

On Relativism

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IN A NEWSPAPER COLUMN after the first year of the Pope's pontificate, John Allen wrote: "In terms of content, no one has to speculate about Benedict XVI's most important teaching concern. He told us, the day before his election, in his homily *Pro Eligendo Papa* on April 18, 2005: the challenge to a 'dictatorship of relativism' in the developed West."¹ Allen's prediction finds support in a long series of documents. As Prefect of the Congregation for Doctrine, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger frequently pointed to the evils of relativism. At Hong Kong in 1993, he called it "the gravest problem of our time," and at Guadalajara in 1996, he called it "the central problem of faith for our time."² Ratzinger returns to the theme of relativism in several books published in English since he became pope, notably *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* and *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism*.³ From

¹ John L. Allen, Jr, "Pope Benedict XVI, One Year On" (cover story), *National Catholic Reporter*, April 21, 2006, 12–14.

² Both these lectures are in substance incorporated into Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004) [originally *Glaube-Wahrheit-Toleranz: Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 2003)] (this work will be cited in text and notes as "TT"). Pt. I, ch. 2 ("Faith, Religion and Culture," 55–79) incorporates much of the Hong Kong address, while pt. II, ch. 1 ("Variations on the Theme of Faith, Religion, and Culture," 115–37), presents a version of the Guadalajara address (quotations above are at 72 and 117).

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006) [originally *L'Europa di Benedetto nella crisi delle culture* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2005)]; Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, trans. Michael F. Moore (New York: Basic Books,

these and a few other sources, we can piece together a fairly complete description of his critique.

Origins of Relativism

Relativism holds that mutually opposed points of view can all be valid. According to Ratzinger, relativism is an outgrowth of the metaphysical agnosticism of Immanuel Kant (TT, 126, 135). Rejecting the possibility of metaphysics in the usual sense, Kant held that the human mind can properly know only sensory “phenomena” or what can be logically deduced from them. Knowledge is therefore conditioned by appearances, which are relative to the observer. The absolute, Kant maintained, cannot be found within history or validly deduced from it, though earthly realities may be interpreted as pointing to it.

Kant himself, while denying that we can strictly know eternal and necessary principles, avoided relativism by affirming that there were universal and necessary a priori forms of the intellect and postulates of practical reason that enjoyed the same universality. Making use of these postulates, the enlightened person could, in Kant’s opinion, construct a system of morals and a viable religion within the limits of reason alone without appeal to the supernatural. But Kant continued to hold that there can be no knowledge properly so called of transcendent realities.⁴

Nineteenth-century thinkers in the West, sharing Kant’s agnosticism, likewise stopped short of relativism. The dominant outlook was scientific positivism, a system that attempted to account for all reality on the basis of fixed mechanical laws. This system eliminated morality as a specific category. The favored theory was utilitarianism, which assessed the goodness and badness of human acts not on grounds of transcendental precepts or intrinsic values, but on the basis of their beneficial or harmful consequences.⁵

Moreover, socialists of various types attempted to construct a fully scientific explanation of society. Marxism was the last great effort to found a universally valid code of behavior and to lay the foundations of a new society. The collapse of Marxism in central and eastern Europe in 1989 brought about a profound disillusionment. Relativism has filled the resulting vacuum (TT, 116–17).

2006) [originally *Senza radici: Europa, relativismo, christianesimo, islam* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 2004)] (this work will be cited in text and notes as “WR”).

⁴ Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, 51–52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

In WR, co-author Marcello Pera discusses two forms of contemporary philosophical relativism: contextualism and deconstructionism (Pera in WR, 11–22). Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers represent the first. They maintain that different cultures have their own rules of thinking and speaking. Different linguistic universes, they say, are incommensurable. What one community holds to be true, beautiful, and good is only so according to the criteria by which that community guides its judgment. There are no meta-criteria by which to judge what is universally true, beautiful, or good. Since all the criteria are contextual, relativism, they argue, must in the end prevail.

