

*Spiritus Sanctus non est Neoconservatus:*¹
On Weigel's Reading of *Gaudium et Spes*

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FEW DOCUMENTS are as capable of dividing interpreters into “camps” as *Gaudium et Spes*. It would seem from all accounts that it was certainly one of the most, if not the most, contentious documents during the Council, and it has certainly not ceased to be a touchstone in current times. Tracey Rowland’s provocative *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*² can be read as an extended response to the cultural naivety of the document, while the dominant theology of the twenty years immediately following the Council can be read as a two-decade long performance of a fairly superficial reading of one aspect of the document. Furthermore, John Paul II’s pontificate, both in terms of its activity but especially in terms of its encyclicals, could be seen as a protracted attempt properly to retrieve the document—his repeated quotation, in every encyclical no less, of *Gaudium et spes* §22 should provide some evidence of this. It

¹ In his famous debate with Luther concerning the doctrine of predestination, Erasmus stated that, on this issue, he preferred to take his stand with the skeptics. Luther responded, “*Spiritus Sanctus non est skepticus*.” This title notwithstanding, I should explain at the outset that I am not using neoconservative as an epithet. I mean it in the sense that Alasdair MacIntyre uses “conservative liberal.” In other words, MacIntyre suggests that the only political discourse allowed in America is between liberal Liberals, conservative Liberals and radical Liberals. As I will be arguing, it is precisely the importance that Weigel places on taking sides in this conversation that makes his thought different from either John Paul II or Benedict XVI.

² Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

would not be much of an exaggeration, then, to say that, in spite of the fact that it is clearly not the best or most important document produced by the Council—this honor would clearly have to go to *Lumen Gentium* or *Dei Verbum*—it is still the most contentious. That it elicited a seemingly cranky commentary from Josef Ratzinger, during his allegedly more progressive phase (1968), only a few years after its promulgation provides even more evidence of its incendiary qualities.³

George Weigel's essay stands, then, in good company. And, like many of the commentaries and responses since the time of its writing, Weigel's comments are often quite critical. In what follows, I would like to examine Weigel's comments in the light of both the document and its retrieval in the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. My thesis is this: in spite of the fact that Weigel couches his criticisms in terms of the retrieval of *Gaudium et Spes* in the pontificate of John Paul II, there are significant differences in their respective readings, differences which go beyond matters of prudential judgment to the core of how *Gaudium et Spes* is to be retrieved for our time. Stated differently and with more content, John Paul II insinuates that the best way to retrieve *Gaudium et Spes* is in terms of the Christocentrism of paragraph 22; while Weigel pays lip-service to this and even applauds it, he underestimates its full implications. In order to make a case for this I shall proceed in three phases: first, I shall offer a reading of Weigel's comments which raises questions regarding those aspects of *Gaudium et Spes* that he finds "curiously dated"; second, I shall compare Weigel's concerns with those especially of Benedict XVI in order to show that the differences concern more than just matters of prudential judgment; third, I will draw some brief conclusions and offer some tentative suggestions based upon this comparative reading. A corollary of my thesis can be stated accordingly: John Paul II and Benedict XVI provide for a retrieval of *Gaudium et Spes* that gets to the root of modern errors in anthropology; these errors, at least as far as these two pontificates are concerned, did not begin with the (small "I") liberalism of the sixties, but with the (big "L") Liberalism of the Enlightenment.

³ I would like to agree at the outset with the position of Thomas Rourke regarding Ratzinger's reading of *Gaudium et Spes*: "Clearly, Ratzinger accepted the document as a definitive and authoritative document of an ecumenical council, with all that such a designation entails, whatever his reservations about some of the influences on its formation." Rourke, "Fundamental Politics: What We Must Learn from the Social Thought of Benedict XVI," *Communio* 35 (2008): 445, n. 22. While I wrote the current article before reading Rourke's, the entire approach that he takes coincides nicely with the central argument of this article.

Weigel's Lecture: "Rescuing *Gaudium et Spes*: The New Humanism of John Paul II"

Weigel's comments begin with a recognition of the many important and abiding insights of *Gaudium et Spes*, along with a brief synopsis of what the document was meant to do. Here Weigel mentions the important role played by then Karol Wojtyła, stating specifically that the second part of the document in particular foreshadows many of the things which John Paul II would say in *Centesimus Annus*. More particularly still, it is noted that *Gaudium et Spes*, like *Centesimus Annus* after it, takes a much more positive attitude than previous Church documents towards societies composed of "a democratic polity, a free economy, and a vibrant public moral culture, with the last being crucial to a proper functioning of the other two."⁴ But then Weigel moves rather quickly to those aspects of the document that now seem "curiously, even strangely, dated."

⁴ One of the difficulties of interpreting Vatican II centers on the issues of "continuity and newness." Pope Benedict XVI has recently called for a greater attention to the continuity between Vatican II and previous Church teachings, and a fine new study of the Council takes up this charge—*Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). In a somewhat curious review of this book—reviewed in conjunction with another more progressive one—the late Richard John Neuhaus says the following, "In the long history of church councils, Vatican II was different. While there is continuity in teaching, something remarkable really did happen at the council. The liberal proponents of a hermeneutic of rupture are not making up their argument out of whole cloth." Neuhaus, "What Really Happened at Vatican II," *First Things*, October 2008. These comments are somewhat striking coming from a well-known "conservative" such as Neuhaus, and it should not be denied that he is generally favorable towards the book. But there does seem to be some discomfort over too much emphasis on continuity. I mention this here, in the light of Neuhaus's close friendship and collaboration with Weigel over the years, because I think we can see a parallel situation in Weigel's reading of the social encyclicals leading up to *Centesimus Annus*. As will be shown at greater length below, this amounts to something like the following: "With *Centesimus Annus* the Church finally got over all that Socialism on the one hand and Capitalism on the other talk, and began to realize that Capitalism is the only game in town." Weigel's now infamous comments on Benedict XVI's most recent encyclical might be due in part to the fact that it disrupts Weigel's narrative of progress (from hostility to capitalism in the early encyclical tradition to its full embracing in *Centesimus Annus*). The point to be made at this time is this: it is clearly the case that one can err either in the direction of continuity—and here one would be in danger of missing what the Spirit was saying in this particular Council; or one can err in the direction of newness—and here one would find it hard to account for the Spirit's role in Church documents of the past. I will argue that John Paul II's *Christocentric* reading makes this balancing act easier than does Weigel's neo-liberal/neo-conservative approach.

At the center of Weigel's criticisms stands the charge that the Council was not more prescient about the real, incumbent dangers of the modern world. Indeed, he states that the Council seems to have been worried about things that turned out not to be very worrisome even while it worried insufficiently about things which were genuinely frightening. Throughout this litany of things to which the Council did and did not call attention, one cannot help but hear the echoes of America's very heated and very current culture wars. To put it bluntly, Weigel has a dog in this fight. One cannot help but suspect, in fact, that it is Weigel's take on the current culture wars that provides the vantage point from which he judges what the Council missed and what the Council got right. The danger here is twofold: (1) that the document is being read in an overly political, if not partisan, manner; and (2) that the Council is being read from an overly narrow (geographically and historically), American perspective.

