

WHY BEGIN WITH LOVE? *EROS, AGAPE* AND THE PROBLEM OF SECULARISM

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“Benedict’s particular construal of the *eros-agape* relationship is uniquely suited to provide a Christian response to secularism that neither preserves Christian distinctiveness at the cost of its worldly mission, nor emphasizes the Church’s worldly mission at the expense of its identity *as Christian*.”

Introduction

There has been some surprise that Benedict XVI’s first encyclical should be about, of all things, love. The topic certainly does not fit the stereotypes of Benedict so often encountered in the media, and there has even been some talk of Ratzinger becoming “soft” now that he is pope. Of course, anybody who has followed Ratzinger’s theological writings over the years knows that such a theme is far from out of keeping with his concerns. However, such a beginning is not without danger, a fact that Benedict himself seems to be aware of in the opening sentences of the encyclical. After all, who is not in favor of love these days? And is not the love that is now in favor so banal, so bereft of content, that it is almost singularly unhelpful as a concept? What, if anything, are we saying when we say that God is love? This becomes even more problematic if one thinks about the

fact that the typical model of love—in late, democratic-capitalist societies—is caught up with the romance of youth, beauty, and fame. As Alexander Schmemmann puts it: “In movies and magazines the ‘icon’ of marriage is always the youthful couple,”¹ unencumbered, one could add, with the responsibilities of children and housework. Again, Benedict is well aware of this danger, as the encyclical makes clear, and so we are left with the question, “Why begin with love?”

If we are willing to think about the matter a little more, however, it might just be that this very problem—the impoverishment of the concept of love in the modern world—justifies such a beginning, for is not the so-called crisis of Western civilization precisely a crisis of love? Or, otherwise put, is not love, properly understood, particularly suited to deal with the seemingly irresolvable problems facing us moderns? Indeed, is it not the case that the immediate historical background of this encyclical is provided by the rise of militant Islam² on the one hand, and the increasing secularization of the West on the other?³ If this is the case, then the question as to why Benedict began with love can only be answered in the context of these issues, which are intimately related. What follows is an examination of Benedict’s first encyclical in light of modern secularism and the various theological-political responses to which it has given rise. The thesis is that Benedict’s particular construal of the *eros-agape* relationship is uniquely suited to provide a Christian response to secularism that neither preserves Christian distinctiveness at the cost of its worldly mission, nor emphasizes the Church’s

¹Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 90.

²Just three paragraphs into the encyclical, Benedict notes: “In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant” (*DCE*, 1).

³I am going to take it for granted in what follows that a necessarily related issue to the problem of secularization is the problem of religious diversity. The two cannot be separated insofar as secularization is modernity’s response to the problem of religious diversity. The influence of the so-called wars of religion on the thought of, say, Locke should bear this out easily enough. But, see William Cavanaugh’s “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House’: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 1995): 397–420, for a devastating argument against the notion that these wars of religion were, in fact, wars of religion.

worldly mission at the expense of its identity *as Christian*. This will require: (1) a discussion of secularism as a theological problem; (2) a (very sketchy) presentation of the two most serious responses to secularism in theology today; (3) and, last, an explication of Benedict's treatment of *eros* and *agape*, which highlights its relevance to the problem of secularism and depicts its advantages over the two previously discussed theological approaches. Unfortunately, this means that no explicit attention will be given to the highly important second half of the encyclical, which unpacks the social implication of the first half. It is hoped that what is argued here, however, will provide a sufficient foundation for those wishing to apply the thesis to the specifics of the second half.

1. Secularism as a theological problem

Secularism is often misunderstood as simple atheism, as the denial that there is anything other than the material world knowable through the scientific method. But this is not the case. In fact, it could be argued that the biggest threat to traditional Christianity in the modern world is not atheism but "spirituality." Secularists need not deny the existence of the "spiritual"; they simply deny that such a realm has anything to do with the day-to-day world. Moreover, secularists tend to see institutional or "public" religion as a threat to the autonomy of the mundane order. Or, to use Alexander Schmemmann's succinct definition, secularism is the belief that this world is not God's.⁴ Furthermore, if religion is strictly an otherworldly matter, then it can have nothing to do with truth or goodness as these things are found in *this* world. Like love, it would seem, spirituality is reduced to something so vague and ethereal as to be of utterly no consequence to the "real" world.

What is perhaps more troubling is the fact that this understanding of spirituality has crept into the Christian churches so that

⁴This seems to be the thesis of Schmemmann's book, already cited, *For the Life of the World*. At one point he explicitly states that secularism "is above all a negation of worship," but this amounts to the same thing as denying that the world is God's, for it is to deny that man is *naturally* (that is, as created) a worshipping animal (*homo adorens*), and therefore also to deny the *sacramental* character of the world. See especially, "Worship in a Secular Age," which is added as an Appendix to *For the Life of the World*, 117–134.

Christianity itself is now reduced to a particular version of spirituality, and this is generally true of both sides of the “culture wars” that are playing out also in our churches. In other words, to return to Schmemmann’s language, modern Christianity is largely divided into “spiritualists” and “activists.”⁵ Spiritualists tend to be more “conservative” and wish to hold on to the beliefs of traditional Christianity (at least *notionally*), such as the divinity of Christ, the nature of Scripture as the Word of God, the bodily resurrection and the doctrine of the Trinity. Activists, on the other hand, see the various doctrines and stories of Christianity much the same way that Kant saw them, as mythological pointers to some generally accessible underlying moral truths. As such, activists worry when Christianity gets overly bogged down in esoteric doctrinal and moral disputes, wanting, rather, to focus on loving their neighbor. A television program once depicted a priest celebrating Mass and then, afterwards, passing out soup in the church basement. “This is what we’re really about,” he said as he handed a cup of soup to a homeless man. The previous worship, it would seem, was little more than a morale boost for the important, this-worldly activity of the church.⁶

These apparent opposites, however, upon closer inspection, turn out to be simply competing versions of the same notion that God and this world, and, therefore, nature and grace, are not

⁵This split, diagnosed by Schmemmann, parallels the split in churches between “conservatives” and “liberals,” insofar as one side wants to emphasize traditional morality and the “vertical” dimension of the Christian faith, while the other wants to emphasize service to neighbor and the “horizontal” dimension of the Christian faith. Even here, however, there is a tendency on both sides to accept the notion that the so-called vertical and horizontal dimensions of the faith can be separated.

