JOSEPH RATZINGER'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF CULTURE

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"The idea of jettisoning 'the speech of Christian centuries' and 'the language of the angels' for a language 'as contemporary as the Beatles' affects all dimensions of culture."

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In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), Paul VI famously declared that "the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time" (20). He added that "the modern world seems to be forever immersed in what a modern author [Henri de Lubac] has termed 'the drama of atheistic humanism'" (55). Almost half a century later nothing much has improved. Indeed, the world appears to be taking the presuppositions of an atheist humanism to logical extremes most would never have imagined in 1975. During these five decades the subject of the relationship between faith and culture was much discussed, and pastoral projects were set in motion to bridge the gap. Many of these were based on the ideas of the Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009). As Lieven Boeve and Ben Vedder explained,

> Schillebeeckx was particularly concerned about the obsti-
> nate maintenance of traditional formulations, practices and
> structures. In his opinion, they impede the unlocking of
> the basic Christian experience. This position frequently led
> him to be sharply critical both of the Church and of the
> tradition.[1]

Schillebeeckx believed that the faith needed to be correlated to
the culture of modernity. Correlationism became popular in the
1960s and 1970s, especially in Belgium and Holland, and it was
"exported" to other first world countries whose most talented
students undertook their doctoral studies in Europe, many at
the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.[2] When they returned home,
they brought correlationism with them.

The general idea was that the faith needed to be "corre-
lated" to whatever was the cultural milieu in which people lived.
A classic example of correlationism was the statement Gareth
Edwards published in *America* magazine in 1966, stating that the
liturgy needs a language "as contemporary as [the Beatles]."[3] In
other words, if the Beatles (the 1960s pop group from Liverpool)
were the most engaging phenomenon within contemporary
youth culture, then the Church needed to correlate the faith to
their culture. This mentality was not isolated to a few academ-
ics. It became all-pervasive in Catholic schools, seminaries, and
parishes. The most notable examples of this for those who lived
through the 1970s were folk Masses and even "Rock Masses"
accompanied by drums, electric guitars, and Argus posters in
classrooms declaring "God is cool."

Modernity, however, went out of fashion in 1968 just
as Schillebeeckx's ideas were gaining traction.[4] As the British

1. Lieven Boeve and Ben Vedder, "In Memoriam Edward Schillebeeckx,
OP (1914–2009)," in *Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology*, ed.
Lieven Boeve et al. (London: T & T Clark, 2010), xiii.

2. For an account of the contribution of Dutch Catholic intellectuals to the
secularization of Catholic culture in the Low Countries, see Filip De Rycke,
"The Apostolate of the Book Revisited. New Evangelisation and the Mission
of Publishing House Betsaida," *Polonia Sacra* 24, no. 4 (2020): 105–20.

3. Gareth Edwards, "Modern English in the Mass," *America*, October 22,
1966.

4. The judgment that 1968 represents the watershed moment when the
ideals of the eighteenth century were finally superceded by postmodern

journalist Malcolm Muggeridge observed, the Church let down
the drawbridge to modernity just as the moderns had decamped
to some other place. Instead of looking fashionable, the Church
yet again appeared to be very much behind the times. After some
three decades of trying to correlate the faith to a culture now
deemed by the world's intellectual elites to be not merely out
of date but also oppressive, in the 1990s a younger generation of
theologians inspired by Schillebeeckx decided that the faith now
needed to be "recontextualized" to the culture of postmoder-
nity. This in turn means that the faith becomes what postmodern
philosophers call an "open narrative." As Lieven Boeve explains,

> Rooted in a critical-constructive conversation with a
> postmodern critical awareness and its insistence on oth-
> erness and difference, I then endeavoured to understand
> the Christian narrative as an open narrative, able to detect
> unexpected opportunities to expose God's presence in the
> interruption of its own tradition by otherness or the other.[5]

        One of the many reasons for Joseph Ratzinger's lack of
popularity among Catholic elites of his own generation is pre-
cisely that he took a different view of the relationship between
faith and culture from Schillebeeckx and others in the *Con-
cilium* circle, and indeed a different understanding of the nature
of revelation and tradition. For Ratzinger, the *memoria ecclesia*
is passed on from generation to generation without any fun-
damental change. For him, the faith of the twentieth-century
Bavarian attending a Mass with musical settings by Mozart is
the same faith as the first-century Roman Christian attend-
ing Mass in a catacomb. It is not the prerogative of each new
generation to pick and mix the elements of this *memoria*. Using
postmodern academic idioms one might say that, for Ratzinger,
the "Christian narrative" was in a sense "closed" with the death

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interests is commonly accepted in the histories of the postmodern movement.
See, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on
Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi and Geoffrey Bennington (Manchester, UK:
Manchester University Press, 1984).

    5. Boeve and Vedder, *Edward Schillebeeckx*, 6. For the notion of "interrupting
the tradition," see Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian
Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

of the last apostle.[6] Using Pauline language one might say that the mission of the Church is not to market herself to the world like a nongovernmental organization in search of patrons, but to restore *all* things in Christ.

Ratzinger therefore saw it as the duty of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and of the holder of the Petrine office to preserve the *memoria ecclesia* free from corruption. In this context he once compared the Petrine office to a constitutional monarchy. Just as the powers of constitutional monarchs are circumscribed by constitutional law and convention, the powers of the papacy are circumscribed by the deposit of the faith embodied within Scripture and tradition. At the very core of the tradition is the belief in the Holy Trinity and an explanation of the role of each person of the Trinity in the economy of salvation, and at the core of the economy is the sacramental mediation of grace. Ratzinger's whole approach to the relationship between faith and culture begins with the Trinity and sacramentality. Behind this approach is de Lubac's judgment that cultures are never theologically neutral. Cultures are always the product or epiphenomena of the dominant theological ideas or other systems of meaning driving the social practices and informing artistic life. As Ratzinger says, "Culture at its core means an opening to the divine."[7] There is, however, more than one conception of divinity.