For instance, the Council, in Weigel's view, is overly concerned about the threats of nuclear war, and not sufficiently about bio-ethical threats, threats to which people like Aldous Huxley were calling attention long before the Council convened. This is a fair enough point and it is certainly the case that the Church has had to turn more attention to such concerns in the years since the Council, but a couple of caveats should also be made in defense of the document's concerns. It is clear that it was part of John XXIII's intent to show that the Church was not merely *against* the various humanistic concerns and projects that marked the modern period: concerns over human rights, freedom, equality, and the like. Indeed, the Council intentionally avoided the language of condemnation (*damnat*) even with regard to something as egregious as anti-Semitism. With regard to the treatment of atheism in the document, for instance, then Josef Ratzinger put it this way:

In fact we may say that the weapon of condemnation had been tried to the limit of possibility by the decree of 1 July 1949, and that it is no longer possible to deal with the problem that way now. It is clear that the Church cannot but reject atheism and must oppose quite universally not only the persecution of the faithful but also the attack on human freedom generally. It is no less clear, however, that in addition it must reflect on its own share in the whole question of Marxism and the defectiveness of its own "humanism", and so accept the comprehensive question represented by Marxism as also concerning the Church itself.⁵

⁵ Josef Ratzinger, commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, "The Dignity of the Human Person," part 1, chap. 1, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 150.

The point here is that a direct condemnation along bio-ethical lines would have gone against the “tone” that the document was trying to strike. Instead, the document presented a positive anthropology which would, by implication, rule out such things as abortion and euthanasia in the name of the dignity of the human person created in the image of God. The worry over weapons of mass destruction, on the other hand, could be seen as a common cause with the so-called secular humanist of “good will.” But even if we grant Weigel’s argument that the Council should have said more about bio-ethical threats, it does not follow that it was the focus on “the destructive capabilities of modern weaponry” that prevented them from seeing this other threat. Nor is it, in my view, the mention of things such as the nuclear threat that makes the document seem “dated.” Is not the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in places like Iran and North Korea precisely a *current* concern? Is it not the use of such weapons that has given our current pope and his predecessor such reservations concerning the possibility of a just, modern war?⁶ The question is whether or not these things are *simply* dated, or whether they are dated from the perspective of an American neo-conservative engaged in a particular way in the culture wars?

The next issue that Weigel raises concerns *Gaudium et Spes*’s failure to predict the “demise of the secularization hypothesis.” “*Gaudium et Spes*,”

⁶ See, for instance, the comments of John Paul II to the diplomatic corps in 2003, where nuclear weapons are specifically mentioned: “War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity. International law, honest dialogue, solidarity between States, the noble exercise of diplomacy: these are methods worthy of individuals and nations in resolving their differences. I say this as I think of those who still place their trust in nuclear weapons and of the all-too-numerous conflicts which continue to hold hostage our brothers and sisters in humanity. At Christmas, Bethlehem reminded us of the unresolved crisis in the Middle East, where two peoples, Israeli and Palestinian, are called to live side-by-side, equally free and sovereign, in mutual respect. Without needing to repeat what I said to you last year on this occasion, I will simply add today, faced with the constant degeneration of the crisis in the Middle East, that the solution will never be imposed by recourse to terrorism or armed conflict, as if military victories could be the solution. And what are we to say of the threat of a war which could strike the people of Iraq, the land of the Prophets, a people already sorely tried by more than twelve years of embargo? War is never just another means that one can choose to employ for settling differences between nations. As the Charter of the United Nations Organization and international law itself remind us, war cannot be decided upon, even when it is a matter of ensuring the common good, except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions, without ignoring the consequences for the civilian population both during and after the military operations.” *Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Diplomatic Corps*, January 13, 2003, §4. Or, note the comments by then Cardinal

says Weigel, “does not, in other words, imagine a world that is becoming *more* religious, and in which religious conviction is having a determinative effect” (256). But, again, this criticism is valid—and it may be—only if one accepts a certain reading of secularization, a reading that, it must be said, tends to be favored by American neo-conservatives.⁷ It must also be said that this is a thesis that has been challenged rather convincingly by the likes of Alasdair MacIntyre and Will Herberg, among others. The substance of their challenge is that, even if, statistically speaking, religion is on the rise, such public professions of faith seem to grow in direct proportion to a daily routine that is increasingly lived as if there is no God, or at least as if God makes no difference. As MacIntyre once put it:

The difficulty lies in the combination of atheism in the practice of the life of the vast majority, with the profession of either superstition or theism by that same majority. The creed of the English is that there is no God and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time.⁸

Ratzinger regarding the justness of the war in Iraq. Notice, again, the explicit mentions of modern weaponry:

INTERVIEWER: Your Eminence, a question about current events, in some way connected to the Catechism. Does the coalition war on Iraq come within the canons of the ‘just war’?

RATZINGER: The Pope has very clearly expressed his thoughts, not only as the thoughts of an individual, but as the thoughts of a man of conscience occupying the highest functions in the Catholic Church. Of course, he has not imposed this position as a doctrine of the Church, but as the appeal of a conscience enlightened by the faith. This judgment of the Holy Father is convincing from a rational point of view also: reasons sufficient for unleashing a war against Iraq did not exist. First of all it was clear from the very beginning that proportion between the possible positive consequences and the sure negative effect of the conflict was not guaranteed. On the contrary, it seems clear that the negative consequences will be greater than anything positive that might be obtained. Without considering then that we must begin asking ourselves whether as things stand, with new weapons that cause destruction that goes well beyond the groups involved in the fight, it is still licit to allow that a ‘just war’ might exist.

Interview in *30 Days*, April 2003.

⁷ Weigel notes, for instance, Peter Berger’s article “Secularization Falsified,” *First Things* 180 (February 2008): 23–27. But this particular “take” on secularization has been rather ably challenged by David L. Schindler in, especially, “‘The Religious Sense’ and American Culture,” *Communio* 25 (1998): 679–99.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 26, cited in Schindler, “The Religious Sense,” 679. Benedict XVI’s constant warnings about the pervasiveness, in Liberal societies, of relativism is at least an indication of where he might fit into this debate.

Or, if we were to take Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God—made over a hundred years ago now—we must acknowledge that it had nothing to do with statistics regarding how many people professed belief in God, or even practiced religion. I suspect that church attendance was relatively high in Nietzsche's Germany even compared to, say, Weigel's America. It had, rather, to do with the fact that the institutions of modernity were operating as if the God—or at least the God of Jesus Christ—question made no intrinsic difference.⁹ Of course I need not prove at this point that the “secularization hypothesis” is right and that Weigel is wrong; it is sufficient to show that there are enough formidable defenders of the thesis still around to cast suspicion on the notion that *Gaudium et Spes*'s attention to it is “curiously dated.”

