

FUNDAMENTAL POLITICS: WHAT WE MUST LEARN FROM THE SOCIAL THOUGHT OF BENEDICT XVI

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“The state’s openness to God, far from leading to theocracy, is actually the only thing that enables the state to distinguish itself properly from the Church.”



As an Augustinian who has specialized in patristic and biblical scholarship, Pope Benedict XVI is not frequently considered a political philosopher of great import. It is certainly the case that those looking for political philosophy per se will be disappointed perusing the Holy Father’s scholarly works or his pastoral statements since becoming Pope Benedict XVI. Nonetheless, I wish to propose that he is a most profound political thinker. In order to elucidate my claim, I will refer to the relationship between fundamental theology and the other branches of the theological discipline. Fundamental theology deals with questions that must necessarily be answered prior to the exploration of the content of theology itself, such as: What is Revelation? What is the relationship between what is revealed and the rest of what we know through the exercise of reason? Why believe in the first place? Clearly, if these questions were not well answered, there would be little value in moving on to the content

of Revelation itself. Similarly, prior to any fruitful study of politics, we must identify its subject matter, its proper realm and limitations, and clarify its relationship with other dimensions of human knowledge and experience. If we could provisionally define the work which set out to answer these necessary preliminaries as “fundamental politics,” then I would want to insist that Benedict XVI has made and continues to make important contributions to the field. As I will suggest in what follows, a central feature of the pope’s fundamental politics is to show how the state’s openness to God, far from leading to theocracy, is actually the only thing that enables the state to distinguish itself properly from the Church, and thus to resist the twin temptations of utopianism and totalitarianism.

1. *The person in Benedict XVI*

A good place to start is with Benedict’s theological anthropology, which revolves around the notion of the person. Benedict makes much of the fact that the concept of person fully emerged only from reflection on the biblical portrayal of God. The Old Testament, for instance, frequently uses the term *panim* to refer to the “face” of God; the God who cannot be worshiped as an image nonetheless has a “face.” Obviously, the concept of face here is much deeper than a mere external representation. Indeed, “Because of its ability to express feelings and reactions, *panim* designates the subject, inasmuch as he turns toward others. . . that is, inasmuch as he is the subject of relationships.”¹ The same insight into God is reinforced when we consider that in the Bible God has a name; He can be called upon. To have a name is to be able to address and to be addressed by others, that is, to enter into relationship.² In light of this Old Testament understanding of divinity, it is not surprising that the full development of the concept of person in Western thought dovetailed with the theological explanation of the identity of the biblical God. Originally, the word *prosopon*, the Greek equivalent of “person,” referred to a role, as in a drama. As a dramatic device for avoiding the mere narration of events, the poets would create roles

¹H. Simian-Rofre, quoted in Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 18.

²Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 19.

to depict action by way of dialogue. Literary scholars would then bring these roles to light, explaining the dramatic purpose of each, in what came to be called “prosopographic exegesis.” Scripture scholars in their turn adapted the same technique in analyzing the Scriptures, where events also developed in dialogue. God himself appeared sometimes as a plural, other times as a singular, and at others engaging in internal dialogue. Hence, Justin Martyr, for example, would refer to the sacred writers introducing various *prosopa*, or roles. However, with respect to God, the roles are realities. Thus, prosopographic exegesis was refashioned by early Christian writers, because, in its new theological context, it served to express the belief in the persons of God as something much deeper than mere roles in a drama.³

It would be in the subsequent attempt to define the nature of God as Trinity and to elucidate the identity of Jesus Christ that the notion of person would take on its definitive conceptual form. That God was one was certain; there could be no plurality of the nature, essence, or substance of God. His three-ness existed at another level, at the level of relations. Again, the biblical evidence confirmed this; the intradivine dialogue, as well as the conversations between Jesus and his Father, revealed an “I,” a “You” and a “We” in God, a “co-existent diversity and affinity, for which the concept ‘*persona*’ absolutely dictated itself.”⁴

The declaration that God himself was defined in terms of relations meant a radical change in the status of relation as a category of being. Relation was elevated beyond its older, Aristotelian status as a mere “accident,” below substance, to a most exalted form of being. The pinnacle of Being lies in a reciprocal exchange of word and love, or, more simply put, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). Moreover, it was also clear that the multiplicity of persons, far from diminishing the unity of God, exalts it by revealing it to be the vibrant unity of interpersonal love. “Person,” Benedict XVI writes, “is the pure relation of being related, nothing else.”⁵

³Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17 (Fall 1990): 439–454.

⁴Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 130.

⁵Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 131.

Relation, being related, is not something superadded to the person, but it *is* the person itself. In its nature, the person exists only *as* relation. Put more concretely, the first person does not generate in the sense that generating a Son is added to the already complete person, but the person *is* the deed of generating, of giving itself, of streaming forth. The person is identical with this act of self-donation. One could define the first person as self-donation in fruitful knowledge and love; it is not the one who gives himself, in whom the act of self-donation is found, but it is this self-donation, pure reality of act.⁶

Man, created in the image and likeness of God, is also a person, although in an analogous and imperfect way.⁷ Despite this imperfection, however, even man can be said to be relational to the very core of his being.⁸ Man, recognizing God as a person who speaks to him and loves him, realizes in his inmost depths that he is referred to God, oriented to him by nature. The human “I,” caught up in the dynamic of the Incarnation, gathers with all other “I’s” in Christ in relation to the “You” of God. Yet, God is no simple “You,” but rather the “We” of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is in the community of the divine persons that we discover the spiritual roots of the human community.