For a culture to be Christian its foundational *mythos* needs to be trinitarian and christocentric. The International Theological Commission, under Ratzinger's direction, expressed the principle thus:

> In the "last times" inaugurated at Pentecost, the risen Christ, alpha and omega, enters into the history of peoples: From that moment, the sense of history and thus of culture

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6. This does not mean that the human understanding of the deposit of the faith cannot deepen in the course of history, especially in the insights of mystics and scholarly saints, but it does mean that such deepening occurs within fixed boundaries set by Revelation as recognized by St. John Henry Newman in his famous *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.

7. Joseph Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures," Address to the Presidents of the Asian Bishops' Conference (Hong Kong, 2–5 March 1993), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/incontri/rc_con_cfaith_19930303_hong-kong-ratzinger_en.html.

is unsealed and the Holy Spirit reveals it by actualizing and communicating it to all. The Church is the sacrament of this revelation and its communication. It recenters every culture into which Christ is received, placing it in the axis of the "world which is coming" and restores the union broken by the "prince of this world." Culture is thus eschatologically situated; it tends toward its completion in Christ but it cannot be saved except by associating itself with the repudiation of evil.[8]

If a gap has arisen between faith and culture, it is not the responsibility of the Church to run after the post-Christian culture and embrace it, throwing her arms around it in the hope that people might then, in turn, embrace the Church. Rather, the responsibility of the Church is to discern how this breakdown occurred and to mend the tear or fissure by a process of trinitarian healing and transformation. Where the correlationists and recontextualists use metaphors borrowed from the hospitality industry such as openness, dialogue, conversation, sharing, including, interrupting, and engaging, Ratzinger uses metaphors borrowed from the health industry such as diagnosis, pathology, medicine, wounds, healing, surgery, and, of course, grace and sacraments, both of which relate to spiritual health. The first presupposes that there might be something in other religious traditions that is lacking in Christianity; the second presupposes that Christian revelation is comprehensive. In *My Work in Retrospect*, Balthasar argued that it was precisely because of Christianity's positing of the Trinity and the Incarnation as the two mysteries that make sense of the world that the "true battle between religions begins only after the coming of Christ."[9] He concluded, "Humanity will prefer to renounce all philosophical questions—in Marxism, or positivism of all stripes, rather than accept a philosophy that finds its final response only in the revelation of Christ. Foreseeing that, Christ sent his believers into the world as sheep among

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8. International Theological Commission, *Faith and Inculturation* (Rome: Editrice Vaticane, 1988), §28, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html.

9. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 118.

wolves."[10] In insisting that Christian revelation is a "closed narrative," in the sense that no future generation can add its own accretions beyond the logical, organic development of dogmas already received, Ratzinger had to endure the howls of the wolves.

A PERENNIAL KERYGMA

Ratzinger's essay "The Dignity of the Human Person," published in 1969 as a commentary on *Gaudium et spes*, is a good place to begin an analysis of his understanding of culture. This is because the document claimed to be undertaking a dialogue between "the Church and the world of today." Ratzinger began by noting that article 2 of the Zurich text (an earlier draft of what became *Gaudium et spes*) had attempted to provide this justification by means of the concept of "signs of the times" based on Matthew 16:3 and Luke 12:56. The authors of the text "regarded time as a sign and voice to the extent that it involves God's presence or absence; consequently the voice of the age must be regarded as the voice of God."[11] Ratzinger observed that this interpretation was "sharply attacked," and he added his own voice to the criticism. Rhetorically, he asked, "Since Christ is the real 'sign of the time,' is he not the actual antithesis to the authority of *chronos* expressed in the proverb '*vox temporis vox Dei*'?"[12] Ratzinger has consistently resisted a sociological or Hegelian reading of these scriptural passages. Apart from what he regards as poor exegesis, he has always sought to protect the "moment of the Holy Spirit" from being deformed into the "momentary spirit of the age."[13] Ratzinger argues that Christ's admonition to his disciples to read the "signs of the times" was his way of making an eschatological point—that he, Christ, was the sign of the time, and thus that the Apostles needed to understand that with the Incarnation a new era in salvation history had arrived. He was not telling

10. Ibid., 118–19.

11. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person," in *Commentary on the Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, vol. 5, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 115.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 117.

the Apostles to become competent sociologists and to use this knowledge to correlate his teaching to the ever-changing moods of the *Zeitgeist*.

This is not to say that Ratzinger is opposed to intellectual engagements with ideas and scholars outside his own Catholic circles. He would no doubt agree that, if every undergraduate in Germany is reading books by Adorno and Horkheimer, it would be foolish for Catholic leaders not to acquaint themselves with the central theses of Adorno and Horkheimer and make some judgments about their relationship to Catholic teaching. That he was able to undertake this kind of work is evident from his famous exchange of ideas with Jürgen Habermas and his appointment to the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, the French pantheon of the academic gods. However, what he does not do is re-present the faith so as to appeal to passing intellectual fashions. If difference is in fashion, he does not market the faith as the greatest champion of difference; or, if inclusivity is in fashion, he does not market the faith as the greatest advocate for inclusivity, even though within the Catholic intellectual tradition there are things to be said about both difference and inclusivity. The Church has her own perennial kerygma, and it is something that ought to be presented in its entirety, with elements both popular and unpopular. As he once remarked, the Church is not a haberdashery shop: she does not change the wares in her windows as the intellectual fashions change.[14] Christ's great commission begins with the statement "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" and includes the exhortations to make "disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:16–20). This does not leave much room for realigning the teaching to ever-changing intellectual fashions. The danger of the haberdashery shop was recognized by St. John Henry Newman, who observed that "in every age of Christianity, since it was first preached, there has been what may be called a religion of the world, which so far imitates the one true religion, as to deceive the unstable and unwary." He concluded that those who cultivate "only one