The next issue I will address is a little more complex. Weigel notes that *Gaudium et Spes*'s concern for widespread economic inequalities now seems dated in the light of the fact of “expanding wealth” (257) and the fact that “five-sixths of the world [are] un-poor, or well on the way to being un-poor—while the ‘bottom billion’ [are] mired into abject poverty, in considerable part because of something else that *Gaudium et Spes* did not anticipate: the fantastic corruption and incompetence of post-colonial governments in the Third World” (257). And then, in terms of the effects of economic inequality on war and peace, Weigel states:

In terms of international affairs, *Gaudium et Spes* suggested that economic inequality would be the primary *casus belli* between nations in the future. Yet it is hard to think of very many wars caused by economic inequality or the desire to plunder resources since 1965. (258)

⁹ It is an interesting question, one which cannot be pursued in this essay, as to why neo-conservatives (or neo-liberals) have such an interest in refuting the secularist hypothesis. One suspects that it has to do with their desire to defend the modern, democratic-capitalist nation state against the charge—from traditionalists and post-modernists of varying stripes—that such regimes invariably lead to an increasing forgetfulness of God. At least this much can be said in defense of the traditionalists: it does seem to be the case that conservative liberals, such as Weigel, are losing, slowly but surely, every one of the culture wars. I once heard Fr. Edward Oakes say that once we have to go into a voting booth to decide whether or not marriage is between a man and a woman, we have already lost the battle. But see also the remarkable new book by James Kalb, *The Tyranny of Liberalism: Understanding and Overcoming Administered Freedom, Inquisitorial Tolerance, and Equality by Command* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008). See especially chapter 7, which details why neo-conservative challenges do not go deep enough to challenge the Liberal demands for “more freedom” and greater secularization.

He goes on to suggest that the real cause of the war between nations these days is nationalist and religious at root. Oh, and of course the failure of the United Nations.

Again, we are entitled to ask whether concerns over economic inequality and even over the role that such inequalities play in the wars between nations are really “curiously dated,” or whether they are dated simply from the viewpoint of a particular, late twentieth and early twenty-first century, largely American, largely neo-conservative reading of things. It is not uninteresting that the book that Weigel cites in defense of his position—*The Bottom Billion: Why The Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*—is a favorite among neo-conservatives. The main point here, however, is not to contest this reading; the main point is that the question of economic inequality between nations is hardly one that seems to be passé for the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In his speech before George W. Bush in 2001, John Paul II expressed this concern accordingly:

In recent days, the world's attention has been focused on the process of globalization which has so greatly accelerated in the past decade, and which you and other leaders of the industrialized nations have discussed in Genoa. While appreciating the opportunities for economic growth and material prosperity which this process offers, the Church cannot but express profound concern that our world continues to be divided, no longer by the former political and military blocs, but by a tragic fault-line between those who can benefit from these opportunities and those who seem cut off from them. The revolution of freedom of which I spoke at the United Nations in 1995 must now be completed by a revolution of opportunity, in which all the world's peoples actively contribute to economic prosperity and share in its fruits. This requires leadership by those nations whose religious and cultural traditions should make them most attentive to the moral dimension of the issues involved.¹⁰

And with regard to the role of inequality in the wars between nations, John Paul II had the following to say:

[To respond to terrorism means] to undertake new and creative political, diplomatic and economic initiatives aimed at relieving the scandalous situations of gross injustice, oppression and marginalization which continue to oppress countless members of the human family. . . . History, in fact, shows that the recruitment of terrorists is more easily

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Address of John Paul II to the President of the United States of America, H. E. George Walker Bush*, July 23, 2001, §2.

achieved in areas where human rights are trampled upon and where injustice is a part of daily life. . . . [T]he international community can no longer overlook the underlying causes that lead, young people especially, to despair of humanity, of life itself, and of the future, and to fall prey to the temptations of violence, hatred and desire for revenge at any cost.¹¹

These sorts of considerations, according to John Paul II, present a special challenge to the democratic, capitalistic societies of the West, as Christian values are being questioned by cultural models that are:

grounded in an exaggerated individualism which all too often leads to indifferentism, hedonism, consumerism and a practical materialism that can erode and even subvert the foundations of social life.¹²

And in his most recent encyclical, Benedict XVI states explicitly that economic disparity continues to be a real concern, even in spite of the sort of economic growth that Weigel refers to:

As John Paul II has already observed, the demarcation line between rich and poor countries is no longer as clear as it was at the time of *Populorum Progressio*. *The world's wealth is growing in absolute terms, but inequalities are on the increase*. In rich countries, new sectors of society are succumbing to poverty and new forms of poverty are emerging. In poorer areas some groups enjoy a sort of “superdevelopment” of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation. “The scandal of glaring inequalities” continues.¹³

More importantly, Benedict XVI raises questions regarding the use of merely economical statistics to prove that capitalism is “working”:

Paul VI had an *articulated vision of development*. He understood the term to indicate the goal of rescuing peoples, first and foremost, from hunger, deprivation, endemic diseases and illiteracy. From the economic point of view, this meant their active participation, on equal terms, in the international economic process; from the social point of view, it meant their evolution into educated societies marked by solidarity; from the political point of view, it meant the consolidation of democratic regimes capable of ensuring freedom and peace. After so many years, as we observe with concern the developments and perspectives of the succession of crises

¹¹ These are John Paul II's comments in 2002, days before the anniversary of 9/11, and reported at zenit.org/article-5276?l=english.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §22.

that afflict the world today, *we ask to what extent Paul VI's expectations have been fulfilled* by the model of development adopted in recent decades. We recognize, therefore, that the Church had good reason to be concerned about the capacity of a purely technological society to set realistic goals and to make good use of the instruments at its disposal. Profit is useful if it serves as a means towards an end that provides a sense both of how to produce it and how to make good use of it. Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty. The economic development that Paul VI hoped to see was meant to produce real growth, of benefit to everyone and genuinely sustainable. It is true that growth has taken place, and it continues to be a positive factor that has lifted billions of people out of misery—recently it has given many countries the possibility of becoming effective players in international politics. Yet it must be acknowledged that this same economic growth has been and continues to be weighed down by *malfunctions and dramatic problems*, highlighted even further by the current crisis.¹⁴

The point is this: while it may seem that the worries of older social encyclicals and of *Gaudium et Spes* regarding economic inequalities are obsolete (curiously dated?) in the light of current economic growth, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have emphasized that this is not really the case: first, because there are still some fairly significant economic inequalities, inequalities that might—contra-Weigel—even be seen as one of the root causes of current conflicts between nations; second, because mere growth in economic terms does not get to the question of whether there has been genuine, *human* development.¹⁵

Given this final point, it is curious that Weigel begins the second part of his lecture commending *Gaudium et Spes* for realizing that “the anthro-

¹⁴ Ibid., §21.

