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RATZINGER ON MODERN CULTURE, TRUTH AND CONSCIENCE

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Karl Barth is reputed to have said that the theologian should read the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. It may be an apocryphal saying, but its mythical status indicates a scintilla of some home truth. In other words, the inspired witness to God's revelation needs to be related to what is happening in the world, i.e. history in the making, which is always a history marked by sin and redemption. Criticism of the times we live in would seem to be implied, at least on the part of Barth and those who follow him. On the other hand, the *aggiornamento*, the opening of the Church to the world inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council, has often been interpreted in terms of adjusting and adapting Christian faith and praxis to the mores and language of the modern world to such an extent that faith and praxis tend to become more and more assimilated into (or shaped by) the underlying system of values that constitute modernity. The result has not infrequently been such that, to quote the then Cardinal Ratzinger, "Instead of a leaven for the age, or its salt, we are often simply its echo"¹.

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¹ J. Cardinal Ratzinger, Ratzinger, Forward to Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism. Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* trans. L.C. Sheppard and Sister E. Englund OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), p. 12.

At least for Ratzinger, the theologian should by his very nature be someone who is critical in the sense of putting the underlying assumptions of society to the test. However, the theologian does not find himself standing over against the world with a body of truth which he possesses in all its purity. The theologian evidently lives and moves and has his cultural being in that same world². “Man is never alone, he bears the stamp of a community that provides him with patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. This system of notions and thought patterns that preconditions the individual human being goes by the name of culture”³. The theologian, too, is part of contemporary culture, while the specific living tradition he represents is also a cultural product. This means that his criticism must of necessity often amount to a kind of self criticism – including a self-criticism of Christianity as an historical and existential reality. The need for a self-criticism of Christianity as a historical phenomenon has been a concern expressed by Ratzinger on more than one occasion. One of the most illuminating examples is to be found in an article devoted to exploring the thesis that Christianity is indispensable for modern pluralistic democracy. After discussing the weaknesses of, and so consequently the threats to, modern democracy, and before outlining his thesis, he engages in a criticism of Christianity as an historical phenomenon which has in the past (and so can still be) a threat to the political order⁴.

There is a further complication. According to Plato, philosophers are those “who are able to grasp that which is always invariable and unchanging”⁵ Christian theologians recognize in this claim their own vocation – with the essential difference that the eternal comes to us in the guise of what is *not* invariable and unchanging, in other words through history and so through historically conditioned means. This requires of the theologian the responsibility to look critically at cultural embodiments of Christian Tradition including its authoritative witnesses. This criticism, of course, is undertaken in the confidence, none the less, that the Truth which God reveals to humanity in Christ is to be found there. It is that invariable and unchanging truth which Ratzinger occasionally simply calls the Logos, God’s Word, that throws light on every human situation.

² Henri de Lubac SJ once commented: “For however unsusceptible to outside influences the theological world would sometimes like to be, it cannot always remain untouched by the trend of thought in the world, and it is not always when it thinks itself particularly well-shielded that it offers the most effectual resistance” (*Catholicism*, p. 309).

³ J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. M.J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 43.

⁴ See J. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics. New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, trans. M. J. Miller, et al., San Francisco 2008, pp. 200–203.

⁵ Rep. VI, 484.

At a colloquium organized in 2002 by the Italian bishops' conference on the theme "Gospel and Culture", the then Cardinal Ratzinger read a paper entitled "Communication and Culture: New Methods of Evangelization in the Third Millennium"⁶. It is worth closer inspection. He begins by asking the question: how, in the plethora of information with which people today are bombarded, can we show them "that what we call the gospel makes it clear that it is an entirely different sort of information, that it is, rather (in today's parlance) a 'performance', a living process, by which the [musical] instrument [that is] human life can at last be tuned correctly?"⁷. The fact is, he maintains, that evangelization must of its very nature be addressed to the culture of a people. People embody in themselves a particular culture, into which the Word of God must enter. "It must make itself understood within it, and it should have some effect [on] it, make an impression on this entire pattern of life, be the leaven, so to speak, that permeates the whole thing. The gospel to a certain extent presupposes culture; it never replaces it, but it does leave its mark on it"⁸.

