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Logos

The meaning and extent of reason in the theology of Benedict XVI

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It is tempting to assume that protests against a biblical, Christian vision of the world are typical of the modern era. It is globally true, as will be stated later. However, there are portents of such a protest at the heart of the Middle Ages, during the very peak of Europe's Christian culture. It was raised by a group of teachers belonging to Paris' Faculty of Arts, a Faculty specialized in disciplines like natural sciences and philosophy which one was supposed to master before entering the Faculty of Theology. This alternative vision was based on Aristotelean physics, read at the light of Arab philosophers like Averroes, and suggested that the world was eternal, without beginning nor end. When reflecting on the theological concept of reason, or the status of human reason applied to the mystery of God within the Catholic tradition, the so-called crisis of 1267 stands out as a pivotal moment. Indeed, it brought to light the existence of two very different, but equally legitimate ways of dealing with reason within this tradition. These two ways appeared embodied in the contrast between the two major theological minds of the time and probably of all times, the Franciscan Bonaventura and the Dominican Thomas Aquinas. Having entered in a fierce polemic with so-called Latin Averroists, Bonaventura was led to question his earlier moderate endorsement of Aristotle. The suggestion of an eternal world based on purely philosophical arguments showed that reason without faith could become a devastating threat to Christianity. Bonaventura fought back with arguments which were no less rational, but which were ultimately anchored in the experience of faith, as providing the contemplation of a superior truth. Confronted with the same anti-biblical views, Thomas Aquinas adopted a totally different strategy: instead of launching an attack as Bonaventura, he meticulously integrated these ideas into his theological vision. By claiming that one *could* uphold the eternity of the world on purely philosophical grounds, he endeavoured to show that the biblical idea of a world with a beginning and an end could not be derived from something else than faith.

The necessary existence of a Creator implied two possibilities, either a finite or an infinite world. At the light of faith, but only at this light, human reason was invited to opt for the first solution and reject the second. The strategies of Bonaventura and Thomas are symmetrical opposites: whereas Bonaventura draws from faith the arguments that will enable him to overturn purely rational arguments, Thomas uses these purely rational arguments to investigate the nature of faith. Thomas is a genius of conciliation: let us examine the truth that each position conceals, and we will be ultimately led to see how the two positions are connected together at the light of a superior understanding. Bonaventura, instead, feeds on harsh oppositions: truth and error or lie, light and darkness. In the work that Bonaventura wrote during the time of the crisis, the Seven days of Creation or the Hexaemeron one finds the origin of theme that will make its way down to the writings of Luther: reason as the devil's harlot. For Bonaventura it signifies a self-sufficient philosophy' a philosophy that attempts to draw us from the hands of the royal bride that is christian wisdom. "The Jews would not hear wisdom from the mouth of Wisdom. But we have Christ in us and still do not desire to hear His wisdom. It is a frightful abomination that the fairest daughter of the king should be offered to us as our bride; but we prefer a despicable servant girl as our wife, and we prefer to prostitute ourselves with her'

It is certainly no coincidence if the first major theological contribution of Joseph Ratzinger, namely his doctoral dissertation, is dedicated to the theology of Bonaventura and to the crisis of 1267 in particular. In this work, Bonaventura's theology of History, the present holy Father argued that the discussion on finite vs. infinite physical time was, for the medieval theologian, anything but a side-issue. According to Ratzinger, this discussion had to do with the core of a theological vision that featured the world as the object of a finite and unrepeatable process, coming out initially from God, *exitus*, and returning ultimately to God, *reditus*, a process at the centre of which lay the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. By the same token, Ratzinger played down Bonaventura's criticism of the reasoning activity. The enemy, writes Ratzinger, was "a self-sufficient philosophy' a philosophy that attempts to draw us from the hands of the royal bride that is christian wisdom".

In order to grasp the inner logic of a powerfully rich and complex theological vision, it is always advisable to go back to the doctoral dissertation of its author. This first serious achievement often contains insights that will provide the dominant themes of the reflection to come. The theology of J. Ratzinger is, I believe, no exception in this regard. In the following presentation, I will argue that, when it comes to reason, considered both as an instrument of the reflecting activity and as an object contemplated by this reflecting activity, Ratzinger is one line with Bonaventure, in contrast to the line of Thomas Aquinas. Never does Ratzinger depart from a perspective where the truth of human rational achievements is assessed according to their degree of conformity to God's revealed truth in Christ. Of course, a disciple of Thomas Aquinas will doubt that this denial of the intrinsic value of reason can give rise to a powerfully creative theology. Is not Bonaventura the one that turned a blind eye to the chief intellectual event of his time, namely the discovery of Aristotelean physics and metaphysics? Can a theology led according to the defensive and often polemic spirit of Bonaventure succeed in integrating the challenging insights of modern times? In my eyes, the theology of Ratzinger provides a masterful demonstration of this possibility. Paradoxically, I will argue that, by moving along the apparently conservative line of Bonaventura, Ratzinger has managed to address theologically the modern mind, a venture which has no equivalent among the adepts of the apparently more open and innovative line of Aquinas. Far from falling into the logical and theological traps of fideism, the Christocentric, Bonaventure-inspired reflection of Ratzinger puts reason, the Logos-principle, at the core of its understanding of the world. Seen in the light of the Logos-principle, not only does the history of Europe, but the history of the whole human civilization, down to the latest and hottest political issues of our times, acquire some new and unexpected meaning.