⁶Notice how, in such a view, whether or not Christ is really present in the Eucharist makes no difference, provided the people who participate in the liturgy are inspired in some way. Theological attention to such problems, then, can quickly be seen as a distraction from what is really important. Benedict’s awareness of this widespread attitude is evidenced in his attention, in the latter part of the first half of the encyclical, to the intimate connection between liturgy and service. As he puts it, “Here the usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart. ‘Worship’ itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented. Conversely, as we shall have to consider in greater detail below, the ‘commandment’ of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be ‘commanded’ because it has first been given” (*DCE*, 14).

intrinsically related to each other. This explains why so-called “conservative” churches are increasingly treating the Christian faith as yet another form of self-help, as an escape from the work-a-day world, as a place for spiritual nourishment in an otherwise nightmarish world of work, consumption, and routine. If one side of the debate calls for a renewed attention to spirituality in an increasingly meaningless world, the other side calls for action and justice. John Lennon imagines there is no heaven, while Jerry Falwell imagines there are no poor. But both sides fail to show how the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is the origin and end (*telos*) of *this* world. It would seem that the fundamentalistic churches in the so-called “red states” are just as content as the liberal activists in the “blue states” to understand Christianity as a matter of private devotion, personal choice, and concerned with matters of the soul as opposed to those of the body.⁷

2. Theological responses

All modern theology worth the name attempts to offer a response to secularism. In other words, all of the great modern theologians were/are aware of the difficulties with the two Christian responses outlined above and attempt to offer a way out. Perhaps another way of saying this is to say that classical Liberal Protestantism (Christianity reduced to activism) and its estranged child, Protestant Fundamentalism (Christianity as purely “otherworldly”), can no longer be taken as serious, thoughtful Christian responses to secularism. The most interesting theology that is currently being

⁷This is true in spite of the fact that Christians in the “red states” are interested in maintaining “family values” in the “Public Square,” for in this case it is *morality* that is at stake and not specific Christian teachings. Such morality should be acceptable, it is argued, by all people of good will precisely because they are not distinctively Christian. My point in mentioning this is not to dispute the idea of natural law—although in another context I would want to raise serious questions about the understanding of natural law that is often invoked in debates between “conservatives” and their “liberal” counterparts—but simply to say that it is precisely in invoking a notion of natural law that is allegedly theologically and metaphysically neutral that the “spiritualists” demonstrate that they do not see an intrinsic relationship between the doctrines which they, properly, wish to defend, and the work-a-day world in which they have to live their lives. The God of Jesus Christ becomes all but inconsequential in such a scenario.

done makes an intentional effort to avoid, on the one hand, an otherworldly orthodoxy and, on the other, a this-worldly heterodoxy, and this means that the most serious modern theology is concerned with healing the rift between nature and grace. Furthermore, there is little doubt that when historians of theology look back on the twentieth century, two of the most important figures will be Karl Rahner and Karl Barth, both of whom, in decidedly different ways, set about to heal this rift. It is significant that the two most dominant schools of theology in the middle to late twentieth century in this country were located in Chicago, where Rahner's influence was always present, and at Yale, where, for some time, the disciples of Karl Barth held sway. A brief analysis, by no means intended as an introduction to these two "schools," insofar as they can be called such,⁸ should provide a backdrop for Benedict's encyclical as a "third way," in particular in its treatment of *eros* and *agape*.

To state it again, all modern theology must do its work in the context of secularization. Historic Christianity, in such a context, has been pushed into the corner, into the realm of the spirit, with no real impact on the day-to-day world of politics, war, and technology. This is clearly what Nietzsche's Zarathustra was diagnosing when he announced the death of God. It was obviously not that God had once been alive and had now died, nor was it even that most people had ceased to believe in God; it was that thought and action were now taking place in a *world* for which the "God question" made no real difference. The natural order, in such a world, had been utterly severed from questions of the supernatural, just as the natural was no longer regarded as pointing to the supernatural. In order to heal this rift, disciples of Rahner—we will leave aside the question of whether Rahner himself can be held responsible for such disciples—have dedicated themselves to declaring the world a "world of grace." Even if modern men and women do not realize it, they live, eat, and breathe in a world that has been touched, from the ground up, by the divine. Far from being of interest only to those who are concerned with salvation or

⁸George Hunsinger's article, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), shows that the designation "Yale School" is misleading for a number of reasons, most importantly, the serious differences between thinkers who are often linked within this one school. The article provides a detailed and helpful discussion of these differences, for example, between Frei and Lindbeck.

heaven, God is the source and end of the natural order. Even in an act as universally human as knowing—knowing, for instance, this or that tree—the subject, insofar as he or she is engaged with something which has *being*, implicitly knows God, the origin and end of all being. Furthermore, every act of love, since the God of Christianity is love, is implicitly a Christian act. To love one's neighbor *is* to love God.

Of course this tells only part of the story. A sophisticated and deeply Catholic thinker, Rahner knew that he had to account for the centrality of revelation and history in Christianity. As such, Rahner insisted that human beings, although unique beings located in a particular time and space, are by nature oriented towards the infinite, towards the True and the Good. He further noted that, because human beings are *historical* and *embodied* beings, they can have no unmediated encounter with the absolute, with the infinite.⁹ As finite beings oriented towards the infinite, human beings are naturally ready to hear a word in history from that which transcends history; human beings are “hearers of the Word.” History is a much more important category for Rahner than it is for the Enlightenment thinkers with whom he is often associated, for it is the only realm in which the human person can encounter the transcendent. So far so good. The difficulty arises when, in order to make the Christian story relevant to all human beings, living and dead, in “Christian” nations and elsewhere, Rahner essentially equates (at least *in kind*) the history of all human beings with revelation–history. If Jesus Christ is singular in such a view—and Rahner insists that he is—it is because he is the ultimate “hearer of the word,” and, as such, can be called *the Word*. Jesus Christ is the highest instance of a human being realizing who he is. And this seems to imply that any human being who is really being true to who he is, is already “Christ-ian.” But with this approach it becomes difficult to account for the fact that Jesus was such a stumbling block, not only to the most religiously astute—the Jews, but also to the most philosophically astute—the Greeks and Romans. It also makes it hard to account for the radical nature of the conversion that is required of those who would follow him. If the natural self is just the graced self waiting to happen—an admitted oversimplification of Rahner's position, but

⁹See especially Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994).

the notion lurks—then why must the old self die? Why the Cross? Why conversion? These were the questions which Ratzinger raised in the 1980s. What concerned him most was the *spirituality* that resulted from this approach. As he put it:

I prefer to leave open the question of whether this does justice, on a conceptual level, to what is particular and unique in the salvation history that has its center in Christ. The real problem seems to me to be with the spiritual formulation, for it is only in the spiritual formulation, which has its source in the abstract concept, that we find the real test of theological speculation. Spiritually, however, this intermingling of universal and particular, of history and being, of being a Christian and being man “as he is,” amounts to man’s self-affirmation. To be a Christian is to accept oneself. Let us recall again the formula: “He who . . . accepts his existence . . . says . . . Yes to Christ.” In this spiritual transposition of transcendental deduction—which was its hidden starting point—I see a resolution of the particular into the universal that is at variance with the newness of Christianity and reduces Christian liberation into pseudoliberation.¹⁰