What then are the characteristics of the contemporary culture in need of evangelization? He begins by reminding his audience that Italian culture perhaps carries more of the imprint of the Catholic faith than others in the Western world. All carry some vestiges of Christianity, the value of which should not be underestimated and which should be promoted as much as possible. He decries the post-conciliar mood that tended to treat pre-conciliar forms of cultural Catholicism as "outmoded junk" to be discarded. He also reminds his audience that the Christian culture of the past was never pure Christianity. Even in the Middle Ages it existed side by side with non-Christian and even anti-Christian elements. However, "Ever since the Enlightenment, Western culture has been moving away from its Christian foundations with increasing rapidity"⁹. The contemporary situation in Western countries is marked by the disintegration of the family, secularization, and moral relativism. "To this extent contemporary culture, in Italy, and in varying ways throughout the Western world, is a culture torn apart by internal contradictions"¹⁰. Therefore there is need to exercise discrimination, help encourage new ways of both asserting authentic Christian culture, and finding "inroads into the secularized zones of this culture that have been left open to the faith"¹¹.

⁶ In *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, op. cit., p. 42–52.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 43, amended.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 45–46.

To describe the inner dynamics of an authentic encounter between the gospel and culture¹², Ratzinger uses an image taken from St Basil's commentary on Isaiah, where the great Cappadocian theologian expounds on Amos 7:14, "I am a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees". In the Septuagint, this was rendered as "I was one who slits the fruit of the sycamore". It seems that, in order to ripen quickly, the plenteous "figs" of the sycamore must be slit before they are picked. Basil uses the sycamore as a symbol for the pagan world of his day: "It offers a surplus, yet at the same time it is insipid. This comes from living according to pagan customs. When one manages to slit [the fruits of the pagan world] by means of the Logos, it [the pagan world] is transformed and becomes tasty and useful"¹³. Despite the plenteousness, the luxuriance of the pagan world, it is basically deficient, insipid and unusable. It needs to be radically transformed from within, something that is beyond its own capacities. An intervention external to that culture is called for: "The Logos itself must slit our cultures and their fruit, so that what is unsuitable is purified and becomes not only usable but good"¹⁴. This process of slitting implies a process of purification. While it is true that only the Logos can guide our cultures to their maturity, Ratzinger comments, "the Logos makes us his servants as the 'dresser of sycamore trees'"¹⁵. This is the particular responsibility of the theologian and the pastor¹⁶.

The gospel, then, must address not simply the individual but the culture that shapes the spiritual growth of the individual for better or worse. However, he adds, "Evangelization is not simply adaptation to the culture, nor is it dressing up the gospel with elements of the culture, along the lines of a superficial notion of inculturation that supposes that, with modified figures of speech and a few new elements in the liturgy, the job is done"¹⁷. It is rather a "slit", a process of purification that leads to healing, that transforms culture from within. This presumes a certain sympathy with the culture, aware both of its dangers and of its potential for good. The process of evangelization is not a momentary event. It is, rather, an ongoing (at times tense and painful) encounter between the Logos and the culture which takes time and patience¹⁸. In the address he delivered in March 1993 to the Presidents of the Asian Episco-

¹² Here Ratzinger follows Chistian Gnllka, *Chresis: Die Methode der Kirchenväter um Umgang mit der antiken Kultur*, vol. 2: of *Kultur and Conversion* (Basil, 1993). According to Ratzinger this book is "a fundamental study of the question of gospel and culture.

¹³ Basil, *In Is 9*, 229, as quoted in *ibidem*, p. 46.

¹⁴ *On to the Way to Jesus Christ*, p. 47.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ See J. Ratzinger: *A Turning Point for Europe?*, trans. B. McNeil CRV, San Francisco 1994, pp. 61-77.

¹⁷ *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, p. 48.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibidem*.

pal Conferences and the Chairmen of their Doctrinal Commissions meeting in Hong Kong, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticized the term “inculturation” and suggested the term “interculturalism” in its place, stressing the fact that the Gospel is not an abstraction but exists concretely in its own cultural complex, which cannot be discarded. The encounter between the gospel and the non-evangelized culture is always an encounter between two cultures, which interact with each other. The non-evangelized culture is likewise not a hostile environment but contains “seeds of the Word”, more or less, depending on whether the culture is a closed or an open culture, i.e. more or less open to the truth¹⁹.