¹⁵ A person working for an American-based company in a lesser developed country may be making more money than he would otherwise be making if that factory were not there; but that hardly gets sufficiently to the question of whether he is actually developing in terms of his humanity. Furthermore, the sorts of statistics that Weigel is drawing on to demonstrate that the free market is working to eliminate economic inequalities can be questioned even from the merely economic point of view. See, for instance, Edward McPhail's "Distributionism and 'Modern Economics,'" in *Beyond Capitalism & Socialism: A New Statement of an Old Ideal*, ed. Tobias J. Lanz (Norfolk, VA: 2008): "For example, the average pay of the top 100 CEOs chosen by Forbes magazine in 1970 was 49 times that of the average worker. By 1998 that ratio had grown to 2,388 to 1. [Paul] Krugman's concern is that 'a rising economic tide has failed to lift most boats,' and that 'highly unequal societies also tend to be highly corrupt'" (109).

pological question is fundamental,” and that he mentions specifically the significance of *Gaudium et Spes*’s reorientation of anthropology along Christological lines. The point that I shall make in the second part of this essay is that it is precisely these two moves that Weigel fails fully to grasp. But first to the remainder of Weigel’s essay.

The second part of Weigel’s lecture—“The Wojtyła solution”—is intent upon showing that, the questions raised in the first part notwithstanding, *Gaudium et Spes* does still have something to say to us, provided it is read in the light of John Paul II’s humanism. At the root of our modern problems, according to Weigel’s reading of John Paul II, lies a deficient anthropology, and it is this anthropology—and not, say, bad economic theory or misguided foreign policy—that led to the gross injustices and human atrocities of the twentieth century. This fits well with Weigel’s repeated notion—one for which, incidentally, I have great sympathy—that the place to begin curing modernity’s ills is not first to be found at the economic or political level, but at the human and cultural level. This thesis is laid out with particular grace in his 1998 article “John Paul II and the Priority of Culture.”¹⁶ There is a danger, however, that what Weigel means by the priority of culture is a relegation of Catholic thought into the realm of culture so that the realm of politics and economics remains metaphysically and theologically isolated.

The first aspect of John Paul II’s anthropology that Weigel finds helpful stems from the former’s reading of John of the Cross and concerns the importance of interiority. Here there is a “turn to the subject” which fits nicely with modern concerns, but it is not to the isolated subject of Descartes. Rather, a proper turn to the subject leads directly to the question of God, in keeping with the Augustinian dictum, “Thou art more interior to me than I am to myself.”¹⁷

Next, Weigel mentions Wojtyła’s Thomistic epistemological optimism in the face of so much modern and post-modern doubt about the human ability to know the external world or metaphysical and moral truth. More important still is Wojtyła’s notion of freedom, which serves as a corrective both to Marxist determinism as well as the post-modern

¹⁶ George Weigel, “John Paul II and the Priority of Culture,” *First Things*, February 1998: 19–25.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger found a similar “positive spin” on the turn to the subject in *Gaudium et Spes*, §13, the source of which he attributes to Pascal and Augustine: “We hear echoes of Augustine’s spiritual experience that ‘intimum’ and ‘summum’ coincide, that the distant God is a God who is most near to man, nearer than man is to himself, that man finds himself and God by accomplishing a pilgrimage to himself, into his own inner depths, away from self-estrangement among things” (Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” 128).

emphasis on the individualistic freedom to choose. Here Weigel mentions Servais Pinckaers's positive notion of freedom as the freedom to do the good. To this is added John Paul II's notion—taken especially from *Gaudium et spes* §22—that true freedom can be achieved only when we make a gift of ourselves to God and each other. In this context Weigel makes specific mention once again of John Paul II's appreciative remarks concerning free economies in *Centesimus Annus*.

Weigel closes his lecture, however, by raising three questions regarding John Paul II's humanism. These questions concern the adequacy of his "personalist" approach for addressing, first, the issue of capital punishment; second, the issue of just war—which Weigel seems to think has become a *de facto* pacifism; and, third, "the ontological dimensions of the moral law" (266). This final concern seems to center both on the objectivity of the moral law and on the fact that Jesus is the world's judge as well as its servant. Weigel implies that John Paul II's one-sided emphasis on "the Law of the Gift" sometimes led to a softness with regard to the tough realities of crime, national disputes, and Church discipline. As I have heard it put, in other words, John Paul II was a good prophet, a good priest, but not so good of a king. Weigel concludes accordingly:

The philosophical and theological anthropology of John Paul II, developed and refined [apparently in the light of the concerns raised by Weigel at the end], is thus the key to the rescue of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from the imprisonment in the dungeon of the sixties to which some of its critics have consigned it. (266–67)

Assessing Weigel's Comments in the Light of John Paul II and Benedict XVI

Before I proceed to the second part of this essay, I should make a caveat and anticipate a possible objection. First, the purpose of this essay is not to attack George Weigel, who has been more often than not, as they say, on the side of the angels. His excellent biography of John Paul II alone establishes his name among Catholic intellectuals of the post-Vatican II era. The criticisms which I am making are directed at a tendency, whether from the right or the left—a tendency to which Weigel does not always succumb—to read Church documents selectively in terms of prior political commitments.¹⁸ This approach was the norm for the dominant, left-

¹⁸ Lest anybody thinks that this fear is unwarranted, I would call attention to Weigel's recent comments in his "*Caritas in Veritate* in Gold and Red," from *National Review Online* (July 7, 2009). As stated above, unless the encyclical is read in the absence of some fairly robust form-critical analysis, it appears to cast significant doubt on Weigel's reading of the social encyclical tradition as finally

leaning, post-Vatican II theology in America; it is no less obfuscating when it comes from the right. Second, it may be that all the questions which I raised in the first half of this essay can be attributed to differences over matters of prudential judgment, rather than matters of essential theological or moral teaching. Indeed, Weigel has repeatedly proved himself a faithful son of the Church in matters both theological and moral, even in terms of the Church's wildly unpopular teachings concerning biological and sexual ethics. Can't orthodox Christians disagree, in short, over matters of war, capital punishment, economics, and the like and still remain faithful to the central teachings of the Church?