Notice that the split between nature and grace is healed in the Rahnerian approach by showing the unnoticed influence of grace even upon what appears to be merely the world of nature, of *salvation* history upon what appears to be merely ordinary history. Christianity regains influence in this view by pointing out the necessity of God, grounding both the possibility of knowing (truth) and action (goodness) in the existence of an omniscient and omnibenevolent being who comes to human beings *in history*. It is in what might be called the second movement of this approach—that God speaks to all of humanity through history—that a potential danger resides. In the attempt to salvage Christian relevance by insisting that God speaks his word in human history, Rahner must struggle (and he did) to show why the particular history of a particular people (the Jews) and of a particular man (Jesus Christ) has a unique significance. In the modern world the spectre of Kant is pervasive, and it is not a terribly far leap from this view to the view that states that all that is really important in Christianity is available apart from the specific revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Of course Jesus is always *a*, and

¹⁰Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 166–167.

perhaps even—as he was no doubt for Kant—the greatest embodiment of what is true and good, but it is difficult to maintain, for many of Rahner’s disciples at least, his unique or indispensable status. It is also difficult to account for the Cross, both soteriologically (why was the death of this particular man *necessary*?) and epistemologically (if the world is a world of grace, why would it kill grace incarnate?). In such a view, so much *agape* is already given to *eros* that it is difficult to account for the necessity of conversion, which is perhaps the central theme of Ratzinger’s theology.¹¹ I will return to these difficulties at greater length below.

Another response to the problem of secularization came from Karl Barth, doubtless the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century. Again, this is not an attempt to summarize Barth’s theology, nor even that of his disciples; it is, rather, merely an attempt to highlight some central characteristics of his approach in order to bring Benedict’s into greater relief. Karl Barth had at least one theological conversion in his life, from the Protestant Liberalism of his youth to the revelation-centered approach of his *Church Dogmatics*. It is not important for our purposes whether he had another conversion from dialectic to analogy, but the abiding theme of his mature theology is that God is God. He emphasizes, that is, the radical difference between God and his creation. Barth’s theology is intent upon turning Feuerbach on his head: far from being a product of the highest aspirations of human thought, the true God of Christianity is utterly confounding to human reason. The only antidote to the false images of God constructed of necessity by human reason is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, a God who comes not only as a surprise but also as an affront to what is highest in the human being. Human religious aspirations, far from providing a

¹¹For instance, in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ratzinger had the following to say about what has happened to Rahner’s thought: “From the popularization of his findings, it is possible to conclude that the contents of Christianity must be interchangeable with the universal knowledge of mankind as a whole; that they are, accordingly, susceptible of an interpretation that equates them with the commonly held views of universal reason. Admittedly, this is a reversal of the direction of Rahner’s thought, but it cannot be denied that there is a certain logic in it. Rahner appropriated universal reason for Christianity and tried to prove that universal reason leads ultimately to the teaching of Christianity and that the teachings of Christianity are the universally human, the rational par excellence. Now the direction of his thought has been reversed. If the teachings of Christianity are the universally human, the generally held views are what is Christian” (168).

foundation upon which Christianity can build, are actually a barrier insofar as Christianity is the end (and not in the sense of *telos*) of religion. The human ascent to God, whether through obedience to some law (Judaism or Islam) or through transcending what is finite, material and historical (Buddhism), is replaced in Christianity by God's descent to humanity, a descent which culminates, it should be added, in the folly of the Cross, an affront not only to human reason but to human religiosity as well.

When this approach is combined, as it is by some of Barth's heirs, with either Wittgenstein or Heidegger, the relationship between humanity's search for God and God's search for humanity becomes even more strained. In light of Heidegger's attack on "ontotheology," philosophy's role is now reduced simply to the demarcation of reason's limitations; any possible philosophical knowledge of God's existence or attributes is denounced as a transgression.¹² Knowledge of God is now given only to faith,¹³ the propositional nature of which is sometimes downplayed.¹⁴ If

¹²D. C. Schindler has outlined the dangers of this approach succinctly enough: "If we seek to save the transcendent mystery of God from the light of reason by forcing him to retreat into the darkness of the unknown, we risk depriving God of intelligible significance and therefore any *real* bearing in the world; making faith ultimately arbitrary, accidental, and sentimental; and casting a shadow on the 'positive' aspects of God's revelation, which include the dogmatic and institutional dimensions of the Church that have traditionally been understood to be an inseparable extension of the Incarnation" ("Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie?": Heidegger, Hegel, and the Stakes of Onto-Theo-Logy," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 4 [Winter, 2005]: 639).

¹³The famous disagreement between Barth and Balthasar regarding the analogy of faith and the analogy of being is pertinent here. The difference is subtle, and, at times, Balthasar saw fit to downplay it. That is, Balthasar knew that Barth had been put off by the pure reason of Neoscholasticism, and, therefore, saw his attack on the analogy of being as an attack on this version of analogy. However, even with Balthasar's (and Przywara's) more careful version of analogy, Barth still had reservations. Balthasar saw this as a refusal on Barth's part to acknowledge the rightful autonomy of the natural realm, reducing it, rather, to a mere presupposition for the Incarnation. For a fuller discussion of this, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), or, secondarily, Rodney Howsare, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and Protestantism: The Ecumenical Implications of His Theological Style* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 77–99.

¹⁴This has been the ongoing accusation against, perhaps, the most famous of Barth's disciples in the United States, George Lindbeck. For instance, George

Rahner's approach was intent upon highlighting the universality of Christianity, sometimes at the expense of its distinctiveness and particularity, this approach is determined to protect Christian uniqueness, but sometimes at the expense of its universality. Even if the universal validity of Christianity is maintained, as it most certainly was for Barth and is for most of his disciples, the link between Christianity, as God's particular solution to the human predicament, and humanity's search for God has been severed. Here, human *eros* can only be viewed as an impediment to God's descending *agape*. It would seem that Nietzsche's accusation that Christianity destroys all that is highest and most erotic in the human spirit is affirmed by such versions of postmodern Barthianism. Furthermore, the relationship between Christianity and the so-called world religions becomes one of incommensurate language games. Even if the Christian knows in faith that the God of Jesus Christ is the true God, it is hard to know how this can be communicated to the non-Christian. It becomes especially difficult to know how a Christian could try to convince a non-Christian of the truth of his position or how he might try to argue for a particular version of the public good, which would be binding for Christian and non-Christian alike. These are obviously thorny issues, and I am by no means suggesting that the "right" answer is simply that Christians *know* in some unproblematic way that Christianity is the true religion. Nor do I mean to suggest that there is some independent reason that is able to adjudicate between the competing religions to see which one is the best. The point is simply this: if there is no connection between what can be known about God through reason and what is revealed in, say, Christianity, then we are left with a variety of leaps of faith regarding the meaning of life, none of which has a right to