In three short propositions, Ratzinger summarizes his thesis. (1) “The Christian faith is open to all that is great, true and pure in world culture” (a reference to Phil 4:8)²⁰. This may include the “sociological or psychological commonplaces that today are opposed to the faith or that could become starting points for its reception”²¹. (2) “Faith is acquired with bridge-building [*Anknüpfung*]; it accepts what is good; but it is also a sign of opposition to whatever in the culture bars the doors against the gospel. [Faith] is as a ‘cut’, as we have heard”²². In another context, he offers a harsh criticism of rock music and their festivals. According to Hugo Rahner’s article on the *pompa diaboli* we renounce at Baptism, that term originally referred to the spectacles of Roman antiquity, the circus games marked by cruelty, violence and the slaughter of men and women. Anyone who wished to become a Christian had to detach himself from that form of culture which could best be described as sick. (3) “Becoming a Christian requires a lived context in which the culture of healing and transformation can be accomplished”. He refers to the ancient institution of the catechumenate and mentions the account of his conversion given by St Cyprian of Carthage. Cyprian paints a graphic picture of the mores of his time, which, Ratzinger says, remind one of Juvenal’s *Satires* and are not dissimilar to the cultural context in which young people today grow up. Can anyone become a Christian in this context? It seems impossible, but, with God’s grace, Cyprian affirms, it is possible – but only within the company of believers, where one learns to acquire new “habits of the heart”, to borrow a term from Robert N. Bellah. So successful was this in the case of Cyprian that Gregory of Nazianzen could praise the African bishop for his “extensive knowledge attested

¹⁹ See his collection of essays *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, translated by Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), especially Chapter 2, “Faith, Religion and Culture”.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*. His criticism of pop-music geared to the mass culture is particularly trenchant.

to by the many magnificent works that he had composed for our cause, after he had brought his learning over into the fold ... and had subjected senselessness to reason”²³. Cyprian changed the culture of his world through subjecting it to the “slit” of the Logos in order to allow its inner richness to come to fulfilment in Christ.

In summary, Cyprian draws attention to the fact that human beings are both carriers and shapers of culture. Truth is what enables any culture to be transformed from within (by a living faith) and so to flourish. But such creative truth is personal by nature and so is always a matter of conscience, as the ancient Greeks perceived, however dimly, and Christianity brought fully into the light. According to the great English historian of ideas, Christopher Dawson, Western European civilization moulded by Christian tradition “made the conscience of the individual person an independent power which tends to weaken the omnipotence of social custom and to open social progress to new individual initiatives”²⁴. The question is: what is meant by “conscience”?

Primordial Conscience

Conscience is one of the main themes in Ratzinger’s entire theological endeavour²⁵. It is a notion that today is the source of not a little confusion, even within the Church. This confusion would seem to be a relatively recent development. Rather bizarrely, an impoverished notion of conscience arose in neo-Scholasticism (characterized primarily by its concern with the notion of an erroneous conscience). This impoverished notion came eventually to be fused with a corresponding subjectivity in moral matters (moral relativism) that characterizes the basic “feel” of modernity. As a consequence, this purely subjective notion of conscience now appears to be not only in opposition to the Magisterium but also – usually unconsciously – conscience becomes the means by which the question of truth itself is eradicated since all that counts is one’s sincerely held feelings.

The significance of Ratzinger’s own reflections on conscience lies in the way he, under the influence of John Henry Newman, rediscovered for our day that dimension of conscience which played a central role in moral reflection from Socrates to High Scholasticism, and profoundly determined the life and

²³ Gregory Nazianzen 24,7 (Sources chrétienne 284, 50/52); Ratzinger *ibidem*, 51.

²⁴ Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 16.

²⁵ See D.V. Twomey SVD, *Benedict XVI. The Conscience of Our Age: A theological Portrait*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007.

writings of Thomas More, but which tend to be ignored in the contemporary period, apart from such exceptions as Josef Pieper and Theo G. Belmans. What is at stake here is the ontological level of conscience, namely conscience as an underlying capacity as distinct from conscience as a conscious judgement in a particular situation. In the Middle Ages (due to scribal error) it was called *synderesis* (in contrast with *conscientia*, i.e., conscience as act). Ratzinger prefers the term *anamnesis* rather than *synderesis* to express this capacity or ontological dimension, which platonic term he interprets in the light of the faith.

Accordingly, there is in man a primordial memory of the true and the good, a memory of the creator, which is identical with the ground of our being, since we are created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27) The ontological level of conscience is ‘... the window, that opens up to man the view of the common truth that establishes and sustains us all and so makes community of decision and responsibility possible due to the common ground of perception’²⁶. However, it needs help from outside to realize itself, just as the human capacity to speak needs the milieu of a language-community so that we can learn how to speak. It is here that the Magisterium plays the part of a midwife, as it were, awakening our subjective capacity for truth in the encounter with objective truth²⁷. This understanding of the notion of conscience is also the basis for the possibility of, and the right to, mission (evangelization). With this notion of conscience we arrive at the existential capacity to know objective truth, a capacity that is at the same time intensely personal and yet, precisely as objective truth, creative of community. It is this truth that makes freedom possible – and democracy. As a result, “The task of the Church in [society] is, therefore, first and foremost ‘education’ taking that word in the sense it had for the Greek philosophers. She must break open the prism of positivism and awaken man’s receptivity to truth, to God, and thus to the power of conscience. She must give men the courage to live according to conscience and so keep open the narrow pass between anarchy and tyranny, which is none other than the narrow way of peace. In society she must create the conviction that can support good law”²⁸. Discussing the relationship of Church and State, Ratzinger stresses that

