

***Belief and the Contemporary Scene:  
A Philosophical Appreciation of Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI)***

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**Abstract** Even before he assumed the Petrine office as head of the Catholic Church, Joseph Ratzinger already carries the reputation of being one of the most important figures, not only of the Catholic intellectual tradition, but more so of the theological enterprise of the twentieth century. A closer appreciation of his thought which delves into the relevant discussions of the time, such as those that tackle pluralism and relativism, further reveals that more than a theologian, Ratzinger is a ‘thinker’ capable of dialoguing with intellectuals of any background. This noncompromising openness to the ideas that challenge his own gives credence to the range and depth of the beliefs that he holds and proclaims to the world. This paper presents Ratzinger’s insights that elicit a philosophical analysis based on the themes that concern the relevance of belief – the Christian faith – to the theoretical and practical movements of the contemporary period.

**Keywords** *faith and reason, pluralism, relativism, freedom*

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## **Influences on Ratzinger’s Thought**

Joseph Ratzinger’s Bavarian background situated him within an ‘intellectually rich’ milieu, and by ‘intellectual,’ we mean the abundance of highly influential thinkers in various fields. Indeed, despite the social and political turmoil that centered on Germany, this kind of activity flourished all the more.<sup>1</sup> Characteristic of this setting also is the

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<sup>1</sup> Aidan Nichols notes: “On the eve of the Great War, Bavaria’s capital was not the worst place in the world to live in. It attracted Vassily Kandinsky from Moscow, Paul Klee from Zürich, Rainer Maria Rilke from

diversity of thinking that allowed the multiplicity of sources instrumental to the development of new ways through which the situation of the time could be understood. For instance, the heritage of Munich University where Ratzinger began his studies, central to the “flowering of Catholic theology in the Germany of the Romantic movement,”<sup>2</sup> is home also to a rich dialogical relationship between Catholics and Protestants, as well as to academic interests for patristics and medieval theology, led by figures such as Martin Grabmann and Michael Schmaus. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Ratzinger’s early theology to be constitutive of “a microcosm of the Munich inheritance.”<sup>3</sup> This initial academic formation eventually developed into Ratzinger’s preoccupation with the theological themes of ecclesiology and history.

Most known among the fruits of this early interest are his writings on the Church in Augustine’s thought for his dissertation, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustine Lehre von der Kirche*, and on Bonaventura’s theology of history for his *Habilitationsschrift* for university professorship, *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*. Evident, therefore, is Ratzinger’s intellectual indebtedness to Augustine, whose influence spanned much of the Middle Ages until the rediscovery of Aristotle in the 13th century and the dawn of Scholasticism with Thomas Aquinas at its climax. Given this, Ratzinger’s chief philosophical foundation is brought to light, for he admits that he is a “decided Augustinian.”<sup>4</sup> Central in Augustine’s thought and key to his intellectual conversion to Christianity is the relationship between faith and reason captured by the adage *credo ut intelligam*. In Augustine’s mind, believing is nothing else but “thinking with assent,”<sup>5</sup> and this includes the special kind of belief that seeks, that is, faith.

This notion gives credence to the suggestion that “the medieval schoolmen were rooted in Augustinian ideas of the relation between faith and reason.”<sup>6</sup> It is thus

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Prague” (*The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*, New York: Burns & Oates of Continuum, 2005, 11).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium: An Interview with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, 2.5. John Rist, “Faith and reason,” in E. Stump & N. Kretzmann (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 26-7.

<sup>6</sup> Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI*, 27.

unsurprising to find that even before his emphasis on John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the phenomena of globalization and cultural pluralism already led him to an explicit appreciation of this relationship in his inaugural lecture as a theologian in Bonn in 1959.<sup>7</sup> Augustine, in turn, is Platonic in influence, considering that his “encounter with certain Platonist books [is] a crucial turning point in his path to Christianity.”<sup>8</sup> In turn, as a professed Augustinian, Ratzinger is also “to a certain extent...a Platonist.”<sup>9</sup> He belongs to the line of thinkers along with Descartes who believe in the possibility of innate knowledge, for to him, a kind of “recollection of God, is, as it were, etched in man, though it needs to be awakened.”<sup>10</sup>

This does not imply that Ratzinger is just an Augustinian or even a Platonist through and through, for just like most Catholic thinkers, he also finds inspiration in Thomas Aquinas whom he considers to be an “effective model of harmony between faith and reason.”<sup>11</sup> It is this same paradigm that Ratzinger adopts in believing that “faith and reason, theology and philosophy, are symbiotically, and not extrinsically, related.”<sup>12</sup> More or less, the intersections between these foundational thinkers give us an indication of his other influences as well, which includes Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, among many others, for while they are not exclusively identifiable with the Platonic-Augustinian or Thomistic tradition, their reflections characterize the spirit of the interrelationship of faith and reason evident in their dialogues with the prevalent trends of their time.