Hunsinger notes that Lindbeck's "cognitive propositionalism" model is insufficient insofar as it does not get to the problem that Lindbeck intends it to address. In short, the problem with a cognitive propositional approach to revelation is neither that it treats revelation as cognitive, nor that it treats it as propositional; it is, rather, that it treats it as univocal. Of course revelation is both cognitive and propositional, but it is so *analogically* (Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," 45–49). This preserves Lindbeck's rightful concern for the mystery of God (Augustine's, "If you've understood it, it is not God"), without emptying revelation of its truth content. Propositions such as, "The Son is one in being with the Father," did as much to militate against the rationalism (univocity) of the Arians as they did to teach Christians what to make of Jesus Christ.

make public arguments which are connected in any way with a particular religion. Paradoxically, the hyper-Barthian approach ends up in the same place as the hyper-Rahnerian one: namely, with a variety of religions and worldviews co-existing without the necessity or possibility of genuine conversation, either because they are already legitimate vehicles of saving grace (hyper-Rahnerian), or because there is no way to speak across religious divides (hyper-Barthian).

3. *Deus caritas est and the problem of secularization*

In the background of these differing approaches lies a set of seemingly esoteric problems in fundamental theology: What is the relationship between God and the world? What is the relationship between faith and reason? What is the relationship between nature and grace? What is the relationship between religion and politics? What is the role of religion in the modern world? What is the relationship between Christianity and the so-called “world religions”? These problems, and others related to them, have provided the context for Joseph Ratzinger’s, now Benedict XVI’s, writings over the years, especially his more recent texts. Indeed, it is one of Benedict’s chief insights into the nature of secularism that it either (a) tries to proceed with the prosaic realm as if these questions do not matter, or (b) tries to solve these problems on the basis of some mythical pure reason (*reinen Vernunft*) without interference from theology or faith.¹⁵ But, he insists, it is precisely here that problems

¹⁵Paul Griffiths, for instance, in his *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), shows that the various proponents of a pluralistic approach to religious diversity must assume certain *truths* about the nature of religion—a theory of religion, if you will—which then become the basis of a recommendation that all religions are different ways of achieving the same thing. We have become accustomed to trying to find such a theory *prior to* faith at least as far back as Locke, on the basis of the fact that reason is universal and necessary, whereas faith is private and conditional (see especially the chapter, “Religious Diversity and Truth”). But as Ratzinger has shown in his discussion of the two chief varieties of religion (the “mystical” or the “monotheistic”), “It is clear that as between the two ways we have called ‘mysticism’ and ‘monotheistic revolution,’ no choice can be made in favor of one or the other on rational grounds. That would presuppose the straightforward absolute validity of the rational way, which we have just disputed. This choice is, rather, in the final analysis a matter of faith,

which are seemingly deeply “intra-ecclesial” come to bear upon the various crises facing the modern world. In other words, we cannot speak to the problem of the relationship between “church and state” without at the same time implying some answer to the relationship between nature and grace, or God and the world. Or, we cannot speak to the “problems of religious diversity”—and these cannot help but be problems, even for a secular society—without presupposing some set of answers as to what constitutes and does not constitute a religion, or even without making claims *on behalf of* the various religions.¹⁶

Throughout this encyclical, Benedict deals with these problems in terms of the relationship between *eros* and *agape*, but his use of these terms is precise. While it is true that *eros* is used to denote human love, and, in particular the love between a man and woman, Benedict makes it clear that *eros* cannot simply be reduced to *human* love. Human beings are never *merely* human insofar as they are constituted by the divine, that is, created in the divine image, and therefore human love is never *merely* human love, but is also constituted by the divine and contains “agapic” elements, as will be made clearer, below. Furthermore, *agape* is not simply “God’s kind of love,” as though the God of Christianity did not also possess,

albeit a faith that makes use of rational standards” (*Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003], 32). The point here is simply this: (1) if one simply attempts to “get down to business” without dealing explicitly with faith-related sorts of questions, one will answer these questions in certain ways simply by the manner in which one “gets down to business,” and (2) if one tries to deal with these questions strictly on the basis of secular reason (reason, that is, totally unencumbered by faith, tradition, common sense, etc.), one will, unwittingly or otherwise, end up embracing some sort of faith-involved position or positions.

¹⁶Pluralists such as John Hick, for instance, have often made the mistake of saying that all religions aim at “salvation,” and then go on to define what salvation means (e.g., the “turn from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness”). Notice that in doing so, however, Hick must put words in the mouths of the various religions, words, we might add, that do not exactly flow off the tongues of the natives of those religions. Imagine a Buddhist talking about the excellent eightfold path to “salvation”! The point here is this: not only must the “religiously neutral” now speak about the various religions *from without*, but they cannot do so without assuming things which can only be spoken of *from within* some religious perspective or other, nor can they even speak about “religion in general” without first answering certain questions about the nature of God, human beings, religion, etc.

analogously of course, *eros*. Again, in what will be amplified at a later point, the God of the Old Testament loves Israel in a manner analogous to that of a husband and a wife, the story of Hosea being a case in point. But Benedict's manner of relating the *eros-agape* problematic to the issues of fundamental theology just mentioned is also of interest. If, for instance, *eros* is not merely human love, but is touched already by the divine, then the world, too, is never merely world. In other words, in light of the doctrine of creation, the world takes on a symbolic meaning. As gift of God, the world retains its dignity *as world* only insofar as it is understood as *sign*: the sign of God's love. The secularist desire to preserve the dignity of the world by considering it apart from the question of the Creator, then, not only undermines a proper understanding of God as Creator, it also undermines a proper understanding of world. Either the world is an end in itself or it is not. One cannot, then, proceed to study the world while prescind from the "God question" without already answering the "God question" one way or the other simply by the way one studies the world! This précis regarding *eros* and *agape* will hopefully clarify what follows.