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14. Joseph Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for Every Day of the Year* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 314.

precept of the Gospel to the exclusion of the rest, in reality attend . . . to no part at all."[15]

THE CHURCH HERSELF IS PART OF THE WORLD
AND OF HUMANITY

A second issue Ratzinger addressed in the 1969 *Gaudium et spes* commentary is scholars' tendency to draw a dichotomy between the Church and the world and the Church and humanity, as though they were two completely different entities. The Church herself, he declared, "is part of the *genus humanum* [humanity] and cannot therefore be contradistinguished from it."[16] He criticized the positing of such dichotomies as an extrinsicist mode of thinking. In an essay published in 1975 and later incorporated into his *Principles of Catholic Theology*, he made it clear that he thought those who had drafted *Gaudium et spes* were of this mindset. "We can be sure," he wrote, "that the authors, who were aware that they spoke for the Church, acted on the assumption that they themselves were not the world but its counterpart and that they had up to then had a relationship to it that was, in fact, unsatisfactory where it existed at all. To that extent, we must admit, the text represents a kind of ghetto-mentality."[17]

Such criticisms of extrinsicist thought patterns have often been made by others, including two of the young Ratzinger's mentors, Romano Guardini and Hans Urs von Balthasar. In *The Theology of Karl Barth*, Balthasar wrote, "It is not Christ who is in the world, but the world is in Christ," and, further, "the immensity of this reversal" was "the very basis of Guardini's thought."[18] Similarly, Ernest Fortin declared, "The Church is not an entity distinct from the world but the world reconciled

15. John Henry Newman, *The Heart of Newman: A Synthesis*, ed. Erich Przywara (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1947), 371.

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

17. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 379.

18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 330.

unto itself and unto God: *mundus reconciliatus ecclesia*."[19] Often when ecclesial leaders speak of "the world" they mean something like the centers of resistance to reconciliation. For Ratzinger, the Church can gain nothing by trying to mimic or appease the culture of these centers of resistance. In *A New Song for the Lord*, he wrote,

> When people rightly call for a new dialogue between the Church and culture today, they must not forget in the process that this dialogue must necessarily be bilateral. It cannot consist in the Church finally subjecting herself to modern culture, which has been caught up to a large extent in a process of self-doubt since it lost its religious base. Just as the Church must expose herself to the problems of our age in a radically new way, so too must culture be questioned anew about its groundlessness and its ground, and in the process be opened to a painful cure, that is, to a new reconciliation with religion since it can get its lifeblood only from there.[20]

A TRINITARIAN *TAXIS*

In *Christendom Awake*, Aidan Nichols, one of the leading Anglophone authorities on the theology of Ratzinger, offered what he called a trinitarian *taxis* for understanding the faith and culture relationship:

> First, a culture should be conscious of transcendence as its true origin and goal, and this we call culture's tacit "paterological" dimension, its implicit reference to the Father. Second, the forms which a culture employs should manifest integrity—wholeness and interconnectedness; clarity—transparency to meaning; and harmony—a due

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19. Ernest Fortin, "Political Realism and Christianity in the Thought of St. Augustine" (The Saint Augustine Lecture 1971, Villanova University, Villanova, PA, The Saint Augustine Lecture Series, 1972), 1–38, at 25. For a more extensive account of the concept of the world in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, see the author's "The World in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI," *Journal of Moral Theology* 2, no. 2 (2013): 109–32, and her entry on the world in the *Ratzinger Lexikon*, ed. Rudy Albino de Assunção et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, forthcoming).

20. Joseph Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1996), 96

proportion in the ways that its constituent elements related to the culture as a whole. And since these qualities—integrity, clarity, and harmony—are appropriated in classical theology to the divine Son, the "Art" of God and splendor of the Father, we can call such qualities of the beautiful form the specifically Christological aspect of culture. . . . And thirdly, then, in the Trinitarian taxis, the spiritually vital and health-giving character of the moral ethos of our culture yield up culture's pneumatological dimension, its relation to the Holy Spirit.[21]

This *taxis* is roughly analogous to the three conceptions of culture that one finds in the German language: culture as *Kultur*, culture as *Bildung*, and culture as *Geist*. *Kultur* tends to refer to the overall form of a culture, its fundamental orientation that corresponds to what Nichols would call the paterological dimension of culture, that is, its motivating end. It is also similar to the English concept of civilization. *Bildung*, which is about the formation of the "self," "soul," or more broadly about human education, is roughly analogous to the christological dimension, since in Catholic theology the human person is made in the image of God to grow into the likeness of Christ. There is, in other words, a specifically Christian form of *Bildung*. Finally, the conception of culture as *Geist* is roughly analogous to the pneumatological dimension of culture: the ethos of institutions that is generated by the inter-relationship of the paterological and christological dimensions. In each of these three dimensions of culture it is possible for there to be something deformed or defective and in need of healing, and this includes the very notion of culture itself.