²⁶ „Wenn du den Frieden willst, achte das Gewissen jedes Menschen. Gewissen und Wahrheit“, in *Wahrheit, Werte, Macht. Prüfsteine der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, Freiburg 1993, p. 32; cf. *On Conscience*, op. cit., p. 16 for a slightly different translation than the one given above.

²⁷ I would argue that the midwife is the generally accepted value system of a society, *in so far as* that value system enshrines genuinely authentic values, i.e., values that correspond to our nature as embodied spirits of a transcendent nature (embodied also in community). These values are generally authenticated by the wisdom traditions of humanity found in the world religions. Since these value systems also contain disvalues and are more or less corrupt, there is need for a definitive, transcendent moral authority, which is what the Church claims to offer humanity, an authority which always appeals to the underlying or primordial conscience.

²⁸ J. Ratzinger: *A Turning Point for Europe?*, p. 5.

direct political action on the part of the Church is ruled out; her real contribution must be indirect, awakening conscience, giving those who follow their conscience the spiritual support they need, and inspiring them to devise those laws and institutions required to promote justice and social well-being using their own practical reason that is clarified in the course of political discourse²⁹.

The mission of the Church, then, is to awaken the conscience of mankind. Her teaching touches and quickens that primordial echo of Truth in the deepest recesses of people's hearts, thanks to the fact that man is created in the image and likeness of God. But that "voice of God" in our hearts is often silenced by the more strident voices that resound through the culture we imbibe, and the society in which we live, as well as by our own refusal to be attentive to the small still voice of God. In his critique of the treatment of conscience by the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes* #16)³⁰, Ratzinger criticizes the text for ignoring the epistemological difficulties in recognizing the voice of conscience. The text also betrays an ignorance of the findings of modern human sciences that discovered the extent to which personal and social factors inhibit the exercise of free will in doing what we know we ought to do. One could add that, because of the negative influence of cultural factors on a society's value systems, the Church's role in teaching the truth means that its voice will always be prophetic in nature – and so unpopular. The recent outcry when the Pope reiterated the moral truth about the use of condoms in the prevention of AIDS is a good example of a moral truth touching a raw nerve, touching the conscience of whole societies, whose value system he thereby called into question. That value system is rooted in a much bigger cultural phenomenon, namely modernity.

Critique of Modernity

Discussing Ratzinger's interventions in the area of political theory, Tracey Rowland in her magisterial study of his theology situates the topic within the intellectual context of the different ways people view the genealogy of the

²⁹ It is in this context of practical decision making and legislation that Ratzinger situates Catholic social teaching as offering guidelines to Christians as citizens, in particular to those involved in political life. This social teaching is part of the moral teaching of the Church that includes certain, non-negotiable principles based on the dignity of the human person and excludes actions that are intrinsically wrong. For an account of the role of conscience in the political thought of Ratzinger, see D.V. Twomey SVD, *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age*, op. cit., pp. 105–120.

³⁰ In Herbert Vorgrimler (Herausg.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol 5, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (London/New York, 1969), pp. 115–63; here pp. 134–136.

³¹ The following is indebted to T. Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), Chapter 6: "Modernity and the Politics of the West", pp. 105–122.

culture of modernity³¹. These, she points out, are basically three: those who see modernity as severance of the classical-theist synthesis (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre), those who see it as representing a mutation of the earlier synthesis (e.g. John Milbank), and those who see it as an entirely new culture (e.g. progressivism). The first two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do exclude the third, as does Ratzinger. The first two views are justified by the fact that modernity is in some sense a product of a Western culture that itself has been radically formed by Christian history – and decisively shaped by its own unique theologies of history. As a result, according to J. Pieper, “there is no philosophical question, which, if it really wants to strike the ground intended by itself and in itself, does not come upon the primeval rock of theological pronouncements”³².