The following presentation does not aim at providing a survey of the development of Ratzinger's thought. It is rather an attempt to sketch out an overview of Ratzinger's reflection on this specific issue by bringing together selected passages from his works. I claim that an amazingly coherent picture results from this quite simple exercise.

Bonaventure, as mentioned earlier, perceived three major stages in the history of the world: the creation at the beginning, the Incarnation at the middle-point of history, and finally the return of everything to God at the end of times. One can also perceive three stages in the picture of the world in the reflection of his contemporary disciple. There is a beginning: the advent of Christianity as the encounter between the Jewish religious principle and the Greek logos culture. There is a middle or a turning-point: the Renaissance, as the start of an ever-growing division between reason and religion. Finally, there is an eschatological moment: the time we live in, where the fundamental issue deals with a possible reconciliation between the religious and the rational principles that lie at the core of our civilization. As I proceed to give an account of each of these moments, I will try to give as much space possible to the original voice of Joseph Ratzinger.

1. The ancient world and the advent of the Logos-principle

It is probably true to say that the starting-point of the theological reflection of Ratzinger is neither an inspiring idea nor a noble ideal: it is a historical fact, and a most intriguing one. In *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, a small but programmatic book written shortly after his election, the new Pope to the Papacy, spelt out this fact in the following manner:

“ While Europe once was the Christian continent, it was also the birthplace of that new scientific rationality which has given us both enormous possibilities and enormous menaces. Naturally, Christianity did not begin in Europe, and this means that it cannot be classified as a European religion or as the religion of the European cultural sphere. But it was precisely in Europe that Christianity took on its most efficacious cultural and intellectual form, and this is why it remains intimately linked in a very special way to Europe.”

The influence of European culture in the world of today has to do with its approach of rationality. In the form of scientific and technical inventions, philosophical ideas and political instruments, it is an element that can be communicated to other cultures without damaging them too much since it has something universal in it. The question is why Europe, this “peninsula of Asia” as the poet Paul Valery used to call it, turned out to be the birthplace of an element that, being universal, does not belong to any civilization in particular. Of course, the Greek miracle, the prodigious legacy of Socrates and Plato, played a decisive role in constitution of this European concept of Rationality. Still, our rationality is not simply the rationality of Plato, or rather, it is the same rationality, but thoroughly transformed. This is why Benedict

speaks of a "new rationality" here. Actually, the origin of this new way of dealing with reality can hardly be assigned to something else than to the encounter between the Greek form of civilization and the religion of Israel, an encounter that took place due to the diffusion of Christian faith throughout the Mediterranean. This is everything but a historical coincidence. It is the very core of the Christian revelation which enabled this encounter. In *Truth and Tolerance*, a collection of articles devoted to issues regarding interreligious dialogue, Benedict evokes the spiritual quest of the Greco-Roman world, as the cause that urged a significant number of Pagans to seek answers in the religion of Israel. The so-called "God fearers" were impressed by Israel's faith in a God that had created the world, granted its people the Law, and spoke to it through numerous prophets.

"Jewish faith seemed to them the religious form of philosophical monotheism and, thus, corresponded both to the demands of reason and to the religious needs of man (...) When people associated themselves with the synagogue in this way, there was one unsatisfactory element not accommodated: the non-Jew could only ever be an outsider and could never truly belong' (p.171)

The Greeks, lest they become Jews, could never totally integrate to the concrete life of the people of Israel. In turn, the Jews felt threatened by the all-absorbing universality of the Greco-Roman civilization. There occurred, however, several remarkable attempts to connect the Revelation of Israel to the Greek Logos. In his famous and controversial Regensburg speech, Benedict mentions the Septuagint as the most convincing one:

"Today we know that the Greek translation of the Old Testament produced at Alexandria-- the Septuagint-- is more than a simple (and in that sense perhaps less than satisfactory) translation of the Hebrew text: it is an independent textual witness and a distinct and important step in the history of revelation, one which brought about this encounter in a way that was decisive for the birth and spread of Christianity. A profound encounter of faith and reason is taking place here, an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion".

Notwithstanding, these attempts to draw the religion of Israel and the Greek civilization closer to one another would have remained details of ancient history, were we unable to perceive them, from the historical point where we stand now, as the portents of the major event that has ever occurred, that is, the advent of the Messiah of Israel in the person of the son of God. The fusion of the unique particularity of Israel's Revelation with the universality of the Greek civilization is inscribed in the personal, hypostatical identity of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Logos. Or conversely: the Logos is a

divine person. In *Introduction to Christianity*, a book written more than 40 years ago, in the immediate and hectic aftermath of the second Vatican council, Ratzinger expresses the newness of God's Revelation in Christ in the following way:

“Ever since the Prologue to the Gospel of John, the concept of logos has been at the very center of our Christian faith in God. Logos signifies reason, meaning, or even "word"-a meaning, therefore, that is Word, that is relationship, that is creative. The God who is Logos guarantees the intelligibility of the world, the intelligibility of our existence, the aptitude of reason to know God (die Gottgemässheit der Vernunft) and the reasonableness of God (die Vernunftgemässheit Gottes), even though his understanding infinitely surpasses ours and to us may so often appear to be darkness. The world comes from reason, and this reason is a Person, is Love -this is what our biblical faith tells us about God. Reason can speak about God; it must speak about God, or else it cuts itself short” (p.26).

