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Europe at a crossroads

Address to the American University of Rome

by Marcello Pera

1. *A geopolitical continental drift*

The subject I intend to address today is the crisis of the West, and particularly of Europe. In my view this crisis is twofold, both geopolitical and spiritual, with the latter as the main cause of the former.

The fact that the Old Continent is in a state of deep crisis has been upheld by many distinguished scholars, observers and a few – unfortunately just a few – political leaders in Europe. This was argued in most alarming terms by Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. Here is what he wrote two years ago:

“The victory of the post-European techno-secular world and the universalization of its lifestyle and thinking have spread the idea that Europe’s value system, culture, and faith – in other words the very foundations of its identity – have reached the end of the road, and have indeed already departed from the scene” (J.Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots*, Basic Books, New York 2006, p. 66).

Again:

“There is a clear comparison between today’s situation and the decline of the Roman Empire. In its final days, Rome still functioned as a great historical framework, but in practice it was already subsisting on models that were destined to fail. Its vital energy had been depleted” (Ibid. 66-67).

Let me begin by saying that the concept of the West may be understood in two ways: as a geopolitical and economic *area*, and as a cultural and spiritual *community*. In its first sense, the West consists of

countries sharing the same objectives, strategies, interests, relations and institutions. In the second sense, the West consists of peoples sharing the same principles, values, ideals and religious commitments.

Until the period of the Cold War, when the Berlin Wall came to symbolise the division of the world into two opposing blocs, not only militarily but also ideologically, the West meant Europe and the United States of America. It was not only because Europe needed the American umbrella for its economic and social development, and America needed the European ally for her fight against Communism. Neither was it only because Europe and America constituted a single market. This is true, but is only part of the truth. The fact is that Europe and America felt that they belonged to *one and the same* area, community and civilisation, precisely the West. It is not by chance that at that time the West was labeled “the free world”.

Today, this is no longer the case. Something similar to a geopolitical continental drift is occurring between Europe and the United States. Each one seems to be going off on its own, and in different directions. The September eleven’s attack on the Twin Towers marked the beginning of a new chapter in international relations. On that day, a completely new threat to the West emerged: the threat of Islamist terrorism. Yet even though in the immediate aftermath of the New York massacre everyone declared themselves to be solidly behind America – “we are all Americans”, remember? –, when it came to examine new strategies and new responses as to how to address that threat, Europe – at least a major part of it – started showing hesitations, introducing subtle juridical and political distinctions, opting for incomprehensible “third ways”, hiding herself behind the shield of the Security Council, and finally leaving America almost alone. As a matter of fact, a few months after the attack, we were no longer all americans, we were no longer all westeners on the same rocking boat. Europe had chosen to get out of it.

Let me take a closer look at this phenomenon.

2. European isolationism

Not everyone in Europe has yet fully realized that the boundaries of European and Western security have widened dramatically. Not everyone is conscious that our security no longer merely depends on stability in

theatres close to our backyard, such as the Balkans or the Mediterranean, but that it is equally at stake in more remote areas. Many people in Europe find it difficult to comprehend that in a distant region, be it Asian, African, or Middle Eastern, something might happen that could put in jeopardy our societies at home. Many find it hard to believe that the safety of our towns and cities may depend on stability in distant lands. And many think that one pacifist, that is to say, anti-american, demonstration here can stop a tyrant there.

Not even the recent attacks to our embassies and consulates, the fires set to our catholic churches, the killing of our priests seem to wake up Europe. “Dialogue”, “comprehension”, “tolerance”, “justification”, “indulgence” are still the most widespread European mantra.

Just look at the facts, the hard, crude, facts. Europe is suspicious about the debate on promoting democracy in the Middle East and Central Asia. Europe has responded with scant conviction to the difficult, but so far successful, attempt to finally enable people to make their voices heard after having known only decades of domination and repression in such countries as Afghanistan and Iraq. Europe appears lukewarm – and too often tempted to indulge in appeasement – when faced with the proclamations of Islamic fanaticism. Europe is split over the identification of the terrorist groups. In Europe, the mouth of the most fashionable intellectuals is always filled with the high jargon of fundamental human rights, but when it comes to go from theory to actual practice and ensure them nobody is willing to take a stand.

The result of this state of affairs seems to signal the overturning of a constant in history, almost as if a new kind of isolationism were on the rise in Europe, as opposed to a new interventionism by America.

Today America is making the centrepiece of her foreign policy not only *military might* but also the concept of *democratic peace*. In doing so, she is acting on the basis of two assumptions. The first is that the promotion of liberty is the only realistic pathway to achieving greater international security, and therefore to guaranteeing our own security. The second is that it is precisely the lack of liberty that provides the most fertile soil for disseminating virulent and threatening ideologies.

This is a true Wilsonian view. Europe sees this assertive Wilsonism propounded by a Republican President as a kind of neo-imperialism or as a perverse attempt to interfere in the affairs of other countries. Long after the collapse of Communism, Europe is still locked into the illusion that

the end of the Cold War marked the end of all wars, and gives the impression of believing she can live forever in a happy haven, as if Fukuyama's "end of history" has been reached, or if Kant's "perpetual peace" is about to dawn. Europe is therefore toying with the idea of creating a new world order based on what it calls *multipolarism*, whose aim is to act as a counter-balance to the American superpower which is considered aggressive, and driven by unconfessed economic interests.

How could all this happen? To answer the question we must return to the cultural sense of the West I mentioned at the beginning.

3. *Spiritual decadence*

As a cultural community, the West is a creed, a profession of faith in certain fundamental aspects of its history. The underlying conviction of this creed is that Western societies have developed principles and values that are valid for the whole of humanity, under any latitude and longitude. This is *universalism*.