“What Ratzinger offers by way of his own contribution to the critique of the culture of modernity” Rowland claims, “is a kind of ‘double helix’ genealogy with reference to the two sets of three intellectual moments in which the Hellenic component of the culture was severed from the Christian and in which the Christian component was fundamentally undermined by the mutation of the doctrine of creation”³³. The first set includes the divinization of nature by Giordano Bruno (1545–1600), which is a return to the Greek notion of the world as a divine fullness of peace, thus rendering the notion of human dependency implied by faith in creation as something unacceptable. Galileo represents the second moment. Having recourse of the mathematical side of Platonic thought, he reduces God to One who does geometry, with the result that God “dwindles away to be little more than the formal mathematical structures perceived by science in nature”³⁴. God is reduced to a “first cause” and so becomes ultimately meaningless. Martin Luther, moving in the opposite direction of Bruno and Galileo, attempted to purge Christian thought of its Greek heritage, in particular its understanding of creation in terms of ontology. “For Luther, redemption sets humans free from the curse of the existing creation and thus grace exists in radical opposition to creation”³⁵. Ratzinger concludes that “without the mystery of redemptive love, which is also creative love, the world inevitably becomes dualistic: by nature, it becomes geometry: as history, it becomes the drama of evil”³⁶. To overcome this dualism, Hegel posited a God

³² J. Pieper, *The End of Time: A Meditation on the Philosophy of History* (Indiana: St Augustine’s Press, 1998), 16, quoted in Rowland, op. cit., p. 107.

³³ Rowland, p. 108.

³⁴ J. Ratzinger, “‘In the Beginning ...’ A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall” (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 84, in Rowland, p. 109.

³⁵ Rowland, p. 109.

³⁶ J. Ratzinger, “In the Beginning ...”, p. 89, in Rowland, p. 109.

as part of the process of reason unfolding itself in history, while Marx replaced creation with the category of self-creation, which is to be accomplished through work. Redemption thus takes on a political form. Opposing this reduction of humanity to productive activity, Ratzinger reaffirms that the purpose of creation is worship, the Sabbath rest: “those who reject God’s rest, its leisure, its worship, its peace and its freedom, fall into the slavery of activity”³⁷.

The three moments in the undermining of the Greek strand of the helix, according to Rowland, are (1) Luther’s radical rejection of Greek philosophy which was carried to its logical conclusion by Immanuel Kant; (2) Adolf von Harnack’s programme “to liberate Christianity from philosophy altogether as well as purge it of doctrinal elements”³⁸ and (3) the anti-European attitude that arose after the two World Wars together with the rise of Asian and African nationalism in the 1960s, which rejected the relevance of Greek philosophy for native traditions. But Ratzinger sees the Greco-Latin heritage as part of God’s providential plan and so something that cannot be jettisoned. “The cumulative effect of Luther and Kant was to force a choice between scripture alone and so-called ‘pure’ reason alone. Those who took the path of reason alone tended to instrumentalize Christianity by turning it into a moralism”³⁹. As a consequence, the task of evangelization was reduced to handing on a moral vision and helping people improve their material standard of living. But there were even more radical implications of these developments, which amount to both a severance and a mutation of the classical-theist synthesis. According to Ratzinger: “Once the relationship between nature and creation has been severed, then the way lies open for the severance of nature and morality and the arrival of the Nietzschean project of the transvaluation of the Judeo-Christian heritage”⁴⁰.

In Europe and the Western world in general, the assumption is that only Enlightenment culture can be constitutive of its identity. The Church should then be content to exist as one religious culture among others, all of which are subordinated to the dominant culture of modernity. While recognizing the positive contribution of the Enlightenment, Ratzinger firmly rejects the effective relegation of Christianity to the private sphere. As in the early Church, so too today, Christians will not allow Christ to be included as one among many in the pantheon of gods. Recognizing that there is no such thing as a theologically neutral state, as claimed by the liberal tradition, Ratzinger argues that Western democracy “must recognize that a basic framework of values with a Christian foundation is the precondition for its own existence and it must learn that there

³⁷ J. Ratzinger, “*In the Beginning...*”, p. 32, in Rowland, p. 110.

³⁸ Rowland, p. 111.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

is a truth that is not subject to consensus but which precedes it and makes it possible”⁴¹.

Discussing the mutation of the term “secularism”, Ratzinger argues that it no longer has that element of neutrality guaranteeing freedom for all it originally had in the Western tradition. “It is beginning to turn into an ideology that imposes itself through politics and leaves no public space for the Catholic and Christian vision, which thus risks becoming something purely private and essentially mutilated”⁴². When what is most specifically human – our religious dimension – is treated as something purely private and society defines itself in terms of complete secularity – thus becoming a pseudo-religion – this kind of society is marked by sorrow and despair (often experienced as boredom); “it rests on a diminution of human dignity”⁴³. This is because rationality is reduced to quantitative or instrumental rationality characteristic of science and technology. The sacredness of human life is denied. The most human of acts, such as begetting, are replaced by a technique. Genetically imperfect babies are aborted, while the old are encouraged to choose to end their lives. Every effort is made to produce the perfect man. “Suffering must disappear, and life is to consist of pleasure alone. This leads to new forms of coercion and the emergence of a new ruling class”⁴⁴.