Thus, according to Ratzinger, the cultural Big-Bang from which the European mind was born is anchored in the most intimate truth of God's Revelation. Nothing can be more opposed to the idea that high Christology, speculations about Christ as the Logos, is a consequence of the accidental and hazardous encounter between the religion of Israel and the philosophy of the Greeks. Numerous passages in Ratzinger's writings witness the urbane but open intellectual fight that he wages against the neo-kantian paths of modern German Protestantism. Harnack and later Bultmann, Dibelius, are wrong when they treat non-originally Jewish, somehow speculative concepts, as some kind of phenomenal screen that keep us at a distance from the concrete simplicity of the primeval event. Ratzinger questions the idea according to which what comes first is necessary more simple than what comes later. In *The God of Jesus Christ*, a short book that summarizes the reflection of the then Cardinal Prefect on the Trinitarian mystery, Ratzinger writes:

“Mental processes do not follow the law of animal genealogies. In this case, it is frequently the opposite way around: a great breakthrough is followed by generations of imitators, who bring down the bold new beginning to the banality of school theories (...). How questionable the proposed criteria are can easily be seen in examples: Who would maintain that Clement of Rome is "more developed", and „more complex" than Paul? (...) Whole generations of Thomistic scholars have been unable to sustain the greatness of his thought; Lutheran orthodoxy is far more "medieval" than Luther himself”

Certainly, Greek concepts have sometime been misleading, but they have been acknowledged as such by the genuine tradition of the Church. In the book that I have just mentioned, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger

takes the example of modalism or monarchianism, according to which the distinction of the Persons of the Trinity has to do with the different ways God has chosen to appear to human beings. It is tempting for a Greek mind, since it preserves the unity and transcendence of God. However, as Ratzinger writes:

“(...) in the end it leads back to a situation in which man is only circling around in himself and not penetrating God’s own reality”

There is an undue reduction of the content of Revelation to the logical canons of Greek thinking, but there is also an opposite process - what could be called a transfiguration of these canons, so that they might adequately describe the content of God’s Revelation. Further in the same book, Ratzinger takes the example of the term *homousios*, consubstantial. Although the term is derived from Greek philosophy, it enables us to conceive the Logos as a divine person, and not as a metaphor of God’s wisdom.

“The Word is literally true-that is what is meant by calling Jesus "consubstantial" with the Father. This is not placing philosophy on an equal footing with the Bible; on the contrary, it protects the Bible from attack by philosophy”.

That the abyss of God’s mysterious and totally supernatural being abides, though invisibly, in the concreteness and simplicity of the initial event is a possibility that the Bultmanian school of exegesis dismisses. But this rests on another assumption which is mistaken, namely: that the supernatural can have no concrete existence, since it is not liable to become the object of a scientific approach based on the regularity of natural phenomena. If the biblical God exists, argues Ratzinger, then there exists a Logos, a Reason which both transcends and encompasses the rationality of natural sciences. If this biblical God became incarnate at some point of history, then it is but normal that the reality of this event should evade the grasp of a purely natural or scientific rationality. This absence of correspondence between event and method indicates the limits of scientific exegesis, not the impossibility per se of such a supernatural event.

Indeed, the incarnation of the Logos opens up an horizon which is totally hidden from a mind anchored in the logic of time and space. It reveals the divine as being within itself an eternal *dialogos* of love between the Persons of the Trinity. It also reveals that the divine design of establishing a *dialogos* of love with human beings by crossing the gap that separates

time from eternity. Let me quote these lines from Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity*:

"The Rubicon of becoming man, of "hominization", was first crossed by the step from animal to logos, from mere life to mind. Man came into existence out of the "clay" at the moment when a creature was no longer merely "there" but, over and above just being there and filling his needs, was aware of the whole. But this step, through which logos, understanding, mind, first came into this world, is only completed when the Logos-itself, the whole creative meaning, and man merge into each other. Man's full "hominization" presupposes God's becoming man; (...) the highest possible development accorded to the process began when a creature of dust and earth looked out beyond itself and its environment and was able to address God as "You". It is openness to the whole, to the infinite, that makes man complete"

However, no matter how transcendent be the content of God's Revelation in Christ, Ratzinger emphasizes over and over the enlightenment of natural reason that proceeds from this supernatural event. Even if no human mind is able to encompass the speculative riches of God's eternal Logos, believing that God has revealed himself as the Logos of all creation changes everything. In any case, it did radically transform the Greco-Roman perception of religion, that the advancement of philosophy had relegated either to the irrational sphere of the mythical or to the purely conventional sphere of the political. Human worship, as it turns now towards the real God, is simultaneously directed towards Reason or Logos as the core and regulating principle of the entire cosmos. As Ratzinger explains in *Truth and Tolerance*, this is the reason why Augustine connected Christian faith with philosophy, and not with myth or politics in the threefold classification of religion supplied by Varro:

" [Christianity] is based on knowledge. It is the worship of that being which is the foundation of everything that exists (...) Enlightenment has become part of religion and is no longer its opponent. Because that is how it was, because Christianity saw itself as embodying the victory of demythologization, the victory of knowledge, and with that the victory of truth, it necessarily regarded itself as universal and had to be carried to all peoples: not as a specific religion that overcomes and displaces others, not on the basis of some kind of religious imperialism, but as the truth that renders mere appearances superfluous"