I will offer two brief responses in advance to this question with the hopes that what follows will provide sufficient grounds for my position. First, the social teaching of the Church is an integral part of its moral teaching, and it is at least possible that one can read the tradition of the Church's social doctrine so selectively that one has trespassed with regard to the Church's teaching authority. I am not arguing at this point that Weigel has done this; I simply want to rule out any notion that the Church's social teaching can be radically separated, in terms of authority, from its moral and doctrinal teaching. Second—and this will actually occupy the bulk of what follows—it may prove to be the case that Weigel's differences with John Paul II/Benedict XVI prove not only to concern this or that specific ethical issue—just war, capital punishment, the distribution of wealth, and the like—but may stem from fundamentally different starting points. With regard to this latter point, the question concerns the degree to which the Church's political and social teachings grow integrally from the very Christocentric anthropology that Weigel is so enthusiastic about in the second half of his comments. I would suggest that these two issues—the relationship between the Church's social doctrine and its moral and theological teachings on the one hand, and the integrated nature of Vatican II's Christocentric anthropology and its social teaching on the other—are intimately related, and that it is a failure fully to appreciate this that accounts for Weigel's differences with John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

In what follows, then, I shall offer a brief discussion of the central concerns of Josef Ratzinger's 1968 commentary on the first chapter of the first part of *Gaudium et Spes* in order to get at the fundamental differences alluded to above. Such an approach may seem unfair or arbitrary,

getting it right with *Centesimus Annus*. Read as a whole (as opposed to being read in "Gold and Red"), the new encyclical can only be seen as a step backwards for somebody of Weigel's perspective. It must be something like what happens to a member of the Jesus Seminar when he reads the Gospel of John.

given the fact that no two people are ever going to focus on the same issues in any analyzed text, especially if such analyses are separated by an ocean, a few countries, and forty years! This is only exacerbated by the fact that Weigel's comments are much more general in nature and concern the document as a whole, whereas Ratzinger's come in the context of a rather close reading of one part of the document. While taking these objections into mind, I think there is still merit in my approach insofar as the nature of the comments on *Gaudium et Spes* by Weigel and Ratzinger is *typical* of their writings over the years; in other words, their comments flow directly from the underlying and unifying principles of their thought.

Furthermore, in what follows I am going to assume a common strategy amongst Weigel and his close collaborators Michael Novak and the late Richard John Neuhaus. While I appreciate the differences between these thinkers, I see no evidence that these differences of emphasis amount to differences of principle regarding, for instance, the normative status of the modern, democratically-capitalistically conceived nation-state.¹⁹ Finally, while I am focusing on the writings of Ratzinger/Benedict in what follows, I think it would be quite easy to find the same principles in the thought of John Paul II.

It is not uninteresting that Weigel's comments concerning *Gaudium et Spes* are quite different in tone than those of Josef Ratzinger in 1968. Of course this could be dismissed as merely different emphases at different times, except that, as already mentioned, both sets of comments betray concerns that have been consistent for both thinkers in their numerous writings since the Council. For instance, the central role that Weigel gives to *Centesimus Annus* for finally realizing that the Church does not have to provide a "third way" between or beyond socialism and capitalism goes all the way back to his otherwise excellent biography of John Paul II. As he then put it:

Centesimus Annus made a decisive break with the materialism that had characterized some aspects of prior Catholic social doctrine. That, and John Paul's "culture-first" approach to analyzing public life, also meant that, with *Centesimus Annus*, Catholic social doctrine abandoned any quest for a "third way" between or beyond capitalism and socialism. Socialism

¹⁹ In his "Response to Mark Lowery" (*Communio* 18 [1991]), Weigel calls attention to the differences between his work and that of Novak and Neuhaus, but all of these amount to differences of emphasis or specialty; they do not, however, amount to matters of principle, where these three thinkers have mounted a fairly consistent and common campaign for the last two to three decades.

was dead, and there were many forms of capitalism in the world. . . . The questions for the future were what kind of “free economy.”²⁰

And lest anyone think that the sort of free economy that John Paul was commending was not to be found in actual places like, say, North America, on the very next page Weigel sets this notion to rest:

In the wake of *Centesimus Annus*, defenders of “Christian Socialism” tried to argue that “Capitalism A” [the sort, that is, that John Paul defends in *Centesimus Annus*] existed only in textbooks. That was both empirically and textually implausible: empirically, because examples of “Capitalism A” could be found in various Western European and North American countries.²¹

I mention this because I think it gives further evidence for the normative nature that Weigel, Novak, and Neuhaus give to the modern, democratically-capitalistically ordered, nation state, and especially to America.²² An important aspect of this normativity will be the insistence that the problems which are currently arising in contemporary Liberal regimes are not *Liberal* (as in Alasdair MacIntyre’s use of the word) in nature, but are rather “*liberal*” (as in Sean Hannity’s use of the word) in nature; that is, they do not stem from a flawed anthropology and epistemology coming out of the Enlightenment as much as they stem from the aggressive secularism, pacifism, anti-Americanism, quasi-socialism, and moral libertarianism of the sixties.²³ In contrast to this, Benedict XVI has always traced the roots of

²⁰ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: the Biography of John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 615. This language of “decisive break” is disconcerting in the light of Benedict’s exhortation regarding a “hermeneutics of continuity.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 616.

²² For an almost identical reading of the importance of *Centesimus Annus*, one which claims even more specifically the importance of the American experiment for the document, see Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” *First Things*, May 1997. In this article Neuhaus responds explicitly to the notion found in people like David L. Schindler, Alasdair MacIntyre, Oliver O’Donovan, and others that the anthropology and religious epistemology of the American founding are incompatible with that of traditional Christianity. He says that this is to give the Liberal tradition over to its modern, secularist champions. In short, he, like Weigel, will want to attribute the negative aspects of modern democracies—relativism, consumerism (although it is debatable whether consumerism is really seen as a negative), individualism, collectivism, skepticism, legalism, etc—to a betrayal of Liberalism, which began in earnest in the 1960s. As we shall see, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI will almost always go to the origins of modernity to trace the roots of such ills.

²³ For the central importance that Weigel places on the 1960s, see his “The Sixties, Again and Again,” *First Things*, April 2008.

such modern ills as relativism and its accompanying false notion of freedom to the Enlightenment's novel anthropology and epistemology.²⁴ It is no accident that Ratzinger's criticisms of *Gaudium et Spes* in 1968 concerned the document's ambiguity in these very areas.²⁵ I shall now focus on what I conceive to be his *central* concerns.

It should first be pointed out that the various questions which Ratzinger raises throughout his commentary are really just facets of a single, underlying concern, namely, *Gaudium et Spes*'s (not entirely consistent) dis-integration or separation of anthropology from Christology. Now, it may be asked why a document on the Church's role in the modern world, a document which, furthermore, wants to strike a "positive tone" and enter into "dialogue" with modern man, should make the rather retrograde assertion that the document needs to be *more* Christocentric! Isn't this precisely what "modern man" would deny? Why not begin, in short,

²⁴ Already in his *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger located a key turning point in history in the change from *verum est ens* to *verum quia factum*, that is, from being is truth—which Kant asserted was a mere tautology—to truth is of what is made. This not only changes the relationship between contemplation and action—notice, for instance, that reason becomes first *active* in this latter formulation; it also changes the relationship between faith and reason. Since reason is now conceived as something purely active, stemming from the isolated subject, it is conceived as the opposite of faith, which, Enlightenment thinkers from Hume to Locke to Kant all agreed, was purely passive. This is why an argument based on reason was considered more sound to them than an argument based on, say, faith in revelation; it was also capable of generating wider support than a more "narrow" argument based on revelation. It is not uninteresting that this is an exact reversal of the position of Thomas Aquinas, found in the first article of the first question of the *Summa theologiae*, where he argues that an argument based on revelation is superior to an argument based on reason alone, on account both of the rarity of sound thinking and of the fallible nature of human reason. For a brilliant discussion of Benedict's thought in this regard, see Michael Hanby's "The Logic of Love and the Unity of Catholic Truth: Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est*," *Communio* 33 (2006): 400–22. For Ratzinger's treatment of this turning point, see *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 58–63.