Ratzinger does not advocate a return to the pre-Enlightenment political order in the West. Instead he advocates a change of course on three essential points. The West must learn to appreciate that law is not the opposite of freedom but its necessary condition. It must abandon all utopian projects. In other words, there is no ideal solution, since original sin cannot be eradicated. “And thirdly, the leaders of the Western world need to bid farewell to the dream of the absolute autonomy of reason and of its self-sufficiency”⁴⁵. The leaders, intellectual and political, must be reminded that Christian Revelation de-divinized the state – and the abiding relevance of this is that it relieves the State from the burden of being the highest good for humanity. It rejects all political ideologies that effectively impose a template on political decision-making, and thus allows practical reason illuminated by conscience (our capacity to recognize the true and the good) to determine the conditions for communal living. This does not justify a value-free objectivity since “to genuine human reason belongs the morality that is fed by God’s commandments. This morality is not some private affair; it has public significance. For example,

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 113.

⁴² Interview in *La Repubblica*, 18th November 2003, in Rowland, *ibidem*.

⁴³ J. Ratzinger, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, p. 76, in Rowland, p. 114.

⁴⁴ Rowland, *ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem* p. 116.

Ratzinger, rejecting the modern belief in “value-free” market mechanisms, believes that today economic affairs are driven by a form of liberalism that, as Rowland put it, specifically excludes the heart and the possibility of seeing God⁴⁶. Modern culture tends to hinder the introduction of moral responsibility, love and justice into the worlds of work, of commerce and of politics. In a word, the dominant liberalism excludes conscience, properly understood, because it excludes God.

*Modern Agnosticism*⁴⁷

The modern, scientific attitude, at its best, would say that it would be best to refrain from a judgement on the matter of God’s existence. This seems reasonable and humble, something almost noble. “Nobody can claim that he or she ‘knows’ in the proper sense of the word that there is no God. One can work on the hypothesis that God does not exist and try on this basis to explain the universe”⁴⁸. This, the basic assumption of modern science, has one important corollary. Since the hypothetical cannot be transcended, even the most plausible explanation of the universe cannot lead to a scientific certainty about the non-existence of God. “Nobody can grasp experimentally the totality of being and its requirements. At this point we reach quite simply the limits of *la condition humaine*...”⁴⁹.

The question of God cannot be squeezed into the confines of science. “In this sense the claim of ‘scientific atheism is an absurd presumption, yesterday just as much as today and tomorrow”⁵⁰. Should we therefore be satisfied with a humble, honest, even pious acknowledgement of agnosticism? Ratzinger urges caution in answering this question. The trouble is that “the thirst for the infinite belongs quite simply to what it is to be human. The human frontier can only be that which has no frontiers, and the boundaries of science ought not to be confused with the boundaries of our existence”⁵¹. When science claims that it exhausts human knowledge, it becomes unscientific.

But the real question is: is agnosticism viable as an answer not only for science but especially in terms of human living? Another way of putting the question is: Can we live on hypothesis, “as if there were no God”, if perhaps

⁴⁶ This is one of the basic themes of Pope Benedict’s encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*.

⁴⁷ See Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ, Exercises in Faith, Hope and Love* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1991), pp. 14–25.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

God exists? For us human beings the question of God is not a hypothetical one: it is an existential one that affects our lives into the smallest detail. Whatever about the theory, in practice I must decide between two possibilities: “to live as if there were no God or to live as if God did exist and was the determining reality for my life”⁵². If I adopt the first, I have taken the atheist position. If I take the second, I would be following the advice of Pascal at the birth of the modern age when he too recognized that the question of God’s existence could not be solved by rational reflection: He advised the agnostic, the honest, upright man who admits that he does not know, to live as if God existed and verify the truth of this contention in the experiment of his own life. What all this means is, very simply, that agnosticism collapses under the weight of human experience. Agnosticism is more than a theory: it also affects how we live. It amounts to practical atheism. Ratzinger concludes “We are not allowed neutrality when faced with the question of God. We can only say yes or no, and this with all the consequences extending right down to the smallest details of life”⁵³.