THE CLASSICAL VERSUS MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF CULTURE

While there are many different cultures understood in all three senses of the term and a myriad of deficient and deformed cultures, the most significant cleavage between the Christian and post-Christian conceptions of culture is that Christian conceptions, like the Greek *paideia* or the Latin *cultura animi*,

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21. Aidan Nichols, OP, *Christendom Awake* (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 17.

retain the conceptual link between nature and culture. In classical and Christian thought, culture is never something artificial; it is always a development of something natural. However, in postclassical and post–Christian conceptions, the link between the natural world and culture was lost as nature was displaced by *technē*. As a result, as Louis Dupré argued, culture became a creation independent of any natural, organic form.[22]

Depending on what concept fills the space of the paterological dimension, there can be many different, contrary to nature and thus antihuman cultural forms. When class conflict took the place of God the Father then the culture of Bolshevism arose. When power through genetics took the place of God the Father the culture of National Socialism arose. When upward social mobility and consumerism took the place of God the Father the culture of late capitalism arose.[23] In every instance there will be a corresponding understanding of *Bildung* and a corresponding *Geist* of institutions generated by the interrelationship of the ersatz paterological and christological dimensions. Romano Guardini demonstrated this in his many references to modern culture as a culture with the form of the machine, a critique echoed in David L. Schindler's studies of liberal political theory and its metaphysical presuppositions. The parts of a machine are not integrated. They fit together in such a way that the mechanical components only influence the operation of the piece of the machinery with which they are in direct contact. There is no unifying principle across the actions of the "mechanized" human person or polity. Václav Havel alluded to this when he remarked that people who live in societies where liberalism undergirds the public culture often behave as though they were playing for a number of different teams at once, all with different uniforms, as though they were uncertain as to which team they ultimately belonged.[24] It was for precisely this reason that Guardini regarded

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22. Louis Dupré, *Metaphysics and Culture* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994), 13.

23. For an analysis of this in Polish, see Leszek Kleszcz, "Kultura 'ludzi ostatnich,'" in *Współczesne Oblicza Duchowości: Nova et Vetera*, ed. Bogdana Ferdka and Pawła Beygi (Wrocław: Drukarnia-Wydawnictwo, 2020), 15–24.

24. Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965–1990* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 94–95.

the culture of modernity as antihuman. It operates to thwart possibilities for a coherent integration of the human person. It thereby directly undermines the christological dimension. In accord with both Guardini and Ratzinger, Nichols concluded,

> We should not be looking primarily for "inculturation," where the faith so easily disappears into cultural dialogue, nor for "acculturation," where the Church remains basically external to the cultures in which she acts. Instead of these, we ought to be looking, as H. Richard Niebuhr proposed a decade and more before the Second Vatican Council opened, at Christ the saving transformer of culture.[25]

Christ, of course, can never be understood outside the context of the Trinity. The cultural transformation needs to be, as Nichols would no doubt agree, not merely christological but paterological and pneumatological at the same time.

How such a transformation is possible is best understood by combining the theology of a number of the encyclicals of the pontificate of St. John Paul II with Benedict XVI's encyclicals on the theological virtues. In the suite of St. John Paul II's encyclicals one finds his trinitarian theology: *Redemptor hominis* (1979), *Dives in misericordia* (1980), and *Dominum et vivificantem* (1986), along with his moral theology encyclicals (highly important for the christological dimension) *Veritatis splendor* (1993), *Evangelium vitae* (1995), and the fundamental theology of *Fides et ratio* (1998). Having thus explained how the human person is made in the image of God to grow into the likeness of Christ with the gifts of the Holy Spirit in St. John Paul II's magisterial work, Benedict's encyclicals enrich the theology with an account of the role of the theological virtues. The apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) of Pope Francis also emphasizes the importance of the Trinity and the kerygma for the process of the re-evangelization of formerly Christian cultures, notwithstanding the fact that some sections of the exhortation are closer to Pedro Arrupe's approach to the relationship between faith and culture than to that of Joseph Ratzinger.[26]

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25. Nichols, *Christendom Awake*, 17.

26. For a comparison of Ratzinger and Arrupe's theology of culture, see Jacob Phillips, *Mary the Star of Evangelization: Tilling the Soil and Sowing the Seed* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018).

THE CHURCH IS HER OWN CULTURAL SUBJECT
FOR THE FAITHFUL

The idea of a trinitarian transformation of culture raises the is-
sue of the Church's role in the promotion of this culture and the
Church's own culture, especially the *Geist* or ethos of her own
internal institutions. There are two particular areas of ecclesial
life where this is highly relevant. The first is the ethos of the
thousands of institutions worldwide that claim to be institu-
tions of the Catholic Church, such as schools, universities, hos-
pitals, religious orders, and diocesan agencies. The second is the
Church's liturgical life.

        In the first instance the relevant principle is that the insti-
tutions of the Church should be radically different from all other
institutions precisely because they have been built upon a trini-
tarian framework. They should showcase the culture of the In-
carnation to the world at its most lofty embodiment; they should
stand out because the form of these institutions should be chris-
tological (in the sense of integrating polarities), not mechanical.