²⁵ It should be noted that, as critical as Ratzinger's comments sometimes are, throughout his commentary he genuinely puts a "positive spin" on the document. Even when he critiques this or that section, he always tries to illuminate what the authors were really trying to do and even offers a hand at helping them do it. He is, that is, in general agreement with the overall intentions of *Gaudium et Spes* and simply thinks that a change of approach here and there would have actually helped them to achieve what they wanted to achieve even better. This can be seen especially in his suggestion that the anthropology of the first part of the first section should have been better integrated, from the beginning, with the Christology of the second part of the first section, culminating in *Gaudium et Spes*, §22. This will be made clearer in what follows.

with things that we have in common? But this gets to the central paradox of Ratzinger's entire approach: he is absolutely convinced that the Church does need to enter into a more positive dialogue with the modern world. He is even prepared to acknowledge the advances made with regard to human rights, individual dignity, religious freedom, economic freedom, the relative autonomy of the political vis-à-vis the ecclesial, and the like. It is simply that he is equally confident that these very positive gains of modernity can only be safeguarded from *within* a Christological perspective. Indeed, Ratzinger's entire commentary—which is remarkably consistent with what he has written over the years and even since he has become pope—sounds like an elaboration of a rather programmatic quote from an equally programmatic essay, written by Hans Urs von Balthasar in 1960:

Human nature and its mental faculties are given their true center when in Christ; in him they attain their final truth, for such was the will of God the Creator from eternity. Man, therefore, in investigating the relationship *between* nature and supernature has no need to abandon the standpoint of faith, to set himself up as the mediator between God and the world, between revelation and reason, or to cast himself in the role of judge over that relationship. All that is necessary is for him to understand “the one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 2.5), and to believe him in whom “were all things created in heaven and on earth . . . all by him and in him” (Col. 1.16). Christ did not leave the Father when he became man to bring all creation to fulfillment; and neither does the Christian need to leave his center in Christ in order to mediate him to the world, to understand his relation to the world, to build a bridge between revelation and nature, philosophy and theology.²⁶

²⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” in *Explorations in Theology*, I, *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 194–95. This is precisely what the modern political philosophy which underlies modern, liberal regimes does: namely, prescind from theology in order to work out the relationship between “Church and state.” Therefore, I don’t have to take a stance regarding whether or not the American version of liberal democracy, based as it is on the kinder and gentler “Scottish Enlightenment,” is as hostile to religion as the European version. It is a big deal for Weigel, Neuhaus, and Novak that the American founding was religious friendly. I will grant them this. The more important questions are these. What form of religion is it friendly towards? Is the relationship between nature and grace, faith and reason, God and the world, and the Church and the world worked out from within a Christological perspective or from within a (merely) anthropological perspective? This may seem like a silly question insofar as the answer is obvious and the question seems to be asking for too much; unless, that is, one realizes that some theological vision is going to get incorporated into the institutions and structures, one way or another. To assume that these institutions are *not* reflective of underlying theological and metaphysical assumptions cannot even be born out at the level of the historical facts of

While Ratzinger, then, would not disagree with Weigel that *Gaudium et Spes* marks a new attitude towards societies “composed of a democratic polity, a free economy, and a vibrant public moral culture,” and would not disagree that this new attitude is a good thing, he would want to insist that this new attitude is made possible precisely because of (and must be understood within) what is really “new” with *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, its Christocentrism. With regard to *Gaudium et spes* §22, Ratzinger says, “We are probably justified in saying that here for the first time in an official document of the magisterium, a new type of completely Christocentric theology appears.”²⁷

Two initial points: We are back once again to themes of continuity and newness. Weigel alludes to the new attitude towards democratic regimes found in *Gaudium et Spes*, which then paves the way for the new attitude towards the free market (which Weigel seems to identify with capitalism)²⁸ found in *Centesimus Annus*. These are of central importance to Weigel’s narrative of the Council. They are also of central importance, it seems to me, in Neuhaus’s review of the text by Levering and Lamb mentioned above (footnote 4). While I would agree with both Neuhaus and Weigel that there is something “new” in the Second Vatican Council, and would therefore agree that it is possible to overemphasize continuity to such a degree that one fails to see what the Spirit is saying to the Church of our age, I would disagree about the location of this newness. Ratzinger situates the new attitude towards such things as religious (and even economic) freedom within the new Christocentrism. Such situating makes all the difference in the world to the *kind* of freedom that one is embracing. It should go without saying, of course, that neither I nor Ratzinger have in mind anything like total novelty; this would precisely buy into to the “hermeneutics of rupture” that the Levering and Lamb text does such a good job of correcting. The newness is clearly in continuity with what has gone before in the Church’s tradition and therefore provides the best safeguard of that tradition.²⁹

Second, when I say “within the new Christocentrism,” my point is this: the impression is often given that the possibility of Vatican II’s openness to

the matter. At the very least, the person who thinks liberal institutions are theologically neutral cannot elicit support for his position from Ratzinger.

²⁷ Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” 159.

²⁸ This, by the way, is very misleading. Chesterton and Belloc were both in favor of “free economies,” but neither of them considered capitalist economies to be very free.

²⁹ One can find such newness in continuity at many key turning points in the Church’s history: such moments are always turning points which often introduce “new language” or “new syntheses” which are invariably suspicious to the hyper traditionalists of the time. Think of the use of “homousios” with regard to Jesus’

the world is rooted in a willingness to constrain the realm of the Church in order to make room for, say, the freedom of the individual (e.g., freedom of conscience) or the autonomy of the political realm. In such a reading, a more positive notion would be taken of the secular than the older, sometimes integralist or monistic approach. If such is the case, Ratzinger's insistence on a Christocentric reading of the document—along with John Paul II's constant quoting of *Gaudium et spes* §22—could be seen as counterintuitive or even as running in opposition to the general thrust of the document (or the Council), especially if we recall the document on religious freedom. But one finds no evidence in Ratzinger's commentary that he sees it this way. Indeed, he seems to be suggesting that it is only within this Christological perspective that the Church's newfound respect for the proper autonomy of the world can make any sense. Furthermore, the dialogue with the world comes in, not by assuring the world that Catholics will agree to circumscribe their territory—say, into the “private sphere”—so that the world will have more room to go about its business. Rather, the dialogue consists in showing the world that mankind and his freedom—and this would include his rightful autonomy—are safeguarded only *in Christ*.