## The Centrality of *Logos*

The brief introduction to the intellectual background of Ratzinger, at least in terms of his philosophical orientation, leads us to consider how he emphasizes ‘reason’ as a

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Vincent Twomey, Introduction to John F. Thornton & Susan B. Varenne (eds.), *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), xxxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Macdonald, “The divine nature,” in E. Stump & N. Kretzmann (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, Angelus Address, St. Peter's Square, 28 January 2007, cited in Tracy Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 5.

foundational aspect of his theological framework. At the outset, it must be elucidated that ‘reason’ in its ordinary sense, although significant, is not the highest point of theological thinking. Yet it is the cynosure of the things that surround the discussions of the matters of faith like the dogma of the Triune God, the deity of Jesus Christ, the intermediary role of the Church between God and the people, and so on. This is because the usual usage of the term ‘reason’ is encompassed by and subsumed under the centrality of *logos*, not only in Ratzinger’s thought but more so in the structure of Catholic theology as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Ratzinger finds Paul’s address to the Athenians as a locus of this idea, for our innate capacity to know God implies that “the Christian religion is a **logos-religion**.”<sup>14</sup>

Ratzinger’s discussion on the Church Fathers’ assimilation of Greek thought shows how the Christian predisposition for the *logos* had driven them to opt “for the God of the philosophers and *against* the gods of the various religions.”<sup>15</sup> Against the *mythos* that pervaded the religious inclination of the ancients, Christianity proclaimed its allegiance to “Being itself...the ground of all being...the God above all powers.”<sup>16</sup> Christianity, therefore, in siding with Greek philosophy in “demythologizing the world and...furthering the action of *logos*,”<sup>17</sup> found itself to be in dispute contra all the other religions with whom it was expected to belong. But Christianity is not merely a religion among other religions, just as how its God is not a God belonging to a pantheon of deities worshipped by mankind. The eventual question that had arisen, however, was the clarification between the God worshipped by faith and the God known to the philosophers.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Tillich’s exhaustive analysis of the evolution of the understanding of ‘reason’ throughout the history of philosophy provides a concrete background to this statement. In ancient thought until before the dawn of modernity, ‘reason’ is taken to pertain both to the capacity of the mind to “grasp and shape reality” and the “*logos* character” of reality itself. At the outset of modern science up to our time, ‘reason’ is seen in a more technical manner, for it has become merely a tool in giving meaning to the world (Cf. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1951, 75-83).

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, trans. Henry Taylor, Horn, S.O. & Pfner, V. (eds.) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 290. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 36. Cf. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*: “Christian faith is word-oriented.”

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 137.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1987), 327.

To this dilemma, it is their coincidental “striving toward the *logos*”<sup>18</sup> that Ratzinger highlights to show Christianity’s decision to side with reason, lest it risk the “amputation of reason,” as is the case for the ancient religions, and be relegated exclusively to the purely religious realm.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this initial concordance, Christianity’s understanding of *logos* endeavored further into its very heart by surpassing the highest possible conceptions of the God of the philosophers. Transcending the God who is eternally unchangeable and inaccessible to what is fleeting, the God of faith “is not only thought of all thoughts...but also *agape*...creative love.”<sup>20</sup> More than just *logos*, the self-contemplating, self-centered *actus purus*, “the creative original thought is at the same time love.”<sup>21</sup> This conceptual and even ontological transcendence of the already tenable conception of the Greek mind is surpassed by the identification of this *logos* fragmented throughout history and culture as the very object of faith.

*Logos* is not merely an instrument, as we would usually understand ‘reason’ as a pathway that directs our minds to what is true and worthy of belief. It is not just the inherent rationality of the cosmos which we find whenever we attempt to understand its orderliness and intelligibility. The *Logos* believed by Christianity in itself “[contains] the meaning of the world,”<sup>22</sup> and so is identified with truth as well – the person of Jesus Christ, the “reason and the rational ground of all things and of all persons”<sup>23</sup> who is recognized and worshipped. In this light, it makes sense for Christians to hold that their religion is also a means for the propagation of ‘reason,’ indeed, even more so than the models of Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment, for every time they witness to the name of Christ, whether through language or culture, the “words of men become bearers of God’s own utterance of his own *Logos*.”<sup>24</sup> This primary theme becomes vibrant all the more in the following sections in that this openness on the part of Christianity allows for its dialogue

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<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 337.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-9.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Beliefs and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004), 196.

with culture and the various periods of history in the common ground of the universal recognition for *logos*.