The second form of relativism derives from Nietzsche and is masterfully represented by Jacques Derrida, who deconstructs supposedly universal concepts and assertions to show that they are self-contradictory. For this school of thinkers, there are no facts, only interpretations. The meaning of a text depends entirely on the subjectivity of the reader.

Wittgenstein and Derrida have their disciples and peers in the United States. The names of Willard Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty, and John Caputo come to mind. But I shall not undertake to examine their work here, since Ratzinger does not deal with them at length.⁶

Moral Impact of Relativism

Relativism brings with it a revision of many basic concepts. It rejects any universal moral law rooted in the nature of the human person.⁷ In a consistent relativism, morality is an existential judgment essentially linked to the particular situation. Instead of being subject to any general moral laws, individual persons are free to determine their own concept of what it means to be human. Some even speak of “moral

⁶ Ratzinger deals briefly with Rorty in “What is Truth? The Significance of Religious and Ethical Values in a Pluralist Society,” in *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006) [originally *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs: Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 2005)], 53–72 [this article was originally published as “Die Bedeutung religiöser und sittlicher Werte in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft,” *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 21 (1992): 500–12, and trans. in Joseph Ratzinger, *Valeurs pour un temps de crise* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2005), 23–49].

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on “Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life” (November 24, 2002), II.2, *Origins* 32 (January 30, 2003): 537, 539–43, at 540.

freedom,” by which they mean the right to choose the moral system by which they shall live.⁸ Any other view, it is held, would be an undue limitation on freedom.

According to the classical concept, which Ratzinger accepts, freedom means the capacity of a self-determining agent to participate in the fullness of being according to its own nature and capacities.⁹ Freedom, rather than consisting in mere potentiality, realizes itself in actions whereby the capacity is fulfilled. Freedom is inseparable from truth; it must be measured according to reality; otherwise, it destroys itself (TT, 248–49). Human beings cannot realize themselves if they aspire to be dogs or angels, but only if they act according to the potentialities of their nature.

In the present relativist climate, which arose out of the Enlightenment, with its emancipatory anti-traditionalism, freedom has come to be understood almost exclusively in terms of its negative element: indeterminacy or liberation. Every kind of constraint, obligation, or commitment is seen as a limitation on freedom. To be free is to be able to do whatever one pleases. The good is whatever I decide that it shall be (CEP, 259–60).

Ratzinger points to the work of Sartre to illustrate the radical separation of freedom from truth. For Sartre, he says:

There is no truth. Freedom is without direction or measure. Yet this complete absence of truth, the complete absence of any kind of moral or metaphysical restraint, the absolute anarchical freedom of man constituted by his self-determination, is revealed, for anyone who tries to live it out, not as the most sublime exaltation of existence, but as a life of nothingness, as absolute emptiness, as the definition of damnation. . . . The anarchistic freedom, taken to a radical conclusion, does not redeem man; it makes him into a faulty creation, living without meaning. (TT, 244–45)

⁸ Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom* (New York: Norton, 2001).

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, trans. Robert Nowell (New York: Crossroad, 1988) [originally *Kirche, Ökumene und Politik* (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizione Paoline, 1987)], 198 (this work will be cited in text and notes as “CEP”).

Social and Political Implications

In various books, Ratzinger considers the implications of relativism for society and for theology. We may at this point consider some of the political applications in contemporary democratic theory. According to the classical concept, democracy presupposes the existence of immutable truths and rights that are independent of society; for example, that human beings are, as the Declaration of Independence puts it, endowed by their Creator with natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In modern relativism, natural laws and rights disappear. The free society is said to be perfectly open-ended and untouched by absolutes. The citizens acknowledge that they have only fragmentary notions of what is right and true. In the procedural democracy, citizens who claim any certainty about ultimate questions are considered unreliable because they do not concede that truth and right can be determined by majority vote (TT, 117).