Some specifics from Ratzinger's commentary should bear this out. First, it is interesting that Ratzinger has no problem at all with the anthropocentric nature of the document. He agrees, that is, that the best place to begin a dialogue with the modern world is in the area of anthropology, on account of the fact that modernity's central claim is a humanistic one. One need only think of such modern themes as equality, freedom, human dignity, human rights, etc. to see that this is the case. But from the other side, Christianity is uniquely suited for this dialogue precisely because of its unique assertion that God became a man without in any way threatening the humanity of that man. As Ratzinger puts it:

What is to be demonstrated, therefore, is that precisely by Christian faith in God, true humanism, i.e. man's full development as man, is attained, and that consequently the idea of humanism which present-day atheism opposes to faith can serve as the hinge of the discussion and a means of dialogue.³⁰

Indeed, Ratzinger even complains that *Gaudium et Spes* has a tendency to suggest that the Church and “man” are two separate entities which then

relationship with the Father or even the novel use of “hypostasis” in the Cappadocians; think furthermore of Thomas's use of Aristotle, or Newman's notion of “real assent.” In each case, however, these “novelties” proved, with the benefit of hindsight, to be the best safeguards of the always living tradition of the Church.

³⁰ Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” 118.

need to come into dialogue. Conversely, he notes, the Church is already part of the human family.

Second, Ratzinger rejects the notion that the Church should engage in a dialogue with the world based on “pure reason” or natural law alone.³¹ This seems to be for two reasons. First, if one begins a dialogue on the basis of some purely natural perspective, it is hard not to give the implication that Christ (grace, the Church, etc.) is just a “crowning conclusion” which is not always, already integrated from the ground up, or which is even optional to human flourishing. Here, again, one would play right into the modern assumption that religious faith is extrinsic to the work-a-day world. Secondly, what version of reason is one to engage in, if not a Catholic one? The point is not to downplay the proper role or autonomy of reason; it is simply to call into question the notion of a purely neutral version of reason which has no pre-rational (and even theological) assumptions. “There is, and must be,” Ratzinger states, “a human reason *in* faith; yet conversely, every human reason is conditioned by a historical standpoint so that reason pure and simple does not exist.”³²

³¹ This would be another important issue in illuminating the differences between the approach of Ratzinger and the *Communio* school and Weigel and the *First Things* school. As a reader of *First Things* for some fifteen years now, I have noticed a proclivity for Robert George’s approach to natural law. In such an approach, the non-metaphysical and non-theological nature of the law is precisely what makes it attractive insofar as it helps to facilitate discussion between Catholics (Christians) and non-Catholics, makes it attractive, that is, because, once again, the modern theologically neutral nation state provides the context in which the law is understood. A central difficulty of this interpretation is that once natural law is treated as something that can be pursued without addressing questions of metaphysics or questions concerning the existence of God, it ceases to look anything like natural law as developed by a thinker like Thomas Aquinas and begins to look a whole lot like Kant’s “autonomous practical reason.” See, in this regard, the excellent article by Steven A. Long, “Natural Law or Autonomous Practical Reason: Problems for the New Natural Law Theory,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Tradition: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. John Goyette, Mark S. Latkovic, and Richard S. Myers (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 2004), 165–97.

³² Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” 118. It would be hard to exaggerate the influence of Josef Pieper on Ratzinger’s thought in this regard. Particularly influential is Pieper’s study of tradition, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), the central thesis of which is that all philosophy is born within the context of some sacred tradition or other. This is not only true of Plato and Aristotle—so that using Aristotle’s philosophy as an example of what “pure reason” can achieve without the influence of “revelation” can be quite misleading—but even more importantly of the Enlightenment philosophers, who were explicitly pretending to do “pure” philosophy. Of course their “sacred tradition” was Christianity, the very thing that some of them wanted to reject and others wanted to remake in a more “rational” form.

The proper autonomy of reason is here recognized, but it is established from within a Catholic perspective. This would seem to gainsay the notion of a purely natural politics as well.

It should also be noted with regard to this second point that Ratzinger blames both *Gaudium et Spes*'s failure consistently to integrate anthropology and Christology and its sometimes overly neutral notion of reason on an overly "juxtaposed" notion of nature and the supernatural. He seems to side with the theologians "especially from the German-speaking countries," who "were convinced that fundamentally the text was still based on a schematic representation of nature and the supernatural viewed too much as merely juxtaposed."³³ That this is intrinsically related to the problem of anthropology can be seen from the following:

Consequently the perspective remained exclusively that of the theology of creation, but one which is not even adequate to the wealth of a Christian theology of creation, for this is only intelligible in eschatology; the Alpha is only truly to be understood in the light of the Omega.³⁴

Third, Ratzinger suggests that *Gaudium et Spes* would have been improved if it had incorporated a fuller notion of the human person. Here is perhaps Ratzinger's most important suggestion and it has remained a consistent theme in his writings over the years. One aspect of this would simply be to call attention to the naturally communal nature of the person, and this is something that *Gaudium et Spes* explicitly tries to do (see especially §12) in the light of the influence of thinkers such as Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber. Even here Ratzinger would have preferred a situating of this within man's natural desire for God. "The capacity for the absolute Thou is the ground of the possibility and necessity of the human partner."³⁵ Furthermore, such a notion of man's natural sociability gives a very

³³ Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person," 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121. This would be one good place to show the essential continuity between Benedict XVI's thought and that of John Paul II, especially in terms of the latter's theology of the body. It is clearly the case that John Paul II's reading of the Genesis account is written in the light of fully Trinitarian concerns. This theology, then, is about much more than sex; it suggests an anthropology of communion that runs quite contrary to that of such modern political philosophers as Hobbes or Locke. For both of these latter thinkers man is essentially (originally) isolated and out for himself, but must enter into relationships (contractual ones) out of self-interest. John Paul II's originally lonely man, on the other hand, quite naturally longs for communion, and this is a symptom of the fact that he is in the image of the Triune and thereby communal God. In such a view the lone individual is in an unnatural state, which, as such, does not feel right and is "not good."

³⁵ Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person," 122.

different foundation for the political order than does modern political philosophy. Even for thinkers as allegedly religious friendly as Locke, man enters into social (and contractual) relationships out of a prior self-interest. This is another place where Ratzinger's Christocentric approach to anthropology provides a better foundation for things like rights, freedom, equality, and the like than the philosophy of the Liberal tradition can.

Modernity, then, needs a fuller notion of the person than the one found in the pagan philosophy of Plato or Aristotle or the modern philosophy of Hobbes or Locke, but where is it going to get it? Modern philosophy, in short, does not provide an adequate foundation for an idea that is essential to its continued practice. Why, for instance, given the sometimes brutal state of nature, should I respect the rights of my fellow man? Why should I fight for the equal dignity of all human beings, even when it acts against my own self-interest to do so, or when those human beings are incapable of pleading for their rights? Ratzinger is bold enough to suggest in this section that the notion of person, apart from which the very things for which moderns are constantly clamoring makes no sense, is unavailable to reason, unless that reason is enlightened by the truth of Christ:

The concept of the person is a product of theology, i.e. of the compensation of biblical faith and Greek philosophy. It was formed in the endeavor to elaborate the Christian conception of God (in Trinitarian doctrine and Christology), and apart from those contexts it is neither possible nor intelligible.³⁶

But, unfortunately, *Gaudium et Spes* failed to integrate sufficiently its anthropology, its Buber-esque personalism, and its Christology:

The disadvantage of this arrangement is that the philosophy of love, the whole set of I-Thou questions, are practically absent from the doctrine of man laid down as a basis. Consequently the constitutive character of these realities for human existence does not stand out as clearly as it could have done.³⁷

What the document rightly points out, nevertheless, is how futile modern political discourse becomes when it tries to be purely scientific and avoids questions of metaphysics or ultimate ends.

