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The Idea of Europe in the work of Joseph Ratzinger

A few weeks before his election as Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger delivered a seminal speech "On Europe's Crisis of Culture" at the Benedictine Monastery of St Scholastica at Subiaco.

In this lecture he describes Europe as the "Christian continent" which also gave birth to "scientific rationality." Christianity itself is not European but it became the "religion of the European cultural realm" and "received precisely in Europe its most effective cultural and intellectual imprint." In this perspective, according to Ratzinger, it would be hard to understand Europe without reference to its Christian roots.

Paradoxically, however, Ratzinger bemoans the fact that "Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner unknown before now to humanity, excludes God from the public conscience, either by denying him altogether, or by judging that his existence is not demonstrable, uncertain and, therefore, belonging to the realm of subjective choices, something, in any case, irrelevant to public life." In this regard, a definition of Europe – and of liberal democracy – is developing in a way which is divorced from its Christian roots.

This paper seeks to explore Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of the idea of Europe. It is an idea anchored in tradition and it hesitates to question the underpinnings of liberal democracy (though, perhaps, questioning its manifestations). It is also an idea which develops at a time when Europe experiences a period of change; of division and then unity; of a unity which also crystallises around imperfect economic and political institutions; and during a period where the same idea of Europe changes, broadens and deepens.