In several of his encyclicals, Pope John Paul II asserted the classical view that democracy cannot stand without moral values that are inscribed in nature and in no way conferred by the society itself.¹⁰ Relativists complain that these encyclicals “have murderous consequences for democracy” and promote an equivalent of Islamic fundamentalism.¹¹ Rejecting these charges, Ratzinger accepts the classical view that democracy presupposes certain rights and duties as prior to the state that are not subject to a majority vote. The relativist theory, which overlooks or denies these innate rights, creates the risk that these rights will be abrogated by the state.¹²

The concept of tolerance likewise undergoes a mutation. According to the classical concept, it means permitting something evil to exist, usually on the ground that its suppression would involve a greater evil. In the relativist framework, tolerance is reinterpreted as meaning the positive approval of ideas and values that are contrary to one's own beliefs and standards. Although tolerance is sometimes carried to ludicrous extremes, universal tolerance is rare. Most people still recognize certain acts as universally unacceptable, such as, for

¹⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1991) [*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 83 (1991): 793–867], §46. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) [*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87 (1995): 401–522], §70.

¹¹ Ratzinger quotes Paolo Flores d'Arcais to this effect in TT, 190.

¹² Ratzinger makes this criticism in many places. In *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 60–64, he rejects the majority principle of Hans Kelsen and Richard Rorty, and he favors the natural law approach of Jacques Maritain.

example, the deliberate killing of innocent persons (TT, 117–18).

Paradoxically, the cult of tolerance in its new guise tends to engender an intolerance of its own. In some countries, ministers are required by law to perform homosexual marriages; hospitals run by churches are required to perform abortions or distribute contraceptives. In Sweden, Ratzinger notes, a minister who presented the biblical teaching on homosexuality received a prison sentence (WR, 128).

Nonetheless, the concept of dialogue has had a long and honorable history in contributing to tolerance. Classically, it has meant a search for truth in which conflicting opinions were tested by rational argument. But in the relativist view, dialogue ceases to aim at truth and settles for achieving the practical compromise of helping people who disagree to live peacefully together.¹³ Some relativists lay down the requirement that all parties entering a dialogue admit in advance that they are perhaps wrong and that their opponents may very well be right. Certainty about one's own opinions is falsely equated with intolerance. The Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on Religious Liberty, showed that respect for religious freedom is compatible with, and indeed required by, firm commitment to the Christian faith (*Dignitatis Humanae*, §1).

Let us now consider some theological applications of relativism. Ratzinger discusses relativism in comparative religion, Christology, ecclesiology, doctrine, and worship.

Religious Pluralism

In comparative religion, Ratzinger takes the writings of several contemporary authors as examples of relativism. The English Presbyterian, John Hick, takes as his starting point the teaching of Kant that we cannot know things as they are in their essential reality (*noumena*), but only as appearances (*phenomena*). The divine is therefore unknowable in itself. After a year's stay in India, Hick was able to combine his Kantian agnosticism with the negative theology of Asia, which maintained that the divine remains veiled in absolute transcendence and shows itself only in fragmentary manifestations. The contemporary encounter of cultures, Hick believes, requires a religious relativism in which each religion discards its claim to preeminence and recognizes other

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in Light of Recent Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995) [originally *Wesen und Auftrag der Theologie: Versuche zu ihrer Ortsbestimmung in Disput der Gegenwart* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1993)], 32–34.

religions on the same plane as itself. This would mean that Christians entering into dialogue would have to abandon the assurance that God stands uniquely revealed in his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁴

According to the relativist view, which is prevalent among contemporary students of religion, many or all religions are manifestations of one and the same reality. The different names and images of God can be translated into one another because they point ultimately to one and the same reality (TT, 22, 25–26). Since all religions are in principle equal, mission in the sense of evangelization can be only a kind of religious imperialism and must therefore be renounced (TT, 105). Dialogue, which finds ever new agreements, must be substituted for proclamation. As the religions grow in mutual openness, multi-religious prayer, such as that offered in the World Days of Prayer at Assisi in 1986 and 2002, becomes appropriate. Without absolutely condemning this practice, Ratzinger makes it clear that he considers it conducive to religious indifferentism, and hence generally undesirable. He particularly objects to any confusion between the personal and impersonal understandings of God (TT, 106–09).