## Belief and Pluralism

The priority of *logos*, therefore, figures primarily in the discussions on Christianity's relation with a pluralist society that shows in many ways "the denial of the Absolute in public life."<sup>25</sup> It is not difficult for a Catholic to accept the chief tenets of the faith, especially when one is predisposed to believe that Catholicism is so closely bound to the *logos* that its beliefs cannot but be tied to the certainty of truth. The "urgent task for the Church," however, is "the new presence of the rationality of faith."<sup>26</sup> What makes this more daunting than it already is that for the rest of the world's people, the offering of Christianity for objectivity, among others, is an ambitious and assuming position at the least, if not ignorable. Such a claim seems to be an affront to the pluralistic character of our time which is something automatically recognized by the majority.

There is nothing inherently wrong with 'pluralism' as that which "affirms that each individual lives within a multiplicity of social groupings."<sup>27</sup> Pluralism in this sense is not so much different from the usual demographic classification of citizens, but its possible implication that "each social body has only a relative value"<sup>28</sup> can be alarming to some extent. This connection with the phenomenon of relativism further opens the way to a 'pluralist theology of religion' that treads down the path of subjectivism, eclecticism, and even nihilism, all of which John Paul II specifically pointed out in *Fides et Ratio*.<sup>29</sup> Worst among the potentialities to which pluralism gradually climaxes is the modern pluralistic

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<sup>25</sup> Twomey's Introduction, *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, xxv.

<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 291.

<sup>27</sup> Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI*, 284.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, September 14, 1998, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html), nn. 86-91. Ratzinger describes these same concepts as "philosophical and theological presuppositions" of pluralism, wherein 'subjectivism' is taken by those who "take human understanding to be the only source of knowledge," 'eclecticism' as the culling out of "ideas from other philosophical and religious systems, regardless of their logic or of whether they can be reconciled with the Christian faith," and 'nihilism,' eventually leads to "the metaphysical emptying of the mystery of the Incarnation" (*Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 210).

conception that “all religions, with a varied multiplicity of forms and manifestations, in the end are and mean one and the same thing.”<sup>30</sup> The easy retort, however, is clear: “there are...sick and degenerate forms of religion, which do not edify people.”<sup>31</sup>

Hence, Christianity, specifically the Church, finds itself at the crossroads decisive of the role it will play in the furtherance of society. On one hand, if it refuses to stand its ground in remaining firm to the objective standards that it upholds amidst the plurality of beliefs and cultures, then it denigrates its mission to the people by relegating itself to the private sphere where it cannot have an external influence alongside other thought systems. On the other hand, if Catholicism insists on its stance of certitude, then it presents itself as an antagonist to society’s identity and autonomy.<sup>32</sup> The solution often invoked to address this concern is the advancement of ‘dialogue,’ but Ratzinger keenly points out the danger of conflating “the ideology of dialogue [that] has taken the place of mission and...conversion”<sup>33</sup> with the way of ‘understanding through dialogue’ which Vatican II proposed. Dialogue for Ratzinger “aims at conviction at finding the truth,”<sup>34</sup> which is radically different from its ideological kind that sets

one’s own position...and what the other person believes on the same level, so that everything is reduced to an exchange of opinions that are fundamentally relative and of equal value.<sup>35</sup>

And how are the different groups and thought systems supposed to find this ‘truth,’ especially when Ratzinger himself acknowledges that to expect unification as a result of dialogue is “bound to disappointment,” and so “hardly possible within our historical time, and perhaps is not even desirable”?<sup>36</sup> Even the suggestion to listen to the *Logos* is rather bleak in the face of the dogmatic presupposition that it is Christ himself whom everyone should heed. If dialogue, then, is already seen as a potent force through which the ‘truth’ can be more clearly discerned, perhaps it is the question of its method that must be

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<sup>30</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Twomey’s Introduction, *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, xxxii.

<sup>33</sup> Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 211.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World*, trans., Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 112.

<sup>35</sup> Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 212.