Indeed, as is plain from the recent book entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger sees this dimension of rational enlightenment as rooted into the very mission of the apostles. It is associated with Christ's command to exorcise demons in his name:

"The world is now seen as something rational: It emerges from eternal reason, and this creative reason is the only true power over the world and in the world. Faith in the one God is the only thing that truly liberates the world and makes it "rational." When faith is absent,

the world only appears to be more rational. In reality the indeterminable power of chance now claim their due; "chaos theory" takes its place alongside insight into the rational structure of the universe, confronting man with obscurities that he cannot resolve and that sets limits to the world's rationality. To "exorcise" the world –to establish it in the light of the ratio (reason) that comes from eternal creative reason and its saving goodness and refers back to it is a permanent, central task of the messengers of Jesus-Christ" (p.174)

The preaching of the Church is a source of enlightenment for the world. It is because this dimension of enlightenment- a modern term that echoes the medieval, thoroughly Bonaventurian concept of illumination- is inherent to the most intimate life of the Church. In his book entitled *The Spirit of Liturgy*, Ratzinger develops most interesting considerations on the notion of *logike latreia*, "reasonable sacrifice" that one encounters first in Romans, ch.12, v.1. This Pauline and later Augustinian use of a Greek concept has a Jewish exilic background among others. It designates a sacrifice by means of human words in the absence of a Temple where physical sacrifices could be offered. However, in Christianity, the sacrifice of the word is no longer a substitute; it does not imply a longing for the "real" sacrifice of animals. The sacrifice of words has become the spiritual receptacle of the sacrifice of the Word, the real sacrifice of God himself, offered once and for all. The worship of the Church is therefore an "enlightened" worship- it does no longer offer bloody, exterior sacrifices. But, by the same token, this enlightened religious worship conceals an illumination in the Bonaventurian sense, since it mysteriously connects the human logos to the eternal Logos of God:

"The Greek mind elevates itself eventually to the idea of a mystical union with the Logos, the very meaning of all things"

Thus, for Ratzinger, Christian faith is all but foreign to what we mean when we speak about rationality. According to its very essence, this faith has to do with science, philosophy, mathematics as opposed to chance, chaos, superstition. Yet at the same time, it discloses the transcendent source of human knowledge as the eternal Logos of God who became flesh for our sake. In a very bonaventurian fashion, the genuine enlightenment that Ratzinger describes implies the intimate illumination of human reason by the eternal Logos. Of course, what the illuminated mind can perceive of the source of its own illumination remains infinitesimal. Notwithstanding, the state of intimacy that faith induces between the human mind and the divine Logos is sufficient to keep religion out of the dangers of fideism and

irrationalism. Ratzinger likes to repeat that Christianity is a philosophy. "It always acts with Logos", according to the words of the byzantine emperor that he quotes in his Regensburg address. This point is indeed fundamental for the present holy Father. If you remember the speech and the controversy that ensued, he sees here what distinguishes Christian faith and the whole Christian tradition from powerful and threatening religious trends similar to contemporary radical Islam. Actually, as he observes in the same speech, there appeared analogical tendencies in late medieval theology. But they have not been endorsed by the magisterium of the Church:

"In contrast with the so-called intellectualism of Augustine and Thomas, there arose with Duns Scotus a voluntarism which ultimately led to the claim that we can only know God's voluntas ordinata. Beyond this is the realm of God's freedom, in virtue of which he could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done. This gives rise to positions which clearly approach those of Ibn Hazn and might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness (...) As opposed to this, the faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy, in which unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language (cf. Lateran IV). God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as logos and, as logos, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf".

Notwithstanding the insights of Karl Barth, Ratzinger claims that there is a consubstantiality between faith and reason which is grounded in the analogy between the human and the divine Logos. But then how come that nowadays, most people, even Christians and faithful catholics, tend to put faith on the side of the irrational? Something stands between us and the paradigm of reason as it has been elaborated by the theological tradition of the Latin Middle Ages. Undoubtedly, a new notion of rationality has seen the light during the Renaissance, a paradigm that has moulded the ways of thinking of the whole modern era. In order to get a glimpse of the depth and width of Benedict's reflection on reason, we have to give an account of his analysis of the clash between the new paradigm and the old.

2. The modern world and the fragmentation of the Logos-principle

As we saw earlier, it was clear to the ancient and medieval theological mind that natural reason in general could not reach out to the truths that God had progressively revealed in the course of Israel's holy history and eventually fully revealed in Christ. Otherwise, the very notion of

Revelation would not make sense. At the same time, as we just explained, it interpreted this absence of correspondence as pointing towards the existence of a transcendent Logos that comprehended both natural and supernatural truths. Accordingly, the human mind could, at the light of this transcendent Logos and the measure of its capacity, endeavour to disclose the continuity between the sphere of the natural and the sphere of the revealed. However, in the wake of the Copernico-Galilean revolution, the human mind started to interpret this absence of correspondence in a totally different way, namely as the sign of the highly doubtful nature of revealed truths. Elements brought to light through natural inquiry tended to show that several truths assumed as revealed by God were simply not true. Consequently, the continuity between the sphere of the natural and the sphere of the revealed could no longer be viewed as an acceptable scientific premiss. The scientifically valid was methodologically restricted to the sphere of the natural. This did not imply that any statement pointing beyond this sphere was necessarily wrong, but that it could not be true once it had proved impossible on scientific grounds. Accordingly, the scientific method was, from now on, the only acceptable criterion to establish the truth-value of a statement bearing on the structure of reality. No matter how unavoidable had become this step in the evolution of the Western mind, one must realise the renunciation that it implies in terms of ontology and metaphysics. In his *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger writes:

"We have given up seeking the hidden "in-itselfness" of things and sounding the nature of being itself, such activities seem to us to be a fruitless enterprise; we have come to regard the depths of being as, in the last analysis, unfathomable. We have limited ourselves to our own perspective, to the visible in the widest sense, to what can be seized in our measuring grasp".

The Renaissance paradigm of rationality dismisses the *a priori* structural rationality of the Universe associated with the adoption of Christian faith:

"That which alone had hitherto seemed worthy of the free mind, thinking about the meaning of being, now seemed an idle and aimless enterprise offering no hope of attaining genuine knowledge. Thus mathematics and history now became the dominant disciplines; indeed, history devoured, so to speak, the whole world of learning and transformed it all fundamentally. Through Hegel, and in a different way through Comte, philosophy became a historical question, in which being itself is to be understood as a historical process".

Actually, the oblivion of genuine faith's strong commitment to rationality, the reduction of its content to the sphere of the subjective and

unscientific does not come only from the outside, that is, from modern philosophy. With the German neo-kantian exegesis of Bultmann and his pairs, it has propagated to the inner circles of theology. The narration of Christ's miracles and the theological proclamations of his divinity in the New Testament have to be regarded as later mythical constructions. Over and over, Ratzinger asserts that such an approach rests on a premise which is liable to criticism, namely, the apriori inexistence of a reality beyond or above natural phenomena. As he writes in *Truth and Tolerance*:

(...) the authority of the Church cannot simply impose from outside the obligation of arriving at a Christology of Jesus as the Son of God'-But it certainly can and must challenge scholars, require them to look critically at the philosophy of their own method' (p.135).

Parallel to this evolution in the field of theoretical sciences, the advent of the modern era witnesses a thorough transformation of the social and political order. Let me quote a passage from *The Dialectics of Secularization*, a most interesting book on the theme of modern Democracy that joins together the contributions of J. Ratzinger and J. Habermas, the last great representative of the alledgedly Marxist *Frankfurter Schule*. On this occasion, Ratzinger invokes the "double rupture of European consciousness" from which the modern understanding of political law is derived:

"First, we have the exodus from the boundaries of the European world, the Christian world, that happened when America was discovered. Now, Europeans encountered peoples who did not belong to the Christian structures of faith and law, which had hitherto been the source of law for everyone and which had given this structure its form. There was no legal fellowship with these peoples. But did this mean that they were outside the law as some asserted at that time (and as was frequently the case in practice)?

Or is there a law that transcends all legal systems, a law that is binding on men qua men in their mutual relationships and that tells them what to do? In this situation, Francisco de Vitoria developed the already-existing idea of the *ius gentium*, the "law of the nations", the word *gentes* also carries the association of "pagans", "non-Christians". This designates that law which is antecedent to the Christian legal form and is charged with ordering the right relations among all peoples.

The second rupture in the Christian world took place within Christianity itself through the division in faith that led to the disintegrarion of the one fellowship of Christians into a number of distinct fellowships, some of which were directly hostile to each other. Once again, it was necessary to elaborate a law, or at least a legal minimum, antecedent to dogma; the sources of this law then had to lie, no longer in faith, but in nature and in human reason. Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, and others developed the idea of the natural law which transcends the confessional borders of faith by establishing reason as the instrument whereby law can be posited in common"

The discovery of the American continent and Europe's inner religious wars play a role similar to the Galilean revolution in the sphere of theoretical

knowledge: they bring about a non-confessional and restrictive, somehow minimalist, paradigm of rationality. The political content of Christian faith tends more and more to be relegated to the sphere of private individual convictions. In the social as in the theoretical fields, modern Enlightenment goes together with a contestation of faith's claim to objectivity and rationality.

Notwithstanding, when it comes to judging the global evolution of modern times, Ratzinger is not entirely negative. He often praises the achievements of science and the beneficial aspects of its technology. Moreover, he fully endorses the approval of modern democracy brought forward during the second Vatican Council. In the *Crisis of Cultures*, Ratzinger writes:

“(..) we have undoubtedly made important gains that can claim a general validity: the assurance that religion cannot be imposed by the state but can only be accepted in liberty; the respect of the fundamental rights of man, which are equal for all; the separation of powers and the control of power. These are fundamental values, which we acknowledge to be generally valid”

This does not mean, however, that these positive aspects of the modern era are connected with the doubt that it casts on the content of Christian faith. This is a crucial point. According to Ratzinger, they are rather due to the fact that, *in spite of this methodological doubt*, the Christian understanding of the rational universe continues to impregnate the quest of the Western mind in a silent and implicit way. As he writes right after the passage we just quoted, this tacit continuity explains why the West turned out to be the birthplace of the scientific and political approach that is typical of Modernity:

“From the very beginning, Christianity has understood itself to be the religion of the Logos. (...). As a religion of the persecuted, and as a universal religion that was wider than any one state or people, it denied the government the right to consider religion as part of the order of the state, thus stating the principle of the liberty of faith. (...). In this sense, the Enlightenment has a Christian origin, and it is not by chance that it was born specifically and exclusively within the sphere of the Christian faith, in places where Christianity contrary to its own nature, had unfortunately become mere tradition and the religion of the state”.