In short, not only is there no way to deal with the various issues dividing Christians from each other, there is also no way to deal with the most vexing questions of modernity without addressing these sorts of fundamental theological questions. But the "problem of secularization" seems to have led the Church itself into a sort of impasse where even Christians (even Catholics) are divided. And here, I would suggest, we have precisely the context in which to situate Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*. I stated at the outset that one of the chief difficulties in the background of this encyclical is the question of Christianity's role in a religiously diverse world,¹⁷ and that in the background of this problem lies the problem of secularization. In short, if secularism prevails and Christianity is removed from the realm of this-worldly truth—whether by its relegation exclusively to the realm of faith or by the denial of the very possibility of religious truth—then the problem of religious

¹⁷Of course the world has always been religiously diverse, and perhaps at no time more than at Christianity's birth, but the point here is that we are in a "post-Christendom" situation in which even countries and continents that were once at least nominally Christian, are now increasingly, and at the same time, both secularized and populated by people of other religious faiths. I have read that more Muslims attend mosque in London than Christians attend church.

diversity will be dealt with in terms of the privatization of religion. While Benedict does not pretend to speak for other religions, in this encyclical he does make a case that Christianity has something to say to human beings *qua human beings*, and that, therefore, Christianity cannot be privatized. But this is no longer immediately obvious, is it? Anybody who teaches theology to modern undergraduates knows that the specific teachings of the Christian faith are no longer either easily recognizable or comprehensible. Even if the students have heard of the teachings—Crucifixion, Resurrection, heaven, hell, sin, redemption—these seem to form part of a foreign language, having little or no relevance to the course of their daily lives. Again, it is not that students today—at least the ones with which I am familiar—are opposed to belief in God, the afterlife or the miraculous. They are not little Enlightenment *philosophes*. Indeed, they are fairly credulous. What they do tend to oppose, almost to a student, is the notion that the particular claims of any religion, including—or perhaps especially—the one in which they were trained, are *true*, in any meaningful sense of that word.

It is part of the wisdom of Benedict's first encyclical, then, that he begins, not with this or that particular Christian doctrine, but with the question of love. The one particular Christian teaching that resonates with most of my students is the notion, which they do not think of as being particularly Christian, that God is love. But Benedict goes back even farther, beyond the notion that God is love to the universal experience of human love, particularly the love—involving body and soul—between a man and a woman. Here Benedict believes that he has found a universal starting point that “by [its] own inner logic” leads to the “threshold of biblical faith” (*DCE*, 7).¹⁸ Against Nietzsche and the hyper-Barthian view outlined above, Benedict rejects the notion that biblical faith, and therefore biblical notions of love (*agape*), are simply incommensurate with human *eros*. He insists, in fact, that human love, when it is true, tends to go where *agape* wishes it to go.¹⁹ Here Benedict's thought

¹⁸Citations from the encyclical are taken from the English translation found on vatican.va and refer to the text's numbered paragraphs.

¹⁹Here is another important place where Ratzinger's theology diverges from that of Karl Rahner. For Rahner, the human orientation towards transcendence, which might be called “*eros*” in the context of this encyclical, is called the “supernatural existential,” and is, therefore, already a work that is grace. This is precisely what

is in accord with the universalist concerns of a Rahner: all genuine human love finds its origin and end in divine love. He goes on to insist, however, that if such love really does have its origin and end in God, then God must be love, must be *personal*. And yet what religion has the audacity simply to assert, not only that God loves, but that God is love? Notice the paradox: it is precisely at the point that Christianity speaks to what is most generally human—the universal experience of human love—that it insinuates itself as singular, as unique. Furthermore, it is precisely when it speaks to that which is most universal and general that it maintains its distinctiveness *as Christianity*. Christianity offers a solution to a universal, human, and “religious” problem that is decidedly particular—even peculiar—which could never have been guessed at in advance, but which, once given, seems uniquely felicitous.²⁰

A balance must be maintained here that does justice to two biblical realities: first, to the fact that *agape* comes to heal, rather than simply destroy human *eros*; second, to the fact that biblical faith says a definitive and explicit “No!” to so much of what passes for “religion” in human history. Benedict deals with both of these aspects. First, with regard to the former, he invokes the famous Song of Songs, noting that the love in the early part of the book is the ordinary, passionate love between a man and a woman. Benedict describes this love, which is captured by the Hebrew *dodim*, as “insecure, indeterminate, and searching,” and, later, as “self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness” (*DCE*, 6). Both of these descriptions are important, as they pertain to two aspects of romantic love that are familiar enough to most human beings. Love begins

makes it difficult for Rahner then to demarcate what is different in kind in the grace that is offered to the Christian in baptism. Again, Rahner works hard to establish this difference, for he knows that it is important. The question raised by Ratzinger in the reference above, however, is whether that Christian difference is really done justice. For Ratzinger *eros* is not yet supernatural, in the proper sense of that word, even if, “from its own inner logic,” it opens up towards what is distinctively supernatural. This may seem like theological hairsplitting, but Ratzinger, at least, thinks that it could result in a decidedly different spirituality.

²⁰Throughout the encyclical Benedict deals with the themes of continuity and newness, working hard to do justice to both. If the Christian message is simply new, then it cannot be addressed to the human family as a whole; if it is merely continuous with humanity’s immortal longings, then Christ will inevitably be reduced to one—even if the greatest, as in Hegel—savior figure among many. The entire section entitled, “The newness of the biblical faith,” is crucial in this regard.

innocently enough, even if a little unsure of itself. One of the best modern depictions of such love is contained in Ron Hansen's novel, *Hitler's Niece*. Basing his story on Hitler's real-life obsession with his niece, Geli, Hanson captures beautifully how human and even tender Hitler's first feelings were. An astute student of human nature, Hanson does not make the usual mistake of simply turning Hitler into a monster, someone or something *sui generis*, as it were. But it is not long until Hitler's love for his niece becomes something less innocent, something, in the end, demonic and exclusively about Hitler.²¹ Here is the key point: *eros* desires of its own logic to be something noble, to be something for the other, but it does not necessarily attain this. Indeed, if it insists on making a god out of such love, of making it an end in itself, *eros* will not even remain what it naturally is. The second aspect of the biblical picture, then, concerns what can only be called God's agapic judgment on human erotic love. But what is crucial is that such judgment is on behalf of *eros* itself, which really does want to "seek the good of the beloved," to "become renunciation" and be "ready, and even willing, for sacrifice" (*DCE*, 6). *Agape*, in such a view, helps *eros* to be what it naturally wants to be, but cannot be if it remains merely *eros*.