        In contrast to this ideal situation, the mimicking of secu-
lar corporate practices by Catholic institutions is one of the major
pastoral disasters in first world countries, second only to the child
abuse crisis. In some instances the two are related. One of the
chief characteristics of corporate management practices is that
they are designed to leave employees with little or no freedom
to take personal responsibility for their actions. Individuals are
to follow protocols and procedures and thus exercise no personal
judgment. Prudential judgment is thwarted by layers and layers
of bureaucratic red tape. One of the elements of the abuse crisis
was the tendency of bishops to delegate their personal episcopal
authority to lawyers, accountants, or committees of "experts."
This now routinely happens in less weighty matters. Episcopal
responsibilities are delegated to business managers, accountants,
lawyers, and whole bureaucracies of lay "experts." This is not-
withstanding the fact that episcopal authority is a form of what
management theorists would describe as "charismatic," not "bu-
reaucratic," authority. Notwithstanding how things are in the-
ory, the trend of the last half century has been for bishops to
govern their dioceses according to the principles of bureaucratic
rationality. Many (not all) bishops have allowed themselves to

become mere "Chief Executive Officers of Catholic Inc." When their "experts" make poor decisions, even decisions inconsistent with Catholic teaching, they are often reluctant to intervene.[27]

This is a complex issue, since bishops often find themselves confronted with a double assault on their charismatic authority. One assault comes from political leaders who attempt to exert control over the Church by encroaching upon the Church's authority and circumscribing the authority of bishops. The most serious example in recent times is the attempt by some governments to demand that priests break the seal of the confessional whenever penitents confess to criminal activity. There are, however, hundreds of less serious examples of governments demanding that the Church report on her internal activities. Throughout history governments have sought to control the Church by controlling the appointments of bishops. The Chinese Communist party is the most recent nefarious example. As Pope Benedict wrote in *Caritas in veritate*,

> She [the Church] has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities: all the energy she brings to the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity is manifested when she is able to operate in a climate of freedom. In not a few cases, that freedom is impeded by prohibitions and persecutions, or it is limited when the Church's public presence is reduced to her charitable activities alone. (11)[28]

The other source of assault comes from within the Church with the lay "experts" seeking to extend their own authority over the charismatic authority of priests and bishops. The Austrian *Wir sind Kirche* movement is the most extreme example of this assault. *Wir sind Kirche* went as far as having priestless "private Eucharistic celebrations."

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27. For two extensive accounts of this trend, see Lyndon Shakespeare, *Being the Body of Christ in the Age of Management* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016); and Thomas V. Gourlay, "Catholic Inc.: On the Mechanised, Managerial Body of Christ," in *Ecclesiology at the Beginning of the Third Millennium*, ed. Kevin Wagner et al. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 64–83.

28. For a development of this idea, see Anthony Fisher, *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 10.

The end result of democratization is always bureau-cratization, and the end result of the bureaucratization of the Church's institutions and agencies is that it is sometimes difficult to see how ostensibly Catholic institutions in the education and health fields are in any way different from education and health institutions run by the state. Benedict addressed this issue of the Catholic difference in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*:

> Those who work for the Church's charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, these charity workers need a "formation of the heart": they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others. (31)

Nonetheless, management protocols often preclude this kind of heart-to-heart relationship on the grounds that it is un-professional. Risk management protocols written by lawyers dis-courage forms of human communication that operate on a more personal and spiritual level. Again, the issues are complex because in some instances a conflict of interest would arise if a more per-sonal approach were to be taken. These complex problems have largely arisen in the postconciliar era with the decline in religious vocations and the simultaneous rise of a class of professional laity. In various interviews, rather than in his more academic pieces, Ratzinger has remarked that the Church needs less bureaucracy and more holiness.[29] In *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, Balthasar was of the view that the "provincialization" of the Church (such as the enthusiasm for national synods) would simply lead to more bureaucratization at the local level and the Church militant would descend to the level of the "photocopy-ing Church."[30]

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29. See, for example, Ratzinger's interview with Peter Seewald, published in *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 343.

30. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 40

A HIERATIC LANGUAGE

The second area of ecclesial life where culture understood as *Geist* is relevant is that of the Church's theological language and liturgical culture. In *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ratzinger argued that the Church "is an independent linguistic subject that is united by the common basic experience of faith and is thus possessed of a common understanding."[31] He argued further that the Holy Spirit acts "to make the process by which the individual becomes capable of speech a part of the process by which he is incorporated into the Church."[32] The Church has her own idioms, her own hieratic language, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are an important aid in this area of Christian pedagogy.

The issues raised here regarding a hieratic versus a nonhieratic language are normally treated in the field of linguistic philosophy. There is quite a wealth of scholarly literature on the relationship between language and culture. The idea that the language in which the faith is expressed should be as close as possible to that of the everyday language of the faithful was fostered, perhaps unwittingly, by the discourse of John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council. In this discourse, John XXIII remarked, "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another." This one sentence, like the pontiff's description of Vatican II as an exercise in opening the windows of the Church to let in some fresh air, opened a very wide gate to pastoral experiments in the territory of the relationship between language and culture.

One of the deepest theological engagements with the language-culture issue can be found in the doctoral dissertation of the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago. There he draws attention to the difference in linguistic philosophy between "instrumental" and "expressivist" theories of language. According to the instrumental theory, language precedes culture, while according to the expressivist theory, culture precedes language, which is to say that our understanding of the meaning of words and phrases is dependent on the culture in which the language is expressed. If the expressivist theory is correct, then it is not so

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31. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 125.

32. Ibid.

easy to transpose theological language into other idioms, as John XXIII presumed. Cardinal George noted,

> Implicitly, Pope John's statement seems to support an in-strumental view of language, regarding language as the means whereby a speaker gives expression to thoughts which exist independently of the language, through the employment of words whose meanings are the object of explicit agreement between prospective speakers. By con-trast, an expressivist view of language holds that thought has no determinate content until it is expressed in a shared language.[33]

He concluded,

> Cultural forms and linguistic expressions are, in fact, not distinguished from the thoughts and message they carry as accidents are distinguished from substance in classical philosophy. A change in form inevitably entails also some change in content. A change in words changes in some fashion the way we think. This truth has long been rec-ognised by missionaries who have had to choose which of many possible translations might be most suitable for expressing Christian truths which have been bound up, in their own minds, with the language and the symbols in which they themselves first accepted the Gospel.[34]

Precisely what John XXIII intended by his one line state-ment is not clear, but it was used as a justification for "archiving" certain elements of Catholic culture, such as Latin hymns. This is notwithstanding the fact that such "archiving" practices were totally inconsistent with statements to be found in the apostolic constitution *Veterum sapientia*, signed by John XXIII on February 22, 1962. In this document, John XXIII exhorted the use of Lat-in and declared that "since the Catholic Church has a dignity far surpassing that of every merely human society, . . . it is altogether fitting, therefore, that the language she uses should be noble,

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33. Francis George, *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion: Culture and Church in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1990), 88. For a more extensive account of the language–culture relationship in a theological context, see the author's *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), chap. 6.