To reject the question of God, is to shut ourselves in on ourselves; it is to forget the inner call of our being – primordial conscience. The modern era is marked by its feeling of self-sufficiency, of all-knowing – even to the extent of claiming to put the question of God to the test of rational thought, as though we could find the criteria with which to judge God. “But we deceive ourselves”, Ratzinger comments, “by making ourselves the lord of truth in this way. “It withdraws itself from those who claim self-sufficiency and reveals itself only to those who approach it with an attitude of reverence, of adoring humility”⁵⁴.

By way of contrast, the modern age is based on the power of natural science, as Galileo put it, to place nature on the rack by means of experiments in order to extract its secrets by force⁵⁵. Its success has been stupendous in terms of knowledge and ability. “The only thing is that, if we grant validity to this way of thinking alone, the throne of domination over nature on which we have placed ourselves will have been build on nothing; it must collapse and bring us and the world down in its fall”⁵⁶. The mastery and domination of nature is not sufficient. We have betrayed our real vocation, which is to search for truth, the truth about who and what we are. We must recover that openness to the infinite that defines us as human beings. Another way of putting it is that we must learn to be vigilant and sensitive to the whole of being. This requires “a humility of thought that is ready to bow before the majesty of truth, before

⁵² Ibidem, p. 17.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 21.

⁵⁵ This is also attributed to Francis Bacon, while others claim that it was invented by Leibniz and wrongly attributed by him to Bacon.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 22.

which we are not judges but supplicants – it reveals itself only to the watchful and humble heart”⁵⁷. This is also true for the great discoveries of science, which are the products of long, painstaking attempts to come to the truth of the matter.

However, openness to the infinite should not be mistaken with credulity or the denial of the need for a critical mind: “on the contrary, it demands the keenest self-criticism. It is more open and more critical than that limitation to the sphere of the empirical in which human beings make their desire for mastery the final criterion of knowledge”⁵⁸.

Instead, we must learn again to become alert to the deeper dimensions of reality in general and human existence in particular. We must learn “humility in front of the greatness of truth; and readiness to be purified by it”. We must also listen to the great witnesses to the truth, the great thinkers and, above all, the great saints, those who have first-hand experience of Truth, of God. Above all, we must pray for that purity of heart which according to the Beatitudes is the precondition for seeing God, for knowledge of God. “The impure heart ... is the very opposite, the presumptuous heart that is shut in on itself, that is completely filled with itself and incapable of finding room for the majesty of truth that demands reverence and ultimately worship”⁵⁹. In summary, agnosticism collapses in the face of reality. We cannot avoid facing up to the question of God. But we can only approach this question by adopting certain attitudes: “listening to the message that rises up from our existence and from the world as a whole; attentiveness towards humankind’s religious perception and experience; the resolute and unwavering commitment of our time and inner energy to this question that affects everyone personally”⁶⁰.

But even within the modern world steeped in a culture characterized by agnosticism, the voice of primordial conscience cannot be entirely stifled. This was acknowledged in a dramatic way by Pope Benedict XVI in his address in Assisi at the Meeting of World Religions in September 2010. There he praised not agnosticism as such but agnostics, representatives of whom he had also invited to the meeting in Assisi. These, he said, were “people to whom the gift of faith has not been given, but who are nevertheless on the lookout for truth, searching for God. Such people do not simply assert: ‘There is no God’. They suffer from his absence and yet are inwardly making their way towards him, inasmuch as they seek truth and goodness. They are ‘pilgrims of truth, pilgrims

⁵⁷ Ibidem, pp. 22–23.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 24. See Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI in *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (London, etc.: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 92–96 on the “pure of heart”.

⁶⁰ Idem, *To Look on Christ*, op. cit., 24–5.

of peace'. They ask questions of both sides". In a sense, they are a leaven in society. One commentator (Robert Moynihan) went so far as to entitle his speech: "In praise of Agnostics". Earlier in the speech, the Pope had warned of the danger of being too certain of one's religious beliefs (one of the sources of fanaticism and religious violence). This happens when the use of reason in matters of faith is ignored, thus (though he did not use the term) effectively silencing conscience. But conscience can never be entirely silenced. That is the human source of hope for individuals and for society. The Pope comments: "These people [agnostics] are seeking the truth, they are seeking the true God, whose image is frequently concealed in the religions because of the ways in which they are often practised. Their inability to find God is partly the responsibility of believers with a limited or even falsified image of God. So all their struggling and questioning is in part an appeal to believers to purify their faith, so that God, the true God, becomes accessible"⁶¹. In another context, while commenting on the Beatitudes, Benedict rejects the attitude common today to let everyone live by whatever religion they happen to be born into, as though religious differences were insignificant (something that is contradicted by empirical evidence). Instead he affirms that what God demands is "that we become inwardly attentive to his quiet exhortation, which is present in us and which tears us away from what is merely habitual and put us on the road to truth. To 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' – that is the path that lies open to everybody; that is the way that finds its destination in Jesus Christ". That is our conscience – and that is what shapes cultures and enables them to find their fulfilment in Christ.