However, the evolution of the Modern era has also dangerously negative aspects, and these are due to the growing distance with the genuine content of Christian faith. Actually, all these negative aspects can

be summarized in one unique statement: taken alone, the modern paradigm of rationality, with its emphasis on the mathematical measurement of nature and technical feasibility, is incapable of providing the criteria according to which human existence could acquire meaning and purpose. In his Regensburg speech, Benedict observes:

Francis Bacon and those who followed in the intellectual current of modernity that he inspired were wrong to believe that man would be redeemed through science. Such an expectation asks too much of science; this kind of hope is deceptive. Science can contribute greatly to making the world and mankind more human. Yet it can also destroy mankind and the world unless it is steered by forces that lie outside it...

As in the tale of the sorcerer's apprentice, the progress of knowledge can have devastating consequences if it does not at the same time deliver the criteria according to which this massive amount of knowledge should be properly used. Ratzinger writes in his *Introduction to Christianity*:

Karl Marx formulated in his classical statement: "So far philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways; it is necessary to change it." With this the task of philosophy was once again fundamentally redefined. Translated into the language of the philosophical tradition, this maxim meant that *verum quia factum*-what is knowable, tending toward truth, is what man has made and what he can now contemplate was replaced by the new program *verum quia faciendum*-the truth with which we are now concerned is feasibility

As such, liberty, the fundamental value of the modern era, does not supply the criterion that would discriminate between its own correct and wrong uses. A passage of the *Crisis of cultures* echoes the one we just read in the following way:

"Man knows how to clone human beings, and therefore he does so. Man knows how to use human beings as "storerooms" of organs for other men, and therefore he does so. He does so, because this seems something demanded by his own liberty. Man knows how to build atomic bombs, and therefore he makes them, and he is willing in principle to use them, too"

The negative aspects of the modern world, these series of wrong choices that have already managed to brought about so many tragedies, including the various versions of 20t c. totalitarianism, are no details of the world history. According to Ratzinger, they all witness the ever-growing inner crisis of the present Western civilization. For the German theologian, this crisis has to do with an implicit, unformulated clash between the ancient, Christian paradigm of rationality, and the modern, post-Renaissance one. On one hand, a considerable amount of energy is used to prove that the new paradigm is self-sufficient, that it can by itself carry further the whole scientific and political order. On the other hand, the whole Western civilization is built

on values that are, as shown earlier, implicitly inherited from the ancient order of civilization. Such, for example, are human rights:

“One final element of the natural law that claimed (at least in the modern period) that it was ultimately a rational law has remained, namely, human rights. These are incomprehensible without the presupposition that man qua man, thanks simply to his membership in the species "man", is the subject of rights and that his being bears within itself values and norms that must be discovered-but not invented”

The problem comes from the fact that the new paradigm of rationality is unable to provide a global theory that could account for these values as well as the old one did. Modern philosophy has completely disconnected the understanding of nature from the notions of order and reason. As a consequence, modern Enlightenment is unable to account in its own way for the ultimate foundation of the political order which has gradually come out under its influence. But it cannot either acknowledge that this ultimate foundation is connected with a picture of the universe that it has set itself to radically question from the start. However, one cannot live in the constant denial- or the artificial putting into parenthesis- of the truth on which one stands. As Benedict argues in *The Crisis of Culture*, the refusal to mention the Christian roots of Europe in the project of the European constitution is a particularly bitter illustration of this mental state of paralysis, resulting in a tacit collective lie:

“[The motives behind this refusal] presuppose the idea that only the radical culture born of the Enlightenment, which has attained its full development in our own age, can be constitutive of European identity. (...)

A tree without roots dries up . . .

In affirming this, we are not denying all the positive and important contributions of this philosophy. Rather, we are stating that it needs to be completed, since it is profoundly incomplete.(...)

The failure to mention Christian roots is not the expression of a superior tolerance that respects all cultures in the same way and chooses not to accord privileges to any one of them.

Rather, it expresses the absolutization of a way of thinking and living that is radically opposed (inter alia) to all the other historical cultures of Humanity”.

We come here in sight of the strange paradox of Modernity. The agenda of the postRenaissance Enlightenment was set on the future triumph of reason. But the more it pursued its goal, the more illogical and chaotic became its understanding of nature. Benedict often emphasizes the ascending line that starts with Descartes’ mechanicism, continues with Spinoza’s geometrical pantheism, Kant’s epistemological scepticism, Hegel’s

rational historicism, Marx's atheistic messianism and culminates with Darwin's vision of evolution. In *Truth and Tolerance*, Ratzinger, quoting the great epistemologist Karl Popper, puts the question in the following way:

"Has everything been said by the kind of answer that we find thus formulated by Popper: 'Life as we know it consists of physical 'bodies' (more precisely, structures) which are problem solving. This the various species have 'learned' by natural selection, that is to say by the method of reproduction plus variation, which itself has been learned by the same method. This regress is not necessarily infinite."