In both *Dominus Jesus*¹⁵ and his presentation of this Declaration to the press on September 5, 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger forcefully rejected religious pluralism of the type he attributes to John Hick.¹⁶ “The Church’s constant missionary proclamation,” he wrote, “is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only de facto but also de iure (or in principle). As a consequence, it is held that certain truths have been superseded: for example, the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, . . . the personal unity between the Eternal Word and

¹⁴ TT, 119–23. In the *National Catholic Reporter*, October 24, 1997, Hick responded, contesting the accuracy of some of Ratzinger’s statements about him. But in his reply, Hick admitted that, as a religious pluralist, he regards the great religions as different ways of conceiving “the intimate reality we call God.” See also John L. Allen, Jr., *Pope Benedict XVI: A Biography of Joseph Ratzinger* (New York: Continuum, 2000; repr. 2005).

¹⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000) (this work will be cited in text and notes as “DJ”), in *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Jesus*, ed. Stephen J. Pope and Charles Heffling (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002): 3–23, and in *Origins* 30 (September 14, 2000): 209, 211–19.

¹⁶ Ratzinger’s presentation of the Declaration at a press conference is reprinted in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: the Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn et al., trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005) [originally *Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich, 2002)], 209–16.

Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit,” and many others. DJ then goes on to explain some of the philosophical and theological sources of this religious pluralism, including “relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others” (DJ, §4). The Declaration affirms:

In contemporary theological reflection there often emerges an approach to Jesus of Nazareth that considers him a particular, finite, historical figure, who reveals the divine not in an exclusive way, but in a way complementary with other revelatory and salvific figures. The Infinite, the Absolute, the Ultimate Mystery of God would thus manifest itself to humanity in many ways and in many historical figures: Jesus of Nazareth would be one of these. More concretely, for some, Jesus would be one of the many faces which the Logos has assumed in the course of time to communicate with humanity in a salvific way. (DJ, §9)

DJ continues by discussing the opinion that the Eternal Word has a salvific mission more encompassing than the incarnate Word. Although no adversaries are named, the Declaration may here be referring to Raimundo Panikkar, whose position Ratzinger had discussed at some length in his Hong Kong address of 1993. Ratzinger there insisted that Jesus of Nazareth is not just the highest manifestation of the Logos; he is the Logos in person. The Declaration stoutly affirms what it calls “The fullness and definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus Christ,” supporting this position with many quotations from the New Testament, the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, the Second Vatican Council, and Pope John Paul II (DJ, title of ch. I; *passim*).

At various points in his writings, Cardinal Ratzinger takes on both Paul Knitter, an American who teaches at Xavier University in Cincinnati, and New Age religion. Knitter has forged a link between Hick’s religious pluralism and the liberation theologies of Latin America. Conceding that we cannot know which views of God are correct, Knitter holds that all of us can, nevertheless, act in ways that promote freedom for the oppressed. Orthopraxy, he maintains, can be our guide when orthodoxy fails. Knitter’s theology of religion, according to Ratzinger, leads back into political theology. Knitter assumes some of the theses of Marxist liberation

theology that are now widely regarded as incoherent (TT, 123–26).

The so-called New Age religion is still another offshoot of relativism. This movement, according to Ratzinger, accepts the impossibility of overcoming relativism either by metaphysics or by orthopraxis. Nonetheless, it attempts to encounter the Absolute by a kind of dissolution of the self through ecstatic absorption into the cosmic whole. God is understood not as a personal being distinct from the world, but as a spiritual energy at work throughout the universe. We can experience the intoxication of the infinite by entering collectively into the cosmic order through music, dance, and the beguiling interplay of light and darkness. We become free not by dominating the world, but by letting ourselves be carried away and, as it were, sublimated. New Age religion, in various forms, has affinities with ancient Gnosticism and pantheism. It renounces every effort to give an intelligible account of reality (TT, 126–29).

