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Italian Senator on Pope Benedict, Europe and Relativism

by Edward Pentin

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ROME – Sen. Marcello Pera, the former president of the Italian Senate, isn't Catholic – in fact, he's not even a Christian believer.

But he is a deep admirer of the ideas of Pope Benedict XVI, with whom he collaborated on the 2004 book, *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (2006 Basic Books). Sen. Pera spoke recently with Register correspondent Edward Pentin about the themes he and the Pope addressed in their joint writings.

How did you come to co-author the book *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam with Pope Benedict XVI*?

I had been an admirer for some time of the writings of Cardinal Ratzinger. I considered him a profound theologian and an original thinker.

One day I went to visit him and proposed that he give a lecture in the Senate on the critical situation of being in Europe and in the West. We discovered that we held many of the same views, and since in the meanwhile I had given a lecture at the Pontifical Lateran University, we talked about how we could spread our ideas.

This is how the book was born: We both reviewed our theses and decided to include additional comments.

In the book, you issued a strong indictment of relativism and focused upon the loss of Christian values in Europe. Since the book was published, do you see signs of hope in Italy and Europe as a whole that the universal principles and values you espouse are overcoming relativism?

No, I see signs going in the opposite direction. The de-Christianization process underway in Europe is moving forward at high speed, from Spain to Holland to Italy. On issues like bio-ethics, life, the family, procreation, not only is the sense of the sacred, of sin, of limits being lost, but the idea is spreading that Parliaments are so sovereign that they can modify the fundamental principle of our tradition.

What John Paul II most feared and denounced is underway: the perverse alliance between relativism, as the equivalence of all substantive values, and democracy, as a mere formal process. And the opinion of Benedict XVI, according to whom Europe no longer loves itself, is becoming ever more true.

I believe that the situation is becoming increasingly serious because Catholics themselves are not reacting as they should.

You oppose multi-culturalism on the grounds that it is the result of relativism. What do you propose as an alternative in which a society of different cultures can exist harmoniously?

Multi-culturalism can be taken both as a doctrine and as policy. As a doctrine it gives rise to insurmountable contradictions. It affirms that all communities have an equal right to exist because outside these communities, individuals would lose their own specific identities.

So, what are you supposed to do when a community does not respect certain rights, for example, the equality between men and women? If you leave the community freedom of action then you might violate certain fundamental rights – if you force them to respect these rights then you violate the principle whereby all communities possess equal dignity in the ethical sense.

As policy, the effects of multi-culturalism are exactly the opposite of integration, because it gives rise to separate communities, that are then reduced to a ghetto-like status and enter into conflict amongst themselves. The examples offered by the UK and by Holland speak eloquently. The alternative is an integration that respects the fundamental independent principals of individual communities.

As you know, there is still deadlock over the European Constitution. What solution to this crisis would be favorable to you?

I do not see any realistic solution – and nobody is proposing one. I think that the European States can unite through treaties, not through an actual Constitution. A Constitution presupposes that a ‘people’ exists, with a specific identity, but at the moment there is no European people with a European identity.

Identity is not like a common currency that can be negotiated around a table. An identity presumes a sense of belonging, and therefore a common spirit. Today, Europe does not acknowledge this spirit – not even in its’ tradition as the “Christian continent”.

Pope Benedict XVI is sympathetic to the idea of an ethic for globalization - universal principles on which all cultures agree and can unite around. What is your opinion of this idea?

From an intellectual point of view it is an arduous endeavor, because universal ethics presumes either natural rights or recognized rational rights, and everyone knows that both rationalism and [natural law] are attractive, but difficult-to-justify doctrines. Nonetheless, I believe that we should work towards universal ethics. I do not believe that we will ever achieve this, but the very search would make us more aware of the possibilities ahead of us, would further unite us and would constitute a step forward for humanity.

How do you see the future of relativism and multiculturalism in Europe?

My diagnosis on Europe’s future is not a happy one. It is analogous to Bernard Lewis’ and to other scholars’. If Europe goes forward with its relativist culture, with the refusal of its own tradition, with its low nativity rates, with indiscriminate immigration, then Europe is going to end up Islamized.

Maybe we have already been dealt a blow to the heart and did not notice it. What Pope Ratzinger says in *Without Roots* comes to mind: the impression today is that Europe resembles the Roman Empire at its fall.

Some say that Pope Benedict XVI hasn’t spoken out against relativism and in defence of Europe’s Christian values and heritage as much as was expected. How true is this in your view?

No, Cardinal Ratzinger spoke clearly and Pope Ratzinger uses the same language. I think that he is very firm on principles and I do not understand these objections.

Do you have plans to write any more books on this subject, and any more to be co-authored with Pope Benedict?

Naturally, another book with Benedict XVI would please me immensely, and especially the opportunity to converse with him, but this is not likely. In *Without Roots*, he makes an appeal to the “creative minorities”. Personally, I consider myself a modest member of these minorities, and will continue to work in the direction that he indicated.