour Islam—or any religion—in this manner. As a student of twentieth-century German culture, I have come across a great deal of emotionally-charged and egregious language to promote the cause of anti-Semitism, and I often see sweeping generalizations with a similar tone informing the discourse surrounding Islam’s place in Europe. And that worries me. Is it necessary or even accurate, for example, for Oriana Fallaci to label Islam “the new Nazi-Fascism”? (Qtd. In Jenkins 13). Van Gogh’s showy provocations—he had a history of trying to shock the public with his films and pronouncements—did nothing to further the dialogue of peoples. Van Gogh’s case is reminiscent of the fatwa that the Ayatollah Khomeini issued against Salman Rushdie in 1989 for publishing his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The public call for the author’s death was criticized throughout the Western world, but many also took Rushdie to task for publishing and then not withdrawing a novel that he knew would outrage many Muslims and put many lives, not just his own, at risk (the Japanese translator of the novel was found slain outside his university office).

Michel Houellebecq, the enfant terrible of French letters, found himself in a similar situation after publishing his novel *Plateforme* a month before 9/11. Tried and acquitted of having provoked racial hatred—he had labelled Islam as “stupid” (*la religion la plus con*) in an interview with the French magazine *Lire*—, Houellebecq has been luckier than van Gogh: he’s still alive. Houellebecq’s novel about a protagonist named Michel who sells sex holidays in Thailand contains harsh and insulting passages about Islam, but also about almost everything else. David Solway notes that Houellebecq’s real target isn’t Islam or Muslims but rather “the effete and ideologically riven culture of the West . . . a culture that has lost touch

with the core of genuine feeling and civic solidarity and [which refuses] to garrison its outposts and protect its citadel” (29-30). A Europe that has lost its way, or as Ratzinger put it, a Europe with a “strange lack of will for the future” (Ratzinger 24).

Another example of gratuitous provocation might be Hans Neuenfels’s production of Mozart’s *Idomeneo*. Although its premiere in 2003 caused no outcry, its 2006 production was cancelled by the Berlin Opera after the artistic director received word that a vague, anonymous threat had been made against the production. The opera has nothing to do with Islam, being set in the period following the siege of Troy, but Neuenfels’s staging managed to make a stab at religious commentary. After the curtain has fallen at the end of the opera, Idomeneo reappears with the severed heads of Neptune, Buddha, Jesus Christ, and the Prophet Muhammad. What exactly this has to do with the opera—Neptune actually helps Idomeneo in the end, so killing him doesn’t fit logically with the story—was lost on critics. But in the post-9/11 world such gestures are perhaps an artist’s attempt to call religions to account. In any event the outcry against self-imposed censorship was heard loud and clear by the Berlin Opera, and *Idomeneo* was indeed performed this past December.

I have not mentioned the situation of Judaism in Europe as yet, and this would be a good place to briefly do so. No one, as far as I can tell, who has commented on the *Idomeneo* controversy has remarked that none of the Jewish prophets—Moses, Elijah, Isaiah—were decapitated at the end of the opera. Is Neuenfels exercising self-censorship? In any event, the hypocrisy of his provocation becomes clear: the gods and prophets of other faiths can be insulted, but the prophets of Judaism are excused from the excess. And it is understandable why: Europe’s, and especially Germany’s, centuries-long mistreatment of the Jews, culminating in the Holocaust, has made it next to impossible to subject Judaism to the kind of critique that we see of other religions in the opera. As Tony Judt points out, “the recovered memory of Europe’s dead Jews has become the very definition and guarantee of the continent’s restored humanity” (804). In other words, by acknowledging its guilt vis-à-vis the Jews and by displaying greater sympathy for Jewish religion and culture, Europe is able to redeem itself from its misbegotten past. Judaism in Europe, as a result, while not necessarily flourishing, is on stable ground. This does not mean that anti-Semitic attacks have ceased; regrettably, they have not. In Germany they still occur, and from most accounts are the acts of the far-right fringe in German society. Elsewhere in Europe, for example France, there is some concern that anti-Semitism may be on the rise and stemming from the newly reinvigorated Muslim communities. While some might consider the special status of Judaism in European society as an affront, I think it only makes sense as proof that Europe as a whole rejects the prejudice and the violence that it had previously provoked or tolerated.