34. George, *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion*, 47.

majestic, and non–vernacular." *Veterum sapientia* itself fell victim to the practice of sidelining valuable elements of the cultural patrimony of the Church on the grounds that it was not consistent with the popular culture of the "people," as if the Catholic faithful were universally ignorant, poorly educated, unable to use a dictionary or follow a translation.

On the issue of the relationship between language and culture, Ratzinger implicitly concurs with Cardinal George. Both understood that it is not easy to transpose what Paul VI called "the speech of Christian centuries" into contemporary idioms. In his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (2007), Benedict exhorted leaders of seminaries to make certain that future priests "receive the preparation needed to understand and to celebrate Mass in Latin, and also to use Latin texts and execute Gregorian chant" (62). In the same paragraph, he added that the faithful can be "taught to recite the more common prayers in Latin, and also to sing parts of the liturgy to Gregorian chant."

The idea of jettisoning "the speech of Christian centuries" and "the language of the angels" for a language "as contemporary as the Beatles" affects all dimensions of culture.[35] It impoverishes the christological dimension (*Bildung*) by dumbing down intellectual formation; it renders the paterological dimension (*Kultur*) mundane rather than heavenly or transcendent; and it renders the pneumatological dimension (*Geist*) flat and acutely boring. As St. Augustine remarked in his *On Christian Teaching*, "No one disputes that it is more pleasant to learn lessons through imagery and much more rewarding to discover meanings that are won only with difficulty."[36]

BEAUTY IS A TRANSCENDENTAL PROPERTY OF BEING

Returning to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is important to note that Ratzinger often refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in

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35. The expressions "speech of Christian centuries" and "language of the angels" were used by Pope Paul VI in his General Audience Address (26 November 1969).

36. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33.

elevating the cultural life of the Church. Since culture relates to intellectual and spiritual development, and since the gifts of the Holy Spirit are directed precisely at such development, the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in both the cultural formation of the individual member of the faithful and in the life of the Church more broadly. It is also important to note that for Ratzinger not only truth and goodness but also beauty is important in the formation of the person. Ratzinger follows St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, and more recently Newman and Balthasar in treating beauty as a transcendental property of being. Ratzinger would also no doubt agree with Fyodor Dostoevsky that "beauty is not only fearful but also mysterious. Here the devil is stuggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart."[37] In his essay "The Contemplation of Beauty," Ratzinger wrote,

> Christian art stands between two fires today: it must oppose the cult of the ugly, which says that everything else, anything beautiful, is a deception and that only the depiction of what is cruel, base, and vulgar is the truth and true enlightenment. And it must withstand the deceptive beauty that diminishes man instead of making him great and that, for that very reason, is false.[38]

It is most dangerous for a soul to pursue beauty as an end in itself completely disconnected from truth and goodness. This danger is something of a recurring motif of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement. The Romantics were in full rebellion from the hyper-rationalism of the eighteenth century. Whereas the rationalists emphasized the intellect, the Romantics were interested in the will, human emotions, and the imagination. This movement thus had the propensity to move in one of two opposite directions: it could move in a Christian direction with an emphasis on the purity of the heart, or it could move in the direction of a sensuality disconnected from rationality. It is for this reason that the Romantic movement is often described as

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37. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 108.

38. Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 40.

a halfway house between Catholicism on the one hand and ni-
hilism on the other. It could end up with the theology of Joseph
Ratzinger and the music of Anton Bruckner, on one side, or the
atheism of Friedrich Nietzsche and the theological ambivalence
of Richard Wagner, on the other. In his liturgical essays, Ratz-
inger alludes to the danger of "aestheticism" in the liturgy. He
stands opposed to both a "beauty for beauty's sake" approach to
the liturgy, or what he calls "aestheticism," and the approach of
leveling down artistic standards, an approach he calls "pastoral
pragmatism." In *The Spirit of the Liturgy* he compares the idea of
lowering liturgical standards to whatever happen to be the ordi-
nary, everyday experiences of the people to the Hebrews' wor-
ship of the golden calf, and he describes such practices as a form
of "banal self-gratification."[39] In *Sacramentum caritatis* he declares,

> The liturgy is a radiant expression of the paschal mystery,
> in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to commu-
> nion. As Saint Bonaventure would say, in Jesus we contem-
> plate beauty and splendour at their source. This is no mere
> aestheticism, but the concrete way in which the truth of
> God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights
> us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us
> towards our true vocation, which is love. . . .
>
> The beauty of the liturgy is part of this mystery; it is a
> sublime expression of God's glory and, in a certain sense,
> a glimpse of heaven on earth. The memorial of Jesus' re-
> demptive sacrifice contains something of that beauty which
> Peter, James and John beheld when the Master, making his
> way to Jerusalem, was transfigured before their eyes (cf.
> *Mk* 9:2). Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather
> an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an
> attribute of God himself and his revelation. These consid-
> erations should make us realize the care which is needed, if
> the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendour. (35)

A few paragraphs later Benedict speaks of the importance of
beautiful ecclesial architecture, church furniture, art and vest-
ments, and especially of the importance of directing the sacred
art to sacramental mystagogy, concluding that "everything re-
lated to the Eucharist should be marked by beauty" (41).