Like all the other theories just mentioned, Darwinism is a successful alternative to the Christian vision of the universe, in the sense that it relies on nothing else than natural data, but it fails to demonstrate that the rival explanation, which relies on a supernatural Revelation, is impossible. In Popperian terms, no experimental falsification of Darwinism is conceivable. Darwinism may be true, but it may as well be wrong. This is why the Pope dismisses the idea that nothing is left to the human mind but the answer of Popper:

"In the end this concerns a choice that can no longer be made on purely scientific grounds or basically on philosophical grounds. The question is whether reason, or rationality stands at the beginning of all things and is grounded in the basis of all things or not. The question is whether reality originated on the basis of chance and necessity (or, as Popper says, in agreement with Butler, on the basis of luck and cunning) and, thus, from what is irrational; that is, whether reason, being a chance by-product of irrationality and floating in an ocean of irrationality, is ultimately just as meaningless; or whether the principle that represents the fundamental conviction of Christian faith and of its philosophy remains true: "In principio erat Verbum"- at the beginning of all things stands the creative power of reason (p.180-181)

It is highly remarkable that the natural reason of modern Enlightenment comes ultimately to overturn its own legitimacy, since it offers no explanation for its own existence and purpose in this floating ocean of chance and mechanical necessity. Meanwhile, ironically enough, the supernatural reason of the primeval Christian enlightenment offers a firm basis to the inquiries of human natural reason. Accordingly, our contemporaries cannot avoid facing a powerful, albeit tacit, spiritual and intellectual dilemma. Between a type of rationality that does not go beyond the sphere of nature, but views nature as the result of chance, and a type of rationality that rests on the supernatural, but views nature as an intelligible form of organization, there is hardly anything in common. The former denies the validity of the latter but does not have the rational means to eliminate it. The latter justifies the validity of the former, but can only do so on the basis of

the supernatural premise of faith. To some extent, we are back to the confrontation of 1267. The Bonaventurian spirit of Ratzinger challenges the modern followers of Averroes, the proponents of a vision of the world that cannot be, according to him, conciliated with faith. He passionately blames the errors and misleading perspectives of his opponents, but he knows that ultimately, there is no middle term: his criticism is rationally valid only so long as one accepts faith premises, so that, at the end of the day, one is left with the necessity of choosing between two opposite types of argumentation that are both equally unable to claim a definitive victory over the other. No wonder Benedict, addressing his fellow-human beings, often refers to Blaise Pascal's famous wager, as in *The Crisis of Cultures*:

'We must therefore reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment and say: Even the one who does not succeed in finding the path to accepting the existence of God ought nevertheless to try to live and to direct his life *veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God did indeed exist. This is the advice Pascal gave to his non-believing friends, and it is the advice that I should like to give to our friends today who do not believe”.

However, as we said in our introductory speech, Benedict should not be merely characterized as a Bonaventurian spirit speaking at the beginning of the 21 c.. He is also an innovative one. As I come now to the last part of this presentation, I would like to show how his analysis of the crisis of Western civilization in terms of a silent confrontation between two irreconcilable types of rationality opens up to a new and fresh understanding of the world's present and future situation.

3. The present world and the eschatological role of the reconciliation between reason and faith

The consequences of the crisis of Western civilization extend far beyond the secularized horizon of Europe. In a remarkable manner, I assume, despite hardly avoidable public controversies, Benedict highlights the connection between this inner crisis and the most prominent political challenge of our time: the rise of radical Islamism. The general attitude of Westerners is one of consternation: “We do not, cannot and ultimately do not want to understand. How can one so vehemently dismiss the evidence and multiple tokens of Western civilization's benevolent intentions? This must be an idiosyncratic and isolated phenomenon in one of the greatest

religious traditions of mankind, so that there is surely a way to come to an agreement with a majority of moderate and reasonable faithful". I believe the Pope is keen on pointing out the element self-deceit concealed in such a view. We do not want to see that the standard reductive treatment of the religious dimension induced by the modern paradigm of rationality is simply unbearable to moderately self-confident faithful of any great religious tradition. In the *Dialectics of Secularization*, Ratzinger draws on the words that Habermas reports to have heard from the mouth of an Iranian intellectual. According to the latter, "(...) the comparative study of cultures and religious sociology surely suggested that European secularization was the odd one out among the various developments- and it had to be corrected" (p.38). Ratzinger comments:

"At any rate, it is a fact that our secular rationality may seem very obvious to our reason, which has been formed in the West; but qua rationality it comes up against its limitations when it attempts to demonstrate itself. The proof for it is in reality linked to specific cultural contexts, and it must acknowledge that it cannot as such be reproduced in the whole of mankind"

What Ratzinger has in mind the religious *qua* religious. Why on earth should it give up its most legitimate striving, which is to mould the entire political body according to its understanding of what is good for men? Having reduced rationality to the sphere of the countable and the feasible, having accordingly lost several fundamental benchmarks as to the regulation of social liberty, the present Western civilization finds itself defenceless against people who have taken to open warfare in order to defend a *purely religious* political ideal. It is not defenseless because it lacks weapons to fight back, but because it has deliberately deprived itself of the means to understand the exact reasons of the war it has been led into. Correcting the perspective sketched out by S. Huntington in his famous *Clash of civilizations*, Ratzinger writes in *The Crisis of Cultures*:

"The real antagonism typical of today's world is not that between diverse religious cultures; rather, it is the antagonism between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on the one hand, and the great religious cultures, on the other. If we come to experience a clash of cultures, this will not be due to a conflict between the great religions, which of course have always been at odds with one another but, nevertheless, have ultimately always understood how to coexist with one another. The coming clash will be between this radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures. Accordingly, the refusal to refer to God in the Constitution is not the expression of a tolerance that wishes to protect the nontheistic religions and the dignity of atheists and agnostics; rather, it is the expression of a consciousness that would like to see God eradicated once and for all from the

public life of humanity and shut up in the subjective sphere of cultural residues from the past.”