For centuries, the West has cultivated this view. It has considered truth, liberty, democracy, tolerance, respect, compassion and many other related values as having been shaped in one place, but applicable everywhere. It is this view that has given rise to the Charters, Conventions and Declarations on human rights, that we all claim to be universal, such as the United Nations Declaration.

In Europe, universalism is now in crisis. It is considered the forbidden, poisoned fruit of the Enlightenment, and has been replaced by its extreme opposite, *relativism*, the doctrine according to which traditions, cultures and civilisations are autonomous and closed systems, each one with their own criteria of value and their own validation procedures.

The main and most risky consequence of relativism is that there is no common yardstick by which to measure cultures and civilizations and judge them in terms of their greater or lesser goodness, soundness, justice, desirability, etcetera. Relativism holds that all cultural systems have the same ethical dignity and are therefore all equal. *All of them*: fundamentalists and democrats, fanatics and liberals, the violent and the humanitarians, the intolerants and those who engage in dialogue.

The symptoms of this relativistic disease are many and each connected with another.

The very first square of the domino is *the identity crisis*. This emerged clearly when the members of the European Constituent Assembly decided to omit reference to Europe's Judaeo-Christian roots from the Preamble to the European Union Constitution, which was subsequently rejected by France and the Netherlands. In its place, the Constitution inserted a vague formula referring to the "spiritual and moral legacy of Europe" and the "cultural, religious and humanistic heritage". As is clear, these are useless and grudging ritual expressions which do not clearly define *which* legacy, and *what* religion Europe is indebted to.

Another symptom is *multiculturalism*, the doctrine that the rights of the community are paramount to those of the individual members. Because of its extremely low birthrate and increased immigration, Europe is becoming an increasingly more multicultural society. This policy, which has been implemented above all in the United Kingdom, has set out to integrate everyone by respecting the communities and permitting them all to live according to their own customs and lifestyles, without any government interference. The result has been social tension, ghettos, schools in which children are educated in a different culture, often hostile to that of the host country, with the consequence that the highest authority responsible for integration policy in the United Kingdom has warned that the country is unconsciously sliding into new forms of segregation.

Yet another symptom marks the onset of a strange "*guilt syndrome*". Here is the perverse chain of an argument which is typical of many European intellectuals. If Islamic terrorists have declared a *jihad* against us, they must feel resentful against us. If they feel resentful, this must be the result of social and economic inequalities. If such inequalities exist, they must be the fault of the West, and above all of America, its economic power, its military imperialism and its cultural arrogance. Ultimately, if the West is guilty of all this – as indeed it is, because it tries to promote and export its own life style as though it were valid for everyone everywhere – then the West deserves everything that happens to it. The conclusion is: it is all our fault. More exactly: it is all America's fault.

There is one further element to be added to this mosaic: the secularist drift which our continent is experiencing, and which explains the marginal role religion plays nowadays in European society. Long ago Europe successfully separated Church and State. Although this separation

– which, incidentally, stems from the Gospels – has been a civil achievement of which Europe may be proud, it is essential to be clear about what it means. It has to do with the political *institutions* and their borderlines, not the human *dimension* and their spheres. In other words, the separation of Church and State *does* imply that one institution is not superordinate to the other, but does *not* entail expelling religion from social life and considering it purely as a private affair, ultimately relegated to a “ghetto of subjectivity”, to use a phrase of Pope Benedict XVI. Unfortunately, this is exactly what is happening in Europe. The public expression of religion is disliked, disapproved, frustrated, if not prohibited.

The first consequence is that religion can no longer nourish our civil customs, provide a spiritual ground for our societies or act as a support for our public rules and behaviour, unlike the situation in America where the private sphere still has a strong public character. Another consequence is that the constant broadening of the sphere of *possibilities*, in the absence of the constraints imposed by conscience or by faith, is being transformed into an equally constant broadening of the sphere of *rights*, to the detriment of the solidity of our societies.

4. Dialogue and truth

This crisis is having a devastating effect on Europe. In the absence of a belief, a faith, a spiritual bond, how can we justify all those noble values – liberty, democracy, tolerance, respect, brotherhood etc. – to which we Europeans adamantly profess allegiance? How can we put them forward as examples to others if we do not believe in them ourselves? How can we hope to find an identity, and then respect it and defend it?

If this is the dominant thinking, if really people believe that equality between men and women only applies to us, that democracy is our tradition and is not suitable for other people, that the freedom of civil society only applies within our own walls, that free institutions are only good for us – in other words, if we really believe that whatever applies to us does not apply to others – it is hardly surprising that there is hesitation and reluctance about promoting, exporting or disseminating democracy, or wavering when talking about human rights or foot-dragging in combating the resurgence of anti-semitism.

Sure, we must learn from all cultures; we must talk and enter into dialogue with everyone, and show readiness to give up our ideas, even those we consider to be the best. But we cannot talk or dialogue with anyone if we start out with the idea that there is no truth to affirm, no value to prefer, and no principle that is worth defending or fighting for.

The question therefore is: can Europe become economically, socially and politically united? Can Europe stand up as a beacon of progress? Can Europe side with America in proposing credible and inventive international solutions if it does not intend to affirm and foster all those values and principles without which Europe would not exist, and which constitute the core of Europe's identity?

My answer is no. Europe cannot. Unless Europe rapidly regains confidence in its principles, and understands that they apply not only to Europe but to everyone, because they confer dignity and hospitality to all, it will become irrelevant on the world stage. If that day comes, all of us will have lost, because our great civilisation will have been transferred elsewhere. And if that happens, the West, as we knew it, will run the risk of fading away.