When speaking to students about love, sometimes the one topic that keeps them awake, I often evoke popular figures to make this point. It has become drastically dated now, but I often use the example of John Lennon. A typical, lower-middle-class British adolescent suddenly found himself the recipient of an almost unparalleled amount of fame and attention. This, of course, included the attention of women, many of whom fainted at a glimpse of him. There is little doubt that Lennon (as well as the other Beatles) took advantage of this fame in the way that one might expect young men to do. And yet, after a not very long while, Lennon settles down with a certain Yoko Ono and, as far as we know, loved her in a fairly traditional and, again, as far as we know, faithful manner. I often ask my students why Lennon would trade the excitement of

²¹Another interesting case in this regard would be serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's self-description of his descent into the barbarity that resulted in his eventual imprisonment. Dahmer's "adventure" began with typical loneliness and the simple desire to love and be loved, to "make a connection" with another person. That such love can quickly degenerate into something ghastly is a fact universally known. What is interesting, for our purposes, is the fact that the desire begins as something innocent enough.

the “early years” for a life of relative sedateness with one woman. Strangely enough, and as incredulous as some of my male students pretend to be at this point, I can see that they understand. What John Lennon wanted, what all human beings need in the final analysis, is not chance encounters with more or less anonymous “partners,” but genuine love. The point of this digression is to illustrate Benedict’s point that *agape* simply wants to enable *eros* to be what it really longs and, in the end, needs to be. Such *agape* neither destroys *eros*, nor leaves it to its own devices. “The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature” (*DCE*, 7).

If we now attempt to tie these observations more explicitly to the problem of secularization, we will also be able to address the closing themes of the first, more theoretical half of the encyclical. The perennial temptation of all theology since the Enlightenment has been to mitigate Christianity’s “scandal of particularity” by showing that the particular doctrines and stories are, at bottom, really about an ethic that can be recognized by everyone. It might very well be that other religions, in fact, tell different stories, but what is important is that they all intend the same kind of *praxis*. The seriousness of the differences is diminished by highlighting the ultimately mysterious nature of the supernatural. Human language, it is pointed out, is not equal to that which is transcendent. In his *Truth and Tolerance*—which could be read to great benefit in conjunction with this encyclical—Ratzinger refers to the famous story of the blindfolded men who unknowingly encounter an elephant, the moral of which is that when all the *blind* seekers acknowledge the partiality (in both senses of that word) of their “take” on the elephant, they more easily make room for the other seekers who “see” the elephant differently, or see it according to some other aspect. What is gained by such an approach, ostensibly, is an easier and more harmonious existence with people of other faiths. Ratzinger, however, points out two difficulties worth considering in light of the present encyclical. First, such a view fits much better with a God who is not conceived primarily in terms of love, but of mystery. In fact, while it is certainly the case that the blindfolded seekers long for God (*eros*), note that the elephant in the story does not seem to wish to make itself known (*agape*). Secondly, such a view does not truly avoid the problem of particularity insofar as it in fact does privilege one image of God (a God shrouded in

silent mystery) to others (the rather chatty God of Jews, Muslims, and Christians).²²

By highlighting the fact that the God of Christians does not merely want to be sought but also actively seeks, Benedict is making a case for Christianity in a world increasingly attracted to vague “spirituality.” “I used to be Baptist,” Oprah Winfrey once said, “but now I’m spiritual.” For the secularist, if nature is to have space to breathe, to be itself, then the supernatural—God or whatever—must not only be pushed into another realm, it must also be emptied of all content. This helps to account for the recent flourishing of spirituality and the sometimes knee-jerk reaction to “organized religion.” What is gained in this vague sort of spirituality is a greater freedom to “find one’s own path.” Furthermore, one does not need to be encumbered with this or that set of beliefs, or, worse, this or that set of practices. But what is lost? First and foremost, according to Ratzinger in *Truth and Tolerance*, is the notion that the Source of the universe is not just to be sought (loved), but also seeks (loves). And it is in this context that Benedict can exploit the intimate connection between *eros* and *agape*, can draw, that is, on human *experience*. In true romantic love there is also loss and gain. What is lost to some degree is one’s freedom: the freedom to be unmoved and unhampered by another, the freedom to keep one’s desires indiscriminate, directed now towards this person and later towards another. It seems to be an indisputable fact, however, that one cannot experience the fullness of romantic love without the sacrifice of such negative freedoms. But what is interesting, as was pointed out before in the case of John Lennon, is that love seems to tend towards some form of self-sacrifice of its own accord. What is gained, then, is genuine love with all of the *particularity* and all of the *demands* that such love makes.²³ True love, Benedict maintains, tends towards monogamy,

²²Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 15–54.

²³It should certainly not be irrelevant to the study of religion that we always love what is particular. True affection, true love always concerns what makes one thing precisely not another thing. Imagine the following scenario. A couple loses a five-year-old child. At the funeral, they are overcome with grief and tears. After the funeral a priest approaches the couple and says, “Why are you so sad? There are plenty of five-year-old children left in the world.” The insensitivity and even stupidity of such a comment would betray an absolute misunderstanding of the nature of love: parents love precisely *this* child; a husband loves precisely *this* wife.

indeed, towards marriage, for is not marriage simply, to borrow from C. S. Lewis, love plus promise.²⁴ And yet what is seemingly such a common sense assertion is something that was apparently lost on the human race outside of Israel. “This close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature” (*DCE*, 11).²⁵ And to this unique image of love—and therefore unique conception of the human person—corresponds a unique notion of God. “Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God,” notes Benedict, “is monogamous marriage” (*DCE*, 11). Here we have something close to an argument—although by no means a scientific proof—that the image of God found in Christianity, a God who is one and a God who is love, is the one that best corresponds to human experience. Love is not indiscriminate. Love makes demands. Love specifies!

In short, the last part of the first half of *Deus caritas est* makes a case for the universal significance of the God revealed as love in

There is no vague groping after some equally vague love. Love always comes through exceedingly particular channels.

²⁴This notion that true love necessarily contains a dimension of sacrifice, of the cross, is perhaps what is most lost in recent views of love and family. Is it not the case that the problem with most contemporary views of love and family are not that they are too “low” but too “high”? In other words, most modern couples do not go into marriage thinking that *eros* is something trivial; rather, they think it is the most important thing in the world, something they will also, unfortunately, come to believe about their children. But listen to Schmemmann in this regard: “A marriage which does not constantly crucify its own selfishness and self-sufficiency, which does not ‘die to itself’ that it may point beyond itself, is not a Christian marriage. The real sin of marriage today is not adultery or lack of ‘adjustment’ or ‘mental cruelty.’ It is the idolization of the family itself, the refusal to understand marriage as directed toward the Kingdom of God It is not the lack of respect for the family, it is the idolization of the family that breaks the modern family so easily, making divorce its almost natural shadow. It is the identification of marriage with happiness and the refusal to accept the cross in it It is the cross of Christ that brings the self-sufficiency of nature to its end. But ‘by the cross joy [and not ‘happiness!'] entered the whole world.’ Its presence is thus the real joy of marriage. It is the joyful certitude that the marriage vow, in the perspective of the eternal Kingdom, is not taken ‘until death parts,’ but until death unites us completely” (*For the Life of the World*, 90–91).

