

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger - *Turning Point for Europe? San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994.*

Before going to teach at the University of Budapest in 1991, I had in Rome a conversation with Cardinal Ratzinger: does he have, I asked, a “message” for Catholics in Hungary? To my surprise, the only point he emphasized was “obedience to the bishops,” an explicable insistence in view of the criticism levelled domestically against the local episcopate by liberal-progressive forces. I interpreted the Cardinal’s words not merely as a message applicable to the Hungarian situation, but also as a general call to order, and, behind it, as henceforward a greater emphasis on the Church’s institutional unity and discipline, over against certain utopian trends and temptations.

I admit that the present book leaves me perplexed. The original German was published around the time of the Roman conversation, and philosophically, it hit the mark. “We must again learn to understand that the great ethical insights of mankind (not only monotheism, but also what C.S. Lewis called the Tao) are just as rational and just as true—indeed, more true than the experimental knowledge of the realm of the natural sciences and technology” (p. 35). In the subsequent essays the author returns again and again to the thesis that the moral universe is inseparable from the rational and from rational man, and that we cannot invent a new ethics just as we cannot create a new man. Ratzinger’s insistence sums up very well the anti-modernist thesis, it is the cardinal point (if I may say) of the Church/World controversy in our time. Ratzinger further argues that modern ideologies conceive man outside of faith and morals, as the resultant of determining components: some conscious, often identified as economic factors, others unconscious, formulated along psychoanalytical lines.

The question that remains, a question not actually answered in the book, is why are these words not translated into policy, although the Cardinal repeatedly asks, what ought we to do (for example, p. 102)? He does speak, also repeatedly, of the “progressive dissolution of religion in society,” just as a generation ago Paul VI lamented the Church’s “self demolition.” Is faith enough? Obviously not, Ratzinger answers, reason too must be persuaded to join, and he quotes Guardini, Spaemann, Kuhn, and others from universities who were present in the Paris of 1968 and diagnosed correctly that that insurrection was the civilian consequence of the Vatican Council. Yet it was but the tip of the iceberg. It does not occur to the author that if the Church still possesses reason, faith, and common sense, she ought to offer society and the state a more active support. But for this support she would need some political power, at least the recognition that all communities need power for the running of their affairs and protect their followers. Pluralism is also based on power, that of the “hidden persuaders.” As long as it is taken for granted that state and church are separated by a wall, the

Church's access to society is also blocked, it is forced into partnership with the anti-state and with anti-Christian ideologies.

This dilemma raises the question of the book's title. Published under the impact of the collapsing Berlin Wall and German reunification, the author can be excused for projecting a happier Europe, federated or united, rid of nationalism, rediscovering her cultural vocation. "Turning point for Europe," as if it depended on goodwill, democracy, and a kind of moral purification to enter a new millennium. Alas, it does not. Post-1990 Europe does not escape any of the misery this century concocted, and the continent, submissive and timid, finds itself squeezed amid the forces of modernity, communism, and liberalism. Nor is nationalism replaced, as Ratzinger hopes, by "a generous concept of cultural fellowship" (p. 116). Is there no inconsistency here? On page 85, the Cardinal rightly rejects "the presumption of constructing the perfect man and the perfect society with structural formulas," the essential thought of "modern materialism"; on page 116 and elsewhere he suggests Europe's purification and indicts "tribalism" as the evil source of the still more evil "nationalism."

But this ignores a number of things. Nationalism was not born in 1789, as the author asserts after so many others, it divided, and caused wars between Greeks and Persia, Athens and Sparta (a short list). Today, according to the fashionable slogan, the alternative to nationalism in Europe is a super-bureaucratic super-state, with its cosmopolitan ideology already ravaging populations and their morality, that morality that Cardinal Ratzinger wants, rightly, to restore! Europe's fatal division did not begin at Yalta, Yalta merely reconfirmed the dividing link that Turkish occupation effected 500 years ago. It blocked development in the East, while western Europe advanced in every direction—and generally exploited the eastern regions. We must bear in mind that nationalism does not consist merely of "aggressions," but also of the nurture of language and literature, and respect for popular symbols, among them, those of the Church. Why then disarm nations in advance, why perform a "purification" of history and memory, thus facilitating the ravages associated with industrial technological society?

While the book is fully aware of the Church's plight, it claims to notice "signs of regeneration." My own observation, based on annually six months in Europe, dictates a greater prudence. True, most old facades, architectural and institutional, stand, but they are wobbly and precarious. Cardinals and lesser mortals can still address an attentive and cultured public, debate is still not completely absorbed by media noise and business publicity. But a "turning point" in a positive sense cannot be detected. The author was wise to put a question mark after the title.

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