<sup>36</sup> Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant*, 109.

attentively examined. Ratzinger’s suggestion takes recourse to the model of modern physics already anticipated by Saint Cyran in theology. It involves the awareness that “we cannot embrace given realities...in one form of experiment and so in one form of statement,”<sup>37</sup> as is the case in the theorizations of quantum mechanics exhibited by the uncertainty principle.

It is ‘complementarity,’ therefore, that we should consider in dialoguing with the rest of the world, for it is only “by looking and describing from different, apparently contrary angles can we succeed in alluding to the truth.”<sup>38</sup> Apparent Ratzinger’s realization is the spirit of the Church Fathers’ recognition of the *logos spermatokoi* present in the various cultures, traditions, and religions of humanity, capable of being unearthed by “a dialogical process [which opens up] the hidden depth of something with which [other people are] already in touch.”<sup>39</sup> More than anything, this kind of openness expected from the Christian initiative reflects the *symphonia* that can be found within the Church itself. This *symphonia* is nothing else but the

fundamental form of the expression of truth in the Church, resting...on a complex *ensemble* [wherein] the voice of the faith is not heard as mono-phony, but as symphony.<sup>40</sup>

To possess this attitude is, thus, not only enriching for the flourishing of a dialogical relationship in a pluralistic human society but more so beneficial for the projection of Christianity to the world as an inherently coherent paradigm capable of opening itself to the world in a common quest for the ‘truth.’

## Belief and Relativism

Pluralism though, as mentioned, also risks the spread and gradual establishment of a relativist worldview. Once relativism prevails, and indeed, it already has, everything becomes subject to negotiability, having no ‘truth’ as the standpoint for how things are

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<sup>37</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 173.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>39</sup> Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Le pluralisme: problème posé à l’Eglise et à la théologie,” *Studia Moralia* 24 (1983): 307, cited in Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI*, 287.



supposed to be. More than this, relativism outrages the very core of belief – *logos* – in claiming that “we never have it.”<sup>41</sup> We have become too saturated with myriads of ideologies and thought currents, intensified by the rapid developments in the sciences, so much so that ‘truth’ amidst all these is considered to be unattainable. Such a predicament is worsened by the cautionary extremes that lie on both ends of this spectrum. From the standpoint of one extreme, it is difficult to stand alongside an absolutist view of ‘truth,’ for this precisely is what Ratzinger observes in the positivist framework that many treat with utmost predilection.

The tendency to declare science, which includes its methods and findings, to be the “absolute and unsurpassable form of human thought” is itself a denial of *logos*. While it professes its allegiance to it by subjecting all claims about the world to its rigorous analysis, it also limits it when one “cannot use his reason to ask about the essential things in his life.”<sup>42</sup> For Ratzinger, “true wonder...is a NO to this confinement in empirical, this-worldly reality,”<sup>43</sup> and so to stand by an absolutist view of the world through science is nothing but an upholding of “an amputated reason.”<sup>44</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, to be all-accepting and tolerant of the doctrines that arise here and there every now and then is like being in a “small boat of thought...tossed about by these waves.”<sup>45</sup> When “every day new sects are created...with cunning that tries to draw [people] into error,” and we are left without an anchor and a foundational point, we become swept along by trends, drawn by currents toward

a dictatorship of relativism, which does not recognize anything as certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.<sup>46</sup>

One need not dig deep into history to find that both of these exclusivist and pluralist tendencies give birth to the ‘pathological forms’ of religion and even science that demand

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<sup>41</sup> Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Michael J. Miller & Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 158.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 143.

<sup>44</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff, St. Peter’s Basilica, 18 April 2005, in J.F. Thornton & S.B. Varenne (eds.) *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

a kind of respect that they think they are entitled to. And when they go unchecked, the next thing that we hear of are horrors that mankind would have never wished to see: terror attacks done in the name of religious piety, and the continual ‘development’ of nuclear weaponry capable of reducing miles of territories and millions of lives to ashes. If, as in the case of pluralism, we are to provide a common ground wherein genuine dialogue can take place, the universally recognizable aspect of human life may be pinpointed to serve as a starting point. Since for Ratzinger, science and religion become pathological when they “take leave of the moral order...[become] autonomous, and no longer [recognize] any standard but [their] own capabilities,”<sup>47</sup> it becomes reasonable to suggest that a moral standard independent of human capriciousness would be capable of fulfilling the role of being the object of universal recognition. The goal here is not to unify all the others within this universal standard, for as already implied earlier, “total consensus among men is hard to achieve.”<sup>48</sup>