²⁵Interesting in this regard is Plato’s *Symposium*, which seems utterly unaware of the notion that true *eros* is best realized in the context of marriage. Indeed, *eros* and marriage are seen as opposites, a view that is found in almost all classical romantic literature.

Jesus Christ. For even if the Old Testament provides the foundation for the view that God loves—and there is no doubt that God loves Israel with an unparalleled *eros*—the notion that God *is* love becomes clear for the first time when God offers his only begotten Son in order to win his creation back to himself. Here Benedict does not shy away from saying that, in Christ, God turns against himself in some sense. That is, in Christ, God’s love for humanity is turned against his wrath concerning their sin. God is now both the model and the source for a love that is willing to sacrifice itself on behalf of the other.²⁶ Indeed (and here Benedict wishes to clear away the residual Pelagianism of so much modern Catholic thought), it is only on the basis of God’s love for us, poured out for us in the Cross of Christ and constantly renewed in the sacrifice of the Eucharist, that we can love him or our neighbor efficaciously. Far from being distractions from the mission of the Church to the world, the most scandalizing aspects of the Church’s teaching—the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the salvific nature of his death, the sacrifice of the Mass—are the necessary ingredients of the Church’s continued

²⁶It is unfortunate that Joseph Ratzinger’s (and now Benedict XVI’s) name has been associated for some time now with an inordinate and obstinate obsession with theological and moral orthodoxy. In the typical account, we are presented with a deeply intelligent and once open-minded man who, fearful of the chaos after the Council, hardened into a dogmatic and moral fundamentalist. But this is to miss the central insight of Ratzinger’s work, from his early and allegedly more “liberal” years to the present, that the God of Christianity is *personal*. Ratzinger’s concern for right belief and right conduct can only be understood in this light. Hans Urs von Balthasar once asked what is probably the most important question facing Christian theology today: does Christianity have a form (*Gestalt*)? And, like Balthasar, Ratzinger has always treated Truth and Goodness in the context of Beauty. If God is, indeed, personal, then God cannot simply be whatever the subject wants or needs him to be, any more than true love simply wishes the other to be reduced to its needs, to its *experience*. True love always bumps up against an other. And *true* love loves the other *as* other and finds beauty precisely in the otherness of the other. Unfortunately, the hyper-mystical approach of so much modern theology mitigates God’s otherness by reducing him to silence, placing him behind a veil of “metaphors” so that we never have to hear anything that would go against what we already know. All is *eros* in such an approach. But in Benedict’s approach, what God has to offer is not at the expense of the seeker. It is not as though now that God speaks, the seeker were destroyed along with his or her desires. God’s word is good news—God is love!—precisely because it answers the deepest desires of the human heart. Notice that in such an approach all is not *agape* either.

mission in the modern world. “Love can be ‘commanded’ because it has first been given” (*DCE*, 14).

Notice how such an approach speaks to the “background” issues mentioned at the beginning of this essay. It is here that the connection between militant Islam and secularism becomes clear. Secularists often cite militant (“fundamentalistic”) Islam as a warning sign concerning the danger of religious interference in the affairs of the state. To state the argument bluntly, a purely secular state is the only security against religious fanatics foisting their particular beliefs upon those who do not share them. When religion and politics mix, non-religious or differently religious people are forced to behave in ways that are not in accord with their own beliefs. Therefore, both religion and the state are better off, it is argued, when religion is privatized. I have no intention of addressing all of the problems entailed in such a position, not the least of which is the notion that one can deal with the “world’s problems” without already making certain specifically religious sorts of moves. One need only think of issues such as abortion or the definition of marriage to illustrate this. But what is important for our purposes is that Benedict is making a case for the *public* (that is, universally human) relevance of Christianity in the face of such concerns, and that he does so precisely by beginning with the assertion that the God of Christianity is *love*. True love woos, attempts to convince, even haunts, but it never *forces*. Without even mentioning Islam, Benedict wants to assure Catholicism’s cultured (or perhaps even not-so-cultured) despisers that the Constantinian temptation is not properly Christian.²⁷ Of course this is not the same as conceding to secularism’s ideal of the privatization of religion. If Christianity is good for human beings *as human beings*, and Benedict thinks that it is, then it not only has a right but also a duty to extend its influence as far as it can.²⁸ It is simply that, in

²⁷This is made especially clear throughout the second half of the encyclical. For instance: “This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State The Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. It recognizes that it is not the Church’s responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life” (*DCE*, 24a).

²⁸“Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God—an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason. But it is also a

the meantime (that is, short of the eschaton) such influence must take place with full recognition of the rightful autonomy of the secular order²⁹—*agape* does not wish to impose itself by force and from without upon *eros*—and with all the gentleness and patience of love. The “founder” of Christianity died not wielding a sword, but forgiving his enemies.³⁰

purifying force for reason itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly” (*DCE*, 28a).

²⁹For a treatment of the “rightful autonomy of the secular” that is in keeping with what I have been trying to do in this essay, see David L. Schindler and Nicholas Healy, “For the Life of the World: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Church as Eucharist,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Key to their argument is the notion that the world’s autonomy vis-à-vis God (its Creator) is located always already within a prior relation (of creation to Creator). The world was, that is, created with the precise intention of being taken up into the trinitarian fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Gaudium et spes*, 36 makes it very clear that the rightful autonomy of the world does *not* mean a denial of the created and dependent status of the world. Schindler and Healy sum this up accordingly: “Thus the rightful understanding of the autonomy of the world and of earthly affairs turns on the nature of the creature’s relation to God. The relevant point for Balthasar, in light of what has already been seen above is twofold: the creature’s relation to the Creator is intrinsic, and the God to whom the creature is so related is the trinitarian God present in the Church as the sacrament of Christ’s eucharistic mission to the world. *Gaudium et spes*, 36, in other words, rightly interpreted, is to be understood in light of the ‘integration’ of Christology and anthropology affirmed in *Gaudium et spes*, 22, according to which it is Christ’s revelation of the Father’s love that reveals the meaning of man to him- or herself, and, through man, the meaning of the world in its entirety. It is not implied by 22 that man, being *created* in and for God in Jesus Christ (Col 1:15–18), does not require participation in Baptism and Eucharist for his meaning and destiny to be fully actualized—does not imply that the world, already created in Christ, does not yet need to be *transformed eucharistically*. It implies simply that the human being, and indeed all of creaturely being, is created for the single ultimate purpose of sharing in God’s life, though this purpose is (yet) to be actualized through participation in Christ’s sacramental *communio*. Created being is structurally *called* or *invited* from the beginning of its existence to share in the Eucharist” (60).