Ecclesiological Relativism

Corresponding to relativism among religions is an ecumenical or ecclesiological relativism that sees the different Christian churches as mutually complementary manifestations of one and the same Church, which is present in all of them. In a number of writings, beginning with a 1985 Notification of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger attributes this view to the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff.¹⁷ The one Church of Christ, according to Boff and a number of other contemporary writers, subsists in a multiplicity of churches. According to this view, Jesus Christ did not found an institution, but only a movement, which developed after the resurrection in accordance with sociological laws. The churches, which are simply human constructions, legitimately differ in their offices, liturgies, and theologies.

In opposition to this relativistic view, Ratzinger maintains that Jesus Christ founded the Church as a single visible institution, which continues to exist with all its essential features throughout the centuries as the one Catholic Church. The Church, therefore, is not something that invents itself from below. Sacramentally structured, the Church exists only in a hierarchical succession of ministers and sacraments.¹⁸ Ratzinger insists—quite rightly in my opinion—that, when

¹⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Notification on the Book *Church: Charism and Power* by Father Leonardo Boff, O.F.M.,” March 11, 1985, in *Origins* 14 (April 4, 1985): 683, 685–87.

¹⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco:

Vatican II taught that the Church of Christ “subsists” in the Catholic Church, it meant that the Church is fully present in Catholicism and not elsewhere. Elements of the true Church can, however, be found in different modes and degrees in non-Catholic Christianity.¹⁹

Dogmatic Relativism

The negative impact of relativism does not affect only inter-religious and inter-church relations. It affects the inner unity and strength of the Catholic Church herself. From the relativist perspective, God (or the divine) lies in a realm that eludes proper knowledge and is not accessible except through symbol and metaphor. But the realism of the Bible and of the Christian creeds contradicts this agnosticism. The “I am” of Jesus and the “*et incarnatus est*” of the Christian creed make it clear that God himself acts in history. Jesus cannot be numbered among the avatars; he is the Son of God not in some mythological or poetical way of speaking, but in very truth (TT, 94). Christianity, therefore, has a very specific claim to truth. In the words of Ratzinger:

Whereas myth, whether in Greece or India, does no more than multiply images of the truth, which for its part remains incomprehensible, faith in Christ, as it is expressed in its basic assertions, is never interchangeable. True, faith does not remove the essential limitations of man in his relation to the truth: it does not, in other words, eliminate the law of analogy. Nevertheless, analogy is not the same as metaphor. Analogy can always be broadened and deepened, but, within the boundaries of man’s possibilities, it declares the very truth. In this sense, rationality belongs to the very essence of Christianity in a way which the other religions do not claim for themselves.²⁰

Cardinal Ratzinger frequently points to the connection between religious relativism and cultural relativism. Ernst Troeltsch, among others, maintained that religion necessarily reflects the culture of the

Ignatius, 1987) [originally *Theologische Prinzipienlehre: Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie* (Munich: Wewel, 1982)], 295–96.

¹⁹ DJ, §16; Joseph Ratzinger, “*Deus Locutus est Nobis in Filio*: Some Reflections on Subjectivity, Christology, and the Church,” in *Proclaiming the Truth of Jesus Christ: Papers from the Vallombrosa Meeting* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 13–30, at 26–27; Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 144–48.

²⁰ Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission*, 56.

people practicing it and that no single religion could be satisfying for people of radically different cultures. Late in life, Troeltsch came to the view that Christianity was “merely the side of God’s face that is turned toward Europe” (TT, 164, 176–77). Liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century maintained that the great dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation, elaborated by the Councils of the first few centuries, were products of Hellenistic culture and served to obscure the Gospel of Jesus.