Rather, what is desired is to identify the ethical bases where cultures and thought systems intersect. Again, it must be reiterated that neither an absolutist purview, through science, for instance, nor anchorless ideology, can legitimately decide on these universal hotspots because in relation to the former, “science can never show us more than partial aspects of [human existence],”<sup>49</sup> and the latter, agreement is scarce if not impossible. Attention must be turned, therefore, toward the human person for within it, “there are...self-subsistent values that flow from the essence of what it is to be a man.”<sup>50</sup> And because it is inherently recognizable in each act of introspection exclusive to the privacy of each man’s interiority, it is possible, even amidst the rapid influx of external influences, to maintain a common recognition of our moral inclinations. As to what it is in its exactitude, no one can be completely certain, and so the need for continual dialogues aimed at a better understanding of what is ‘true.’

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<sup>47</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 158.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State,” in Joseph Ratzinger & Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 59.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. “Man *qua* man...is the subject of his rights and that his being bears within itself values and norms that must be discovered but not invented” (*Ibid.*, 71).

Yet this endeavor is difficult because the potentiality for universal recognition can be marred by the human tendency to deliberately disregard it – “man cannot bear sheer morality.”<sup>51</sup> For Ratzinger, it is important to “ceaselessly [clear] away our subsidiary constructions”<sup>52</sup> that prevent us from seeing the essential elements of human and societal existence. The task at hand, therefore, is a ‘reformation,’ an *ablatio* or removal “whose purpose is to allow the *nobilis forma* to appear,”<sup>53</sup> which is, in this case, the moral element essential to human nature accessible through reason. This call for *ablatio* is resounded by the already taken-for-granted principle of the mutual purification of faith and reason underlain by what Ratzinger refers to as a “polyphonic relatedness [through which cultures can become] receptive to...essential complementarity.”<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, this *ablatio* achieves maximal effect, in relation to relativism, within the context of the Christian faith which “[breaks] the barriers of finitude” that limit to us to our cramped, private spheres, and “creates the open space that reaches into the unlimited.”<sup>55</sup>

## On Freedom

This capacity to go beyond our perceived boundaries still poses questions that Ratzinger considers in the face of the upshots of pluralism and relativism: what limits precisely do we have to take into account in terms of freedom’s extent? Similarly, is there a fine line beyond which toleration ceases to operate in a moral society? To Ratzinger, it is apparent that in the contemporary milieu, “freedom is largely regarded as the greatest good there is.”<sup>56</sup> It can even be said that while relativism threatens the private sphere of the individual, the emphasis on ‘freedom’ is mostly seen “in the area of public morality” where the “Enlightenment conceptions of freedom and truth continue to provide the foundation of the dominant political cultures of the West.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the Kantian influence proclaimed

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<sup>51</sup> Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 150.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. Similarly, Ratzinger reiterates that the recognition of these hindering elements as the causes of crisis in morality and eventually in society should lead us to a call for purification. (Cf. Ratzinger, *Light of the World*, 23).

<sup>54</sup> Ratzinger, “That Which Holds the World Together,” 79.

<sup>55</sup> Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 231.

<sup>57</sup> Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 105.

by the adage *sapere aude* figures prominently in our time, and in some ways, it is beneficial to the enterprise of *logos* as it takes the central role in looking at and deciding over human affairs.

Is this something to be disdained though, considering that it is also through this same freedom that the acts of love and assent become possible and meaningful? While this is true, it cannot be ignored that the intersections of pluralism and relativism, along with the contemporary world's crisis of meaning and fragmentation of knowledge,<sup>58</sup> have led to flawed understandings of the meaning of 'freedom.' They all find root in the Kantian emphasis on autonomy that empowered a conception of 'freedom' dependent on the absoluteness of pure reason: "there should be no authority other than reason."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, it must be noted that while in Kant's ethics, some semblance of objectivity is still discernible, thanks to the imperative of reason, our *zeitgeist's* stance leans toward whimsical subjectivism. 'Freedom' for the contemporary mind is nothing but that which serves individual rights and liberty in view of the pursuance of personal goals.

When this is the case, 'freedom' as an absolute and unlimited good becomes separated from truth, from what objectively *is*. What undergirds this, for Ratzinger, is nothing else but the false promise made to our first parents: You will be like God.<sup>60</sup> From this standpoint, no law becomes binding but that which is decided by the deified self. Just as how the first parents disobeyed the law set before them, so too the 'freedom' of contemporary time is hostile to law, treating it as its contrary, an obstacle that inhibits its expression.<sup>61</sup> It is on this note that Ratzinger points out the question abovementioned: "what kind of law is consonant with freedom?"<sup>62</sup>

Returning to the solutions adumbrated for pluralism and secularism, Ratzinger's vision is made clear by taking recourse to the necessity of dialogue, *ablatio*, *symphonia* and

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 81.