I should not give the impression, however, that Ratzinger's overall assessment of *Gaudium et Spes* is a negative one. He clearly sympathizes

³⁶ Ibid., 131.

³⁷ Ibid.

with what the document is trying to do. It is clear that his criticisms are therefore “constructive” in the most basic sense of that word. He is suggesting ways in which the intention of the document can better be achieved. He sees that intention as an attempt to show modern man that without Christ all of the legitimate concerns of modernity—the dignity and rights of the individual, the right to religious freedom, and the like—are in jeopardy. This becomes finally clear in *Gaudium et spes* §22, which Ratzinger clearly sees as the highpoint and center of the document. And he seems to be suggesting that if *Gaudium et spes* §22 is correct—that it is only in Christ that we find the final and true meaning of the human person—then his criticisms about the separation of anthropology and Christology seem to be born out by the text itself. Again, Ratzinger’s comments are neither simply negative nor in contradiction to the central intention of the document; rather, he wants to allow the driving theme of the text to be more fully integrated into the text as a whole.

The rest of Ratzinger’s commentary simply shows the various problems that arise when such Christological considerations are left to one side. He states rather explicitly that the section on freedom (§17) “is one of the least satisfactory in the whole document.”³⁸ “It even falls into downright Pelagian terminology.”³⁹ Here we have an echo of Balthasar’s quote above about the attempt to work out the relationship between nature and grace, reason and revelation, and, finally, the Church and the world from a vantage point outside of Christ. At any rate, this second section should give us a fairly good sense of Ratzinger’s early attempt to retrieve and interpret *Gaudium et Spes*.

Conclusion: Towards a Proper Retrieval of *Gaudium et Spes*

In the interest of space, I can only allude to a couple of implications⁴⁰ of the foregoing in support of my thesis that the difference between the

³⁸ Ibid., 136–37.

³⁹ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁰ In order to keep this essay within reasonable limits, I have intentionally remained at the level of fundamental issues. I am fully aware that in order fully to make the case for which I am arguing, I would have to show how these implications spell out at the level of concrete practice, for instance, at the level of the relationship between Church and state or at the level of economics. This would be necessary to avoid the impression that all of these fundamental issues can and should be addressed at the level of “culture.” While there is certainly some truth in the notion that there is no specifically Catholic politics, it is a whole other thing to suggest that the sort of anthropology that Benedict XVI puts forth would not have radical (to the root) political and economic implications. Since I am not spelling the details of this suggestion out in this paper, I will refer to a few authors who have

approach of John Paul II and Benedict XVI and Weigel runs deeper than matters of prudential, political judgment. In a now well-known debate between David L. Schindler and “Novak, Weigel and Neuhaus,” Michael Novak responded to Schindler accordingly:

For those deep in Catholic understanding, the more theological works of de Lubac and Balthasar quicken mind and heart. However, in writing for Jewish, Protestant, and secular readers, I find the theological language of de Lubac and Balthasar too rich for common understanding. It seems better to go as far as I can with a more “worldly” language, while pointing beyond it, as both Balthasar . . . and de Lubac . . . sometimes did. . . . Taking Balthasar’s vision as his own, Schindler asks a number of important and useful questions of NNW [Neuhaus, Novak, Weigel]. Indeed, one wonders why he simply does not consider himself a colleague, entering as it were into *communio* with us, while accomplishing this part of our common project himself.⁴¹

In defense of this approach Novak makes the classic Liberal move of claiming that the Liberal regime is not loaded with any metaphysical or theological content:

done and are doing just that. With regard to the question of the relationship between Church and state, Glenn Olsen has suggested in a number of books and articles that Gregory VII has provided a model of Church/state distinction better suited to Catholic thought than the one flowing out of Liberal political philosophy. See, in particular, Glenn Olsen, *Beginning in Jerusalem: Five Reflections on the History of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), especially chapter 3, where he defends Gregory’s manner of distinguishing Church and “state” against the charge of monism. See also his review “The Catholic Moment?” *Communio* 15 (1988): 474–87, and, finally, his “Separating Church and State,” *Faith and Reason* 20 (Winter 1994): 403–25. In response to the notion that the Second Vatican Council endorses something along the lines of American style disestablishment, see Russell Hittinger’s “How to Read *Dignitatis Humanae* on Establishment of Religion,” found at the Second Spring website (secondspring.co.uk). With regard to the economic implications of John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s anthropology of self gift, see Adrian Walker’s “The Poverty of Liberal Economics,” in *Wealth, Poverty and Human Destiny*, ed. Doug Bandow and David L. Schindler (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 19–50. And, finally, with regard to the theological non-neutrality of modern political philosophy, see Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and William Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 182–200.

⁴¹ Michael Novak, “Schindler’s Conversion: The Catholic Right Accepts Pluralism,” *Communio* 19 (1992): 148.

A democratic regime is not the kingdom. It is not a church, or even a philosophy. . . . It is designed to create space, within which the soul may make its own choices, and within which spiritual leaders and spiritual associations may do their own necessary and creative work.⁴²

What I have suggested above, however, is that if Balthasar and Ratzinger are right in their assertion that the relationship between nature and grace, between faith and reason, and, finally, between God and the world, is best worked out from *within* a Christological perspective—recall Ratzinger’s assertion that reason always works *within* some sort of faith—then the American notion that a metaphysically neutral state creates “space” within which robust cultural and theological sorts of things can then take place is already to privilege the Enlightenment. Telling a Catholic that he is now allowed to start being a Catholic once the political and economic table has already been set in an insufficiently Catholic (quasi-Enlightenment, quasi-Protestant) manner is something akin to telling him that he is not really allowed to be a Catholic at all.⁴³ I think it is this fundamental difference between John Paul II and Benedict XVI on the one hand and George Weigel and his neo-conservative colleagues on the other that accounts for their differences over the seemingly more superficial matters concerning just war, capital punishment, economics, secularism, and the like. Of course this would require more argumentation, but it would also require a whole other article. I leave it, then, as a suggestion following from the principles sketched out above, even as I have tried to alert the reader to authors who have taken the argument to the next level.

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⁴² Michael Novak, “Boredom, Virtue and Democratic Capitalism,” *Commentary* 88 (September 1989): 34, cited in Schindler, “The Church’s ‘worldly’ mission,” 390.

⁴³ In the introduction to the essay “Separating Church and State” (cited above), Glenn Olsen recalls a comical observation by George Santayana. Once Santayana was asked about Catholicism in America and responded that he had met no Catholics in America, only some Protestants who prayed the rosary!