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39. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,
2000), 23.

Ratzinger therefore totally rejects, as contrary to the humanism of the Incarnation, the idea that beauty does not matter, that it is, theologically speaking, irrelevant, dangerous, or some kind of bourgeois or even aristocratic fetish. He also opposes the puritan and Jansenist mentality that is suspicious of sensuality and the imagination. Speaking of the iconoclast controversy he writes,

> Iconoclasm rests ultimately on a one-sided apophatic theology, which recognizes only the Wholly Other-ness of the God beyond all images and words, a theology that in the final analysis regards revelation as the inadequate human reflection of what is eternally imperceptible. . . . What seems like the highest humility toward God turns into pride, allowing God no word and permitting him no real entry into history. . . . Matter is absolutized and thought of as completely impervious to God, as mere matter, and thus deprived of its dignity.[40]

In an address to a meeting of members of the Communion and Liberation movement in 2002, Ratzinger adds that "nothing can bring us into close contact with the beauty of Christ Himself other than the world of beauty created by faith, and the light that shines out from the faces of the saints, through whom His own light becomes visible."[41] In *A New Song for the Lord* he also warns against a philistine mentality:

> Culture without ritual loses its soul; ritual without culture fails to recognize its own dignity. If priestly formation is liturgical formation in an essential way, at its very core, then a seminary also has to be a house of broad cultural formation. Music, literature, art, enjoying nature—all these belong here. . . . No one can do everything, but one must not surrender to philistinism. Liturgy is the encounter with the beautiful itself, with eternal love.[42]

Ratzinger rhetorically asks whether it is a pastoral success when the Church is capable of following the trend of mass culture and

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40. Ibid., 124.

41. Joseph Ratzinger, "Message to *Comunione e Liberazione*" (August 2002, Rimini, Italy), *Adoremus* 12, no. 7 (October 2006): 1.

42. Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord*, 175.

thus shares the blame for making her people immature or ir-responsible.[43] He concludes that "trivializing faith is not a new inculturation, but the denial of its culture and prostitution with the non-culture."[44]

In various publications Ratzinger is specifically critical of the contemporary culture of the rock music industry, which he describes as Dionysian. He links the popularity of rock music to the human longing for a genuine experience of self-transcendence, something best obtained through the liturgy. His comments on this subject concur with the judgments of the Anglican philosopher Roger Scruton (1944–2020), who also recognized the pseudo-liturgical nature of rock concerts. Scruton argued that, instead of offering a genuine experience of self-transcendence, rock music arrests its listeners in a state of adolescent emotional immaturity fixated on the self. In one of his strongest statements linking the Trinity to the territory of culture, in *The Feast of Faith*, Ratzinger says,

> The movement of spiritualization in creation is understood properly as bringing creation into the mode of being of the Holy Spirit and its consequent transformation, exemplified in the crucified and resurrected Christ. In this sense, the taking up of music into the liturgy must be its taking up into the Spirit, a transformation which implies both death and resurrection. That is why the Church has had to be critical of all ethnic music; it could not be allowed un-transformed into the sanctuary. The cultic music of pagan religions has a different status in human existence from the music which glorifies God in creation. Through rhythm and melody themselves, pagan music often endeavors to elicit an ecstasy of the senses, but without elevating the senses into the spirit; on the contrary, it attempts to swallow up the spirit in the senses as a means of release. This imbalance toward the senses recurs in modern popular music: the "God" found here, the salvation of man identified here, is quite different from the God of the Christian faith.[45]

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43. Ibid., 109.

44. Ibid.

45. Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 118–19.

THE WOUND OF THE LOGOS

Whereas in countries with a long heritage of Christian cul-
ture conciliar *aggiornamento* was often interpreted as a call to
throw out the high culture of the Church and replace it with
something folksy, in mission lands postconciliar pastoral proj-
ects often took the form of attempts to wrap the faith in the
pre-Christian cultures of the native peoples—hence the ref-
erence above to pagan music. In this context, Ratzinger ar-
gues that it is not until a strong Christian identity has grown
up in the mission countries that one can "begin to move,
with great caution and on the basis of this identity, toward
christening the indigenous forms by adopting them into the
liturgy and allowing Christian realities to merge with the
forms of everyday life."[46] In *Caritas in veritate* he notes that
"every culture has burdens from which it must be freed and
shadows from which it must emerge" (59). In *On the Way to
Jesus Christ*, he further endorses the comparison made by St.
Basil between pagan cultures and the sycamore tree. The fruit
of a sycamore tree needs to be slit to allow the sap to run out
before it ripens. Ratzinger remarks,

> Applied to the pagan world, to what is characteristic of
> human culture, this means: The *Logos* itself must slit our
> cultures and their fruit, so that what is unusable is purified
> and becomes not only usable but good. . . . Only the *Logos*
> himself can guide our cultures to their true purity and
> maturity, but the *Logos* makes us his servants, the "dressers
> of sycamore trees." The necessary intervention requires
> understanding, familiarity with the fruit in the ripening
> process, experience and patience.[47]

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46. Ibid., 82.

47. Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 47. This passage was also
discussed by Cardinal Robert Sarah in *God or Nothing: A Conversation on Faith
with Nicolas Diat* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 178; and by Roland
Millare in "The Logos Localized: The Heart of Authentic Inculturation,"
Adoremus 25, no. 3 (November 2019), available at https://adoremus.
org/2019/11/the-logos-localized-the-heart-of-authentic-inculturation/.   In
this context, Ratzinger was influenced by the scholarship of Christian Gnilka
in *Chrêsis: Die Methode der Kirchenväter im Umgang mit der antiken Kultur*, vol. 2:
Kultur und Konversion (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1993).