<sup>59</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 237.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 247. A deeper reflection on this insight leads to the realization that the deification of every individual virtually proclaims the absence of the Absolute in favor of every single absolute-of-his-own; a kind of practical atheism that prevails alongside the ideals of secularism. For Ratzinger, "if this attitude becomes a general existential position, then freedom no longer has any standards, then everything is possible and permissible," and this, we can already glimpse in the novel trends and movements of our time (Ratzinger, *Light of the World*, 26).

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 249.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

complementarity. They all point to a consideration for discussing natural law as the cynosure of discourses that invoke the notions of ‘freedom,’ ‘law,’ ‘reason,’ and even ‘truth’ as fidelity to our nature as human beings. To Ratzinger, the natural law

has remained the key issue in dialogues with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about ethical principles of law in a secular, pluralistic society.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, in the face of this reason-sanctioned principle perhaps recognizable universally, against the “implicit goal of all modern freedom movements”<sup>64</sup> to be gods unto ourselves, Ratzinger declares that ‘freedom’ cannot be associated with arbitrariness and must always be operated with responsibility.<sup>65</sup> This responsible freedom entails that our very existence which includes our participation in social life be “a response to *what we are* in truth.”<sup>66</sup>

It is this fine line alluded to above that keeps tolerance, so prized and demanded by various movements today, within its appropriate boundary. To go with a societal framework that lacks “a common reference to the truth,” which is unfortunately the case for a relativistic world, is to treat as intolerant and freedom-limiting any kind of convictions that stand for what is genuinely ‘true.’<sup>67</sup> For Ratzinger, tolerance should only be characterized as an accompaniment for a search for truth that spans even a pluralistic society.<sup>68</sup> And since it only plays a role in service of what is true about ourselves as humans, it would be unbecoming for it to be absolutized and subjected to relativism in the same way as the fate of contemporary ‘freedom.’<sup>69</sup> In the final analysis, therefore, the concordance of freedom with law grounded on truth mirrors no less than the primal creed of Christian belief. As the missionary existence of the Church is nothing but “relation as mode of unity,”

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<sup>63</sup> Ratzinger “That Which Holds the World Together,” 69.

<sup>64</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 247-8.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Light of the World*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 254. Emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> Ratzinger, “The Problem of Threats to Human Life,” in J.F. Thornton & S.B. Varenne (eds.) *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 385. This ‘truth’ is nothing else but that which cannot be swayed by the fluctuating consensus of the populace; it is the very ‘truth’ that drives them to seek consensus, the ‘truth’ that “precedes it and makes it possible” (Cf. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 113).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Light of the World*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, “The Problem of Threats to Human Life,” 383.

an existence ‘from’ and ‘for,’<sup>70</sup> so is human freedom as “an ordered coexistence of freedoms”<sup>71</sup> within a society.

## Conclusion

Perhaps it would be daring to claim that no argument can stand against the proposition that Joseph Ratzinger is one of the most influential figures in the theology of our time. To question his erudition and acumen is to blindly disregard his contributions to the flourishing of discussions on the continual relevance of Christianity to a constantly secularizing contemporary scene. The denigration of the value of his intellectual labor may be hurled instead against the integrity of theology as a reputable field of knowledge in our current intellectual climate that gives premium to the empirical sciences. Once theology is ignored as a fruitless academic endeavor, the task of dealing with thinkers such as Ratzinger is also diminished, the detractors may so think. A great chunk of Ratzinger’s insights, however, are not exclusive to the domain of theology; indeed, they penetrate the concerns of the human quest for truth and order.

From this perspective, it would not do justice to refer to him only as a ‘theologian,’ an ‘intellectual,’ or even a ‘philosopher.’ In Heideggerian lenses, Ratzinger stands above these references as a legitimate ‘thinker’ capable of dialoguing with thinkers of any stripe. This benefits, of course, not only his credibility but more so the weight of the beliefs that he professes and proclaims – they maintain their respectability, even in the face of harsh opposition. To Ratzinger, the hermeneutics of ‘faith,’ the belief that we have spoken of, is

the only medium which, in the breadth of its vision, transcends the differences of cultures, times and peoples. It does not alienate any civilization...from its values.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 188-9.

<sup>71</sup> Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 256.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 45.

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