Some observers found it ironic, therefore, when this past spring the German-Jewish writer Ralph Giordano, a man who had survived the Holocaust by hiding in a Hamburg cellar, came out so forcefully against the building of a large mosque in Cologne. The far-right Pro-Cologne party, on record for wanting to deport immigrants en masse, had tried to stir up opposition by saying that the mosque, with its 55-metre high minarets, would ruin the Cologne skyline. This was simply an excuse to spread a xenophobic message; other than the wonderful Cologne Cathedral, at three times the height of the proposed mosque, Cologne doesn’t have much of a skyline to speak of. (Cologne is no New York.) But the protest became a national issue after Giordano entered the discussion. Proclaiming that the mosque was “a symbol of the creeping Islamization” of Germany, a symbol “of a parallel world,” he helped to polarize the debate with inflammatory language such as this: “I don’t want to see

women on the street wearing burqas. I'm insulted by that—not by the women themselves, but by the people who turned them into human penguins” (Landler). Giordano, who has written in the defence of the Jewish minority within the larger German community, was now denying Muslims the rights that Jews had come to expect because he doesn't think that Muslims can become real citizens of Germany. The mosque, sponsored by a moderate Turkish-Muslim association, is going ahead, although the ruling party in Cologne has asked for modifications to the design. The plans now call for greater visibility inside the mosque from the street in a gesture of openness and transparency. The minarets have not been shortened, but they have been redesigned to look less obviously like minarets. This is ironic since the original design with traditional minarets had beaten two other designs with more non-traditional minarets.

Giordano's stance in the mosque debate reiterates the concern about Islam's unwillingness to adapt to a European context. This has been a theme in Turkish-German literature as well; German secular society is often portrayed as godless, a fearful prospect for Muslims, and the rituals of Islam surface as a “bulwark . . . against the pressure to integrate” (Stoll 276). Yet as Gregor Stoll points out, “even when the immigrant authors reveal the weaknesses of secular society as it confronts them in Germany, none questions the basic axiom of individual self-determination” (280). Immigrant Muslim authors of German-language literature tentatively accept the necessity for Islamic culture to adapt to Western ways. Women Turkish-German authors have gone further, criticizing the politicization of Islam (since it serves male interests) while expressing the desire to remain Muslim (Stoll 275). Muslim immigrant literature has also pointed out what the Paris riots of 2005 made clear: the marginalization of Muslim communities was driving disaffected youth into the arms of Islamic extremists. Western society has been slow to recognize this, but recent efforts (for example Germany's national integration plan and integration summits promoting job and educational programs) are moving in a new direction.

Muslims, too, have been active in trying to find common ground with Western society. The concept of Euro-Islam, put forward by high-profile European Muslims such as Tariq Ramadan and Bassam Tibi, attempts to mediate a place for Islam within European society. Euro-Islam tries to incorporate the Great Separation into Islam; religion is for the home, not for the public square. Tibi, who coined the controversial German term *Leitkultur* (guiding culture), argues that Muslims and non-Muslims alike must accept that civic identity stands above religious identity (Jenkins 141). Western sceptics doubt the sincerity of Muslims like Ramadan (he is the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood); extremist Muslims, for their part, are not attracted to concepts of moderation and adaptation.

As I said at the beginning of my talk, Europe is in the middle of an identity crisis. As is always the case with any society but perhaps especially with Europe, identity is rarely a fixed point. Identity evolves; it must be constantly negotiated and renegotiated. These negotiations must be open, frank, and respectful, and the participants must not be afraid to hear criticism or challenges to their way of thinking. “My continent, my rules,” or any approach that enshrines immutability, is bound to fail because it ignores the fact that societies evolve. Realism must trump emotionalism. Fear-mongering, hyperbole, threats of violence, and marginalizing the other must also be overcome. I realize that my talk this afternoon has only scratched the surface of the topic, so I invite you to contribute your own comments and opinions. Thanks very much for your attention.

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