However, by far Ratzinger's most philosophical discussion about matters of faith and culture and what is called "inculturation" is found in his address to the bishops of Asia in 1993. In this address he explains,

> One might think that the culture is the affair of the individual historical country (Germany, France, America, etc.), while faith for its part is in search of cultural expression. The individual cultures would allocate, as it were, a cultural body to faith. Accordingly, faith would always have to live from borrowed cultures, which remain in the end somehow external and capable of being cast off. . . . Such thinking is at root Manichean. Culture is debased, becoming a mere exchangeable shell. Faith is reduced to disincarnated spirit ultimately void of reality.[48]

Ratzinger prefers the concept "interculturality" to inculturation because inculturation "presumes that a faith stripped of culture is transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture whereby two subjects, formally unknown to each other, meet and fuse," and aside from modern technological culture, which certainly has no faith, all other cultures have had some faith in something outside themselves.[49] To the extent that these other faiths are inconsistent with the revelation of Christ, there needs to be a slit or wounding of the pre-Christian culture. From this it follows that "whoever joins the Church must be aware that he is entering a cultural subject with its own historically developed and multi-tiered interculturality. One cannot become a Christian without a certain exodus, a break from one's previous life in all its aspects. Faith is not a private way to God; it leads into the people of God and its history."[50] This is yet another affinity between Ratzinger's position and that of the late Cardinal Francis George. Cardinal George observed that "a believing community is always less interested in self-expression than in self-sacrifice," and thus, "the proof of a culture successfully evangelised lies in the culture's newfound ability to encourage its sons and

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48. Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures."

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

daughters to understand and accept that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. . .' (Jn 3:16)."[51]

THE PRIORITY OF LOGOS OVER ETHOS

From all the above it is clear that Ratzinger is not a cultural relativist. Nor is there anything in his thought that is evocative of the nationalist ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Rather, the kind of culture he endorses is founded on a belief in the Trinity and healed and perfected through a trinitarian transformation of the human person, of human art and institutions under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Apart from his famous "Subiaco Address"[52] and his 2005 "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice" homily, his most extensive criticisms of cultural relativism appear in the encyclical *Caritas in veritate.* There he declares that "truth, by enabling men and women to let go of their subjective opinions and impressions, allows them to move beyond cultural and historical limitations and to come together in the assessment of the value and substance of things" (4). Again, a knowledge of the kerygma is absolutely essential.

This does not mean, however, that the culture of the Incarnation, the culture transformed by the Trinity, cannot be refracted in the folk customs of different national groups as rays of light are refracted by the material of a lens. The Swiss may choose to place floral garlands around the horns of their cattle on Marian feast days, while such a practice would never occur to a devout Catholic grazier in the Australian outback. The "lens" there is somewhat different from the lush pastureland of the Swiss alps. In short, there is certainly room for different expressions of the faith in folk customs across the globe. This is clearly expressed in *Caritas in veritate*:

> [The] increased commercialization of cultural exchange today leads to a twofold danger. First, one may observe a *cultural eclecticism* that is often assumed uncritically: cultures

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51. George, *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion*, 346.

52. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Subiaco Address" (April 1, 2005), Appendix I, in Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable. This easily yields to a relativism that does not serve true intercultural dialogue; on the social plane, cultural relativism has the effect that cultural groups coexist side by side, but remain separate, with no authentic dialogue and therefore with no true integration. Secondly, the opposite danger exists, that of *cultural levelling* and indiscriminate acceptance of types of conduct and life-styles. In this way one loses sight of the profound significance of the culture of different nations, of the traditions of the various peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life's fundamental questions. What eclecticism and cultural levelling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them, and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation. (26)

In conclusion, the only way to avoid the cultural leveling of our time is to return to the anthropology of the *imago Dei*, to concepts like self-transcendence and deification, to the Benedictine affirmation of beauty, the Thomist affirmation of truth, and the Franciscan affirmation of goodness. In Ratzinger/Benedict's theology of culture we find all of these elements, along with what might be called a high theology of the Church, permitting her to be her own cultural subject for the faithful. In promoting such a high theology of the Church that protects the faithful from the indignity of being children of their time, or mere shackled subjects of the *Zeitgeist*, Ratzinger was subjected to quite a lot of criticism. Accusations of Eurocentrism and even social snobbery were not uncommon. He was, however, only affirming elements of longstanding Catholic tradition and echoing Newman and Guardini. In a 1958 essay, the historian Christopher Dawson wrote,

It is impossible for us to understand the Church if we regard her as subject to the limitations of human culture. For she is essentially a supernatural organism which transcends human cultures and transforms them to her own ends. As Newman insisted, the Church is not a creed or a philosophy, but an imperial power, a "counter kingdom" which occupies ground and claims to rule over

those whom this world's governments had once ruled over without a rival.[53]

For the Englishmen Newman and Dawson, for the Italo–German Guardini, for the Swiss Balthasar, the French de Lubac, and for the Bavarian Ratzinger, the Church is her own cultural subject for the faithful, and a belief in the Trinity is her foundation and the foundation of any account of the relationship between faith and culture.   □

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53. Christopher Dawson, "Is the Church Too Western to Satisfy the Aspirations of the Modern World?" in *World Crisis and the Catholic: Studies Published on the Occasion of the Second World Congress for the Lay Apostolate, Rome*, ed. Vittorino Veronese (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 166.