Responding to the liberal Protestant Adolf von Harnack, Catholic Modernists such as Alfred Loisy agreed that the Gospel had undergone a series of historical transformations, but they justified this constant re-interpretation on the ground that religion must keep pace with the advance of the human spirit. They adopted, in effect, Hegel’s theory that truth itself evolves. Relativism thus leads to a new dogmatism that accepts the superiority of the present over all that comes down from the past. Every system other than relativism is dismissed as a preparatory stage of human history that is basically obsolete and deserves to be relativized.²¹

Ratzinger proposes a very different relationship between faith and culture. For him, the human spirit in any age is capable of transcending cultural limitations and of remolding cultures in light of trans-cultural insights. Whereas Harnack lamented Hellenization as a distortion of the Gospel, Ratzinger would argue that Christianity evangelized Hellenistic culture and gave it the capacity to express the truth of the Gospel in a new language. The truth of revelation does not have to be injected into a ready-made culture, but it enriches and purifies the culture by entering into it. The dogmas of the patristic age, consequently, do not need to be left behind, as if they were tied to one particular moment of history. They are irreversibly true, even though the language and concepts in which they are expressed may bear the mark of their time and may advantageously be revised (TT, 55–71).

Exegetical and Liturgical Implications

Contemporary relativism affects the Christian faith in its most basic expressions. Relativists read the Scriptures as if they were products of a rather primitive religion. Their exegetical method prevents them from seeking the word of God in the sacred text, as the faith requires one

²¹ Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, 45.

to do. Once faith ceases to exert a controlling influence on exegesis, other worldviews such as scientific positivism step into the breach. Historical-critical method tends to break up the biblical books into fragments and to reconstruct hypothetical sources, as if they were the keys to the right interpretation. The authority of Holy Scripture in this way becomes relativized.²²

Relativists approach the liturgy as though its true purpose were to express the religious experience of the autonomous group here and now conducting the celebration. On this theory, liturgy ought to be inventive and creative. Ratzinger, in an interview of 1985, insisted: “We must be far more resolute than heretofore in opposing rationalistic relativism, confusing claptrap, and pastoral infantilism. These things degrade the liturgy.”²³ For Ratzinger, the liturgy presupposes that the heavens have been opened up and that God is coming to his people. The liturgy, therefore, must be the action of Christ in the Church—a sacred rite of the whole Christ in which the congregation is primarily receptive. Ratzinger writes: “The decisive factor, therefore, is the primacy of Christology. The liturgy is God’s work, or it does not exist at all. . . . Since the priest represents this ‘first’ of Christ, he refers each gathering to a point beyond itself into the whole.”²⁴ This interpretation of the liturgy is at opposite poles from modern relativistic individualism.

Avoidance of Absolutism

I do not wish to leave the impression that Ratzinger is an unqualified absolutist. He recognizes that people of very diverse convictions have to live together and that the laws of the community must be acceptable to the citizens as a body. In the Church, he has always favored what he calls a “fruitful interplay between periphery and center, between the

²² Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–23.

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985) [originally a German manuscript published as *Rapporto sulla fede* (Milan: Edizione Paoline, 1985)], 121.

²⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song to the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today* (New York: Crossroad, 1996) [originally *Ein neues Lied für den Herrn: Christusglaube und Liturgie in der Gegenwart* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 1995)], 133.

living multiplicity of Catholic life (represented by the episcopacy) and the unity which the primacy must protect.”²⁵ In the realm of politics, he recognizes the necessity to provide for “the coexistence of people in whom truth and error are often intermixed” (THV, 143). It would be illusory to hope for an ideal situation within history. For this reason, he contends, “it is our task always to struggle for the relatively best possible framework of human coexistence in our own present day” (TT, 257). A certain measure of relativity is therefore legitimate, though a nucleus of common beliefs and values is necessary to hold society together (TT, 117).