RATZINGER O WSPÓŁCZESNEJ KULTURZE, PRAWDZIE I SUMIENIU (STRESZCZENIE)

„Dobra Nowina do pewnego stopnia zakłada kulturę; nigdy jej nie zastępuje, ale odciska na niej swoje piętno” (Joseph Ratzinger). Teza ta zostaje potwierdzona, gdy bada się ogólnie rolę kultury w refleksji teologicznej, jak też w szczególności wpływ Ewangelii na kulturę (wartości, instytucje, a przede wszystkim język społeczeństwa). Ratzinger analizuje interakcję kultury, która zawsze pozostaje partykularna, z uniwersalną prawdą Objawienia, zakotwiczonego ze swej strony w partykularnej kulturze. Spotkanie pomiędzy kulturą i Ewangelią jest możliwe dzięki roli, jaką pełni sumienie w poznaniu prawdy, przez co przekracza granice kultury. Ratzinger rozumie sumienie w pierwszym rzędzie nie jako akt sądenia, ale jako ontologiczne uwarunkowanie tegoż aktu, tzn. jako zdolność i egzystencjalną możliwość poznania prawdy i dobra. Nie jest ono sprawą prywatną, ale ma głębokie polityczne i kulturowe konsekwencje. Sumienie, jak wszystkie ludzkie sprawy,

⁶¹ Quoted from the Vatican Website.

nie działa w próżni, ale w kontekście osobistej siatki kulturowej, która jest zawsze ambiwalentna. Wszystkie kultury potrzebują ewangelizacji, ale ewangelizacja współczesnej kultury Zachodu wiąże się ze szczególnymi problemami ze względu na to, że kultura ta sama w sobie stanowi produkt uboczny chrześcijaństwa. Charakterystyczne jest dla niej zjawisko modernizmu, którego pochodzenie musi zostać uwzględnione, aby spotkanie z tą kulturą miało być owocne. Centralnym jej objawem jest agnostycyzm, czyli praktyczna negacja istnienia Boga. Jeżeli jednak nie ma Boga, to czy Jego głos może rozbrzmiewać w ludzkim sercu? Czy ta misja jest możliwa?

RATZINGER ÜBER MODERNE KULTUR, WAHRHEIT UND GEWISSEN (ZUSAMMENFASSUNG)

„Das Evangelium setzt bis zu einem gewissen Punkt die Kultur voraus; es ersetzt sie niemals, aber es hinterlässt seine Spur an ihr” (Joseph Ratzinger). Dieser These wird durch die Analyse der Rolle der Kultur in der theologischen Reflexion, aber auch des Einflusses des Evangeliums auf die Kultur (Werte, Institutionen und vor allem Sprache der Gesellschaft) nachgegangen. Ratzinger untersucht die Interaktion von Kultur, die immer partikular ist, mit der universalen Wahrheit der Offenbarung, die ihrerseits in einer partikularen Kultur inkarniert ist. Die Begegnung zwischen der Kultur und der Wahrheit des Evangeliums ist auf Grund der Rolle möglich, die das Gewissen spielt, indem es die Wahrheit erkennt und so die Grenzen der Kultur überschreitet. Nach Ratzinger ist das Gewissen nicht in erster Linie als Akt des Urteilens zu verstehen, sondern als die ontologische Präsupposition dieses Aktes, d.h., die Fähigkeit und der existentielle Impuls in Richtung der Erkenntnis der Wahrheit und des Guten. Es ist keine Privatsache, sondern hat tiefe politische und kulturelle Konsequenzen. Wie alle menschlichen Dinge, operiert das Gewissen nicht in einem Vakuum, sondern im Rahmen der persönlichen Kulturmatrix, die immer ambivalent ist. Alle Kulturen müssen evangelisiert werden. Die Evangelisierung der modernen westlichen Kultur stellt sich aber deswegen besonders schwierig dar, weil sie selbst ein Nebenprodukt des Christentums ist. Sie wird charakterisiert durch das Phänomen der Modernität, deren Wurzel vor jeder fruchtbaren Begegnung verstanden werden muss. Zentral für diese Kultur ist der Agnostizismus, die praktische Leugnung von Gottesexistenz. Wenn es aber keinen Gott gibt, kann dann seine Stimme im menschlichen Herzen gehört werden? Ist diese Mission unmöglich?