³⁰Jesus’ response to the temptation in the desert to the use of force to establish his kingdom is of paramount importance in this regard. But notice that Jesus never denies that he is, in fact, the king of the Jews, and, by implication, the king of all. Accordingly, the Church can veer in two extreme directions: (1) It can use worldly power to extend its kingly influence (Constantinianism); or (2) it can deny its kingly status by attending exclusively to “spiritual” matters.

4. Summary and conclusion

The two dominant approaches to theology in the twentieth century attempted to heal the rift between nature and grace and also addressed the problem of *eros* and *agape*. The Rahnerian approach did this by showing how all human *eros* is always-already touched by *agape*, a position that Benedict is quick to affirm. There is no merely human *eros*. Insofar as *eros* is distinctively human, and insofar as human beings are created in God's image, human love finds its origin and true end in divine love. However, wanting to ensure Christianity's universal significance in an increasingly secular world, Rahner tended to collapse the distinction between *eros* and *agape* by collapsing the distinction between history and salvation history. While it is true that these two cannot simply be separated or opposed, what God does, first in the history of the Jews and then in Jesus of Nazareth, reveals something about the nature of God that could never have been guessed from outside of that history, even if, in hindsight, and in the eyes of faith, one can now see that it could not have been any other way.³¹ Furthermore, what is revealed about God, first in the history of Israel and ultimately in Jesus Christ, flies in the face of a great deal of purported human wisdom about what is up and what is down. Here, Benedict seems to do greater justice to the scandal and "folly" of the Cross.³² However, the other approach outlined above in terms of the theology of Karl Barth fails sufficiently to account for the fact that what is ultimately revealed in the Cross is, in fact, wisdom. It may appear as foolishness to finite

³¹This, of course, does not mean that Ratzinger denies the presence of grace outside of the precincts of organized Christianity. What it means is this: even the grace available outside of Christianity is made available on account of the particular history of Jesus Christ and that, therefore, even salvation outside of Christianity will occur on the basis of some kind of (even if unwitting) *conversion* to Christ, made possible in advance by Christ. In such a conversion, all that is incompatible with Christianity, all that is potentially evil and demonic, will have to be healed by the grace of Christ. Here, too, *eros* will be enabled to go where it is intended to go, but cannot go on its own.

³²It would seem that an "ear" for this aspect of Christianity—i.e., its scandal and apparent folly—is a necessary ingredient to all genuine Christian thought. Already in the Beatitudes Jesus declares things "blessed" that seem far from what an ordinary observer might consider blessed. Perhaps this is one of those aspects of Christianity that is best left to artists. One need only think, in this regard, of Dostoevsky's Mishkin, of Bernanos's "country priest," or of Bresson's donkey, Balthazar.

and sinful human beings, but ultimately it corresponds to their heart's greatest desires. Even human love tends towards the kind of self-sacrificing love that is manifest in its fullness in the Cross of Christ. Furthermore, Benedict's approach, by emphasizing the necessary connection between *eros* and *agape*, can do justice to the legitimate concerns of both of these theological approaches and their rightful attempts to heal the rift between nature and grace. Against an otherworldly orthodoxy, Benedict insists that nature, of its own accord, longs to be what only grace can make it. Here, the natural order is not destroyed by proximity to the supernatural, rather, it is in fact preserved *as natural*.³³ But against a this-worldly heterodoxy Benedict reminds us of the penultimate nature of the natural. Nature is not already grace, and unless it turns to grace (the importance of conversion again) it will not even remain natural. A reason, for instance, which rejects revelation will soon cease even to be good reason. Finally, with regard to secularism's fear of a religion meddling in worldly affairs, Benedict announces a God who is love. Such a God, even if he is the source and end of the natural order, is not a threat to the natural order as natural. True love loves the other in all of its otherness; it is a distorted love that wishes to extinguish the otherness of the other.³⁴ Finally, God's judging *agape* cajoles, exhorts,

³³This, again, is where Alexander Schmemmann is so perceptive. He points out that in the Garden of Eden everything was *given* to Adam and Eve as this or that thing, as *natural*, and as blessed precisely because none of these things was self-sustaining or an end in itself. In this sense it could be said that everything prior to the Fall was a sacrament. The forbidden fruit, in Schmemmann's account, represents the natural order when it fails to find its fulfillment in the supernatural, when it insists, that is, on remaining purely natural. Not only is the supernatural lost, a point that is commonly understood, but so is the natural, because the natural is *by definition* penultimate, with a *given*, but not *self-given*, autonomy. "And in the Bible to bless God is not a 'religious' or a 'cultic' act, but the very *way of life*. God blessed the world, blessed man, blessed the seventh day (that is, time), and this means that He filled all that exists with His love and goodness, made all this 'very good.' *So the only natural (and not 'supernatural') reaction of man, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified world, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to see the world as God sees it and—in this act of gratitude and adoration—to know, name and possess the world. . . . [But] when we see the world as an end in itself, everything becomes itself a value and consequently loses all value, because only in God is found the meaning (value) of everything, and the world is meaningful only when it is the 'sacrament' of God's presence*" (*For the Life of the World*, 15, 17, emphasis mine).

³⁴This seems to be a crucial difference between Buddhist *nirvana* and Christian salvation insofar as the latter does not demand the extinction of the self, nor, even,

woos, and the like, but it does not force. Jesus, God incarnate, never took up arms to establish his kingdom, and his various predictions regarding his disciples' fate in the world ensure that he did not expect them to either.

We have been arguing throughout this essay that the biggest enemy of Christianity in the modern world is not atheism but spirituality, and that spirituality is perfectly compatible with the privatization of religion. Furthermore, as should now be obvious to anybody with eyes to see, a faith that is privatized quickly ceases even to be faith. The same students who are uncomfortable with the notion that what their church teaches is in fact true, soon become uncomfortable with the notion that they should, even privately, adhere to such a faith. The secularization of the world inevitably leads to the secularization of the Church. Either Christ reveals the meaning of human beings to themselves or he does not. In his first encyclical, Benedict XVI has shown that he grasps the full significance of this situation, and that, therefore, he grasps the precarious position of the Church in a secular age. But his answer is, perhaps, surprising, especially in its simplicity. Christianity does not have a grandiose solution to the problems facing the modern world. Still less does it have the power to enact such a solution, even if it had one. But, like Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, Christianity does know something about love, and about a God who loved the world so much that he was willing to bleed to death for it on a Cross. *Deus caritas est.* □

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of all of its desires. It is true that Christianity demands a death to self, but only in order to give birth to the true self. The one, here, who wishes to save his life must surely still lose it; but, notice, in the end it really is saved.