The antagonism between the West and radical Islamism forces the former to face the implications of the dismissal of its own religious roots. Yet at the same time, it provides Western secular society with the means of contemplating this dismissal in a totally new light. Christian faith does no longer appear as an hostile force that modern rationality has to tame in order to be able to promote its own intellectual and political standards. It becomes a unique, quintessential opportunity. Christianity is a religion, and as such it can engage a dialogue with the other great religious traditions of the world. It can speak with them the language that Western society is no longer able to speak. As Benedict observes in *The Dialectics of Secularization*, Christianity has had to go through the tension with secular society that happens to be now challenging Islam, Indianism, Buddhism and even African tribal religions:

These cultures, too, experience the confrontation with the claims of Western rationality and the questions posed by the Christian faith, since both Western rationality and the Christian faith are present there; they assimilate one or the other in various ways, while still trying to preserve their own identity (p.74-75)

Since it has had itself to adjust the absolute character of its message to the emancipative claim of the modern mind, Christianity can contribute to achieve a mutual religious understanding. On the other hand, Christianity speaks the same tongue as the modern secular mind. Indeed, if the Christian religion, as the matrix of European civilization, has historically agreed to be relegated to the sphere of private subjective convictions by the new political order, this is due to the fact that Christianity stands also in some way at the origin of the modern mind's emancipative claim. As said earlier, Christianity is not only or not simply a religion. By placing Reason and intelligibility at the personal, hypostatical core of the Universe, Christianity has somehow domesticated the violence inherent to the element of the religious taken *per se*, a violence that rests on the fact that a religious revelation does not provide the people who believe it with the means of proving its truth to people who do not believe it. These considerations lie behind Benedict's speech at Regensburg, with its controversial reference to the Byzantine emperor Manuel II's apology of Christianity against Islam:

Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. God is not pleased by blood, and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death.... (...)Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: In the beginning was the logos. This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts with logos.

Accordingly, Western secular society should see in the permanence of Christian faith within its boundaries a precious asset in creating the conditions of a genuine dialogue with these outsiders who question and threaten its legitimacy on various religious grounds. The present Western civilization cannot have access to the meaning and understanding that dwells within the great religious traditions of mankind unless it succeeds in recovering an access to its own religious tradition. Ratzinger comes to this conclusion in *The Crisis of Cultures*:

There can be no doubt that the two main partners in this mutual relatedness are the Christian faith and Western secular rationality; one can and must affirm this' without thereby succumbing to a false Eurocentrism' These two determine the situation of the world to an extent not matched by another cultural force;

In numerous passages of his work, as for instance in his encyclical on hope, the Pope emphasizes the crucial importance of the reconciliation between secular reason and faith. A consequence of the paradox mentioned earlier is that secular reason has no other issue, if it wants to escape the disease of irrationalism that threatens it from the inside - or simply to be faithful to its vocation - than to rediscover the virtues of the Logos, in the strong sense of the word, that Christianity has never ceased to convey. We read for instance in *Truth and Tolerance*:

By no means the least important practical function of faith is to offer healing for the reason as reason, not to overpower it or to remain outside it, but in fact to bring it to itself again. Faith, as a historical instrument, has set reason itself free again, so that now that faith has set it on the right path again, reason can once more see properly for itself. We have to strive toward such a renewed process of dialogue between faith and philosophy, for each has need of the other. Without faith, philosophy cannot be whole, but faith without reason cannot be human.

Of course, Benedict is perfectly aware that such a reconciliation would imply, on the side of the secular society, a revolutionary change, a dramatic parting from the line it has followed from the Renaissance on. On the other hand, he is deeply convinced that the Western civilization simply

does not have the resources and the energy to go further, nor to stand up to its inside and outside enemies without facing this Pascalian choice. In actual fact, my personal impression is that Benedict's concern for the future of the Western civilization is almost as high as his concern for the well-being of the Church. At least, both concerns cannot be dissociated in his thought. Ultimately, the present cultural and political crisis leads Western civilization back to its point of origin: the advent of Christ within the time of human beings, an advent that has thoroughly changed the evolution of human civilization. However, the point of God's *exitus* in the human flesh, of the creation of civilisation lies definitively somewhere in the past. We have reached the turning-point of the cosmic *reditus*, the point where, according to Bonaventure, the whole history comes back to God. Blessed are those who, in these trouble times, make the good choice and come to acknowledge Christ as their saviour. They need not fear, when the Logos made flesh, the primeval and ultimate intelligibility of the universe, will come a second time, and do its work of divine justice over all the earth.