Ratzinger therefore takes a very nuanced position on the responsibilities of lawmakers. He strongly opposes confessionalism and theocracy, which blur the distinction between religious law and civil law.²⁶ “The Catholic,” he writes, “will not and should not, through the making of laws, impose a hierarchy of values that can only be recognized and enacted within the faith” (WR, 128). A sound legal order need only reclaim a moral minimum accessible to reason, which all human beings share. In recent writings, Ratzinger expresses the desire that Europe may enjoy a kind of generalized Christian civil religion comparable to that which Alexis de Tocqueville found in the United States (WR, 107–13). He favors a position equally removed from the two extremes of absolutism and relativism.

In a thorough discussion of relativism, it would be necessary to reclaim some elements of truth in the positions Ratzinger rejects as relativistic. The Second Vatican Council made the point that the various religions of the world often reflect rays of that truth that enlightens all peoples.²⁷ John Paul II, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, takes a generally positive approach toward the religions of the East, which he says, “have contributed greatly to the history of morality and culture” and enable countless multitudes to have implicit faith in Christ the universal Redeemer.²⁸

Similar observations apply to the question of ecumenism. Vatican

²⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, trans. Henry Traub, S.J., et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 10 (this work will be cited in text and notes as “THV”).

²⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note, §6 (p. 541).

²⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (1965) [in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J., 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 2:968–71], §2.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994), 83.

II, in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, spoke of a legitimate variety in theological expressions of doctrine and observed that the separated churches of the East have often used expressions that are complementary rather than conflicting with those accepted in the West.²⁹ John Paul II suggested that the divisions among Christians might be a path “continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ’s Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ.” He added: “Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise.”³⁰ Ecumenists such as Yves Congar have emphasized how much Catholics have to gain from living contact with the ideas and practices of other Christian churches, which contain authentic Christian insights as well as errors.³¹ The affirmation that the Church of Christ subsists in Roman Catholicism should not mislead us into thinking that existing forms of Catholic teaching and worship have nothing to learn from dialogue with other Christian traditions.

In reacting against historical and cultural relativism, Ratzinger sometimes seems to minimize the limitations imposed upon Catholics by their temporal and geographical situation. The Catholic Church needs the abilities, resources, and customs of each people in order to achieve her full catholicity and to show forth the infinite riches that lie hidden in Christ (*Lumen Gentium*, §13). Here again, Vatican II can supplement the observations of Ratzinger. Pope John XXIII pointed out the need to avoid confusion between the deposit of faith and its historical expressions, which are always subject to revision. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation pointed out that we do not only receive the revelation from the past, but also grow in our understanding of it thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth. Thus, “as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.”³²

Ratzinger’s critique of the vulgarization of the liturgy in the experimentation that followed Vatican II made some very necessary points, but it should be seen as a corrective. He did not intend to deny

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) [in Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:908–20], §§11, 17.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold*, 153.

³¹ Yves Congar, “Ecumenical Experience and Conversion: A Personal Testimony,” in *The Sufficiency of God*, ed. Robert C. Mackie and Charles C. West (London: SCM, 1963), 71–87, at 74–75.

³² Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (1965) [in Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:971–81], §8.

the importance of simplifying the rites (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §§34, 50) and making adaptations for the sake of what the Council called “the full and active participation of all the people.”³³

In his critique of the tyranny of relativism, Cardinal Ratzinger (or Benedict XVI) deftly identifies one of the most pervasive evils of our day. He correctly points out the need to re-appropriate the great heritage of philosophical reason, tutored by Christian faith, that has come down to us. He rightly judges that Western civilization cannot continue to prosper without regaining the metaphysical realism that undergirded its past achievements. Following his leadership, we must continue to challenge the reigning nominalism, empiricism, and agnosticism that are conspiring to undermine Christian faith and to weaken the civilization that was built on the twin pillars of classical reason and biblical revelation. NEV

³³ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) [in Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:820–43], §14.