The pope’s rich theological anthropology is a much-needed corrective to the ontologically dubious, individualistic view of the

⁶Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” 444.

⁷Of course, the concept of person when predicated of God can never simply be transposed to human beings. There are three essential differences. First, the divine persons are radically original and are distinguished in and by their origins. Human persons, on the other hand, have a common origin, having been brought forth through creation by God. Secondly, divine persons are distinguished uniquely by their relations, whereas human persons are also distinguished by the individualization of the common human nature. Third, the divine relations are perfect and complete, whereas we are full of imperfections and have to grow as persons. That having been said, it still remains that relation has a certain primacy in constituting personhood even on the human level.

⁸This claim in no way compromises personal autonomy. In saying that persons are constitutively relational we do not say that they are nothing but relations. The human person is also a substance, existing in itself and not as part of someone else. There is an abiding center of identity. To be a person is indeed to be a self, to be a center of responsible action. Yet, all of this is always-already informed by the person’s constitutive relation to God and to others; everything in the autonomous self is related to God and to others.

person as a self-contained monad that underlies much of what is distinctive in modern and contemporary political thought, particularly liberalism. Indeed, considered in the light of the notion of person which emerged from Christian theology, the individuals who inhabit “the state of nature,” think behind “the veil of ignorance,” or inhabit “ideal speech situations” are not real persons at all, merely rationalist abstractions, for, analogous to the divine persons, the human person exists only as a relation to others. Nor have the various socialist and Marxist traditions been able to address the problem adequately. In either case, what is missing is a sense of the person informed by (though not reducible to) the revelation of the Trinity. Or, to put it another way, what is missing in both liberalism and Marxism is an understanding of reason as constitutively open to faith. This brings us naturally to our next topic, which concerns the relation between reason and revelation in Benedict’s fundamental politics.

2. Reason and revelation

In order to understand Pope Benedict XVI’s rich treatment of political order, it is necessary to see how his approach to politics is conditioned by his prior understanding of faith and reason, for politics, in the pope’s view, is indeed an exercise of reason, but of a specific kind informed by faith. Reason inhabits a universe of nature wherein its own proper ends are given by the Creator, who transcends reason’s capacity to understand, yet who precisely thereby liberates reason’s deepest potentialities. Therefore, the Holy Father counts it as one of the great errors of our time to hold that the autonomy of reason, whose value he strenuously defends, implies independence from God.

For Benedict, in fact, the lofty respect we owe to reason, and the privileged place due to it in our moral, ethical, and political affairs, is grounded in the assumption that the universe is intelligible—an assumption that itself ultimately depends on the affirmation that the cosmos proceeds from creative intelligence or Logos:

The idea that even before the big bang the Logos existed from which everything came into being and without which nothing came into being, and that in some way this Logos has its effects on human life—this or a similar assumption today is as it was

before the minimum condition for respect for people. In the understanding of the political enlightenment “human dignity” is a metaphysical concept. It becomes meaningless under the presupposition that man is “merely” the result of accidental evolution.⁹

In his book, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, the pope uses the biblical narratives to underscore the way in which the notion of creation guarantees the coherence and intelligibility of the universe.¹⁰ In his reading, the Book of Genesis dispels all the pagan myths that would leave the world at the mercy of an entire range of demonic powers and divinities, which are instead brought to absolutely nothing by the sacred writers. There is only the One God, who creates the universe “ex nihilo.” The great gods, the sun and the moon, are reduced to mere lamps by which to measure time. Most significant in all of this is the revelation that the universe is a product of God’s Reason:

Hence this creation account may be seen as the decisive “enlightenment” of history It placed the world in the context of reason and recognized the world’s reasonableness and freedom. But it may also be seen as the *true* Enlightenment from the fact that it put human reason firmly on the primordial basis of God’s creating Reason, in order to establish it in truth and love, without which an “enlightenment” would be exorbitant and ultimately foolish.¹¹

Of course, the final account of creation is not given until the New Testament. In the Prologue to the fourth gospel, John, with the Old Testament texts in mind, reinterprets the Genesis account of creation in the light of Christ. In the claim, “In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God,” and that it is only through this Logos “that all things came to be,” we find an even stronger assertion of creation as the product of creative Reason.

⁹Martin Kriehle, quoted in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (New York: Crossroads, 1988), 154.

¹⁰The following account is from Pope Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 8–23.

¹¹Pope Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning*, 14.

Having secured the foundation of reason in creative Logos, the pope goes on to make a point of crucial importance for fundamental politics. When reason denies creation and the philosophical teleology that accompanies creation, it attacks its own source, embracing a reductionism that ends up covertly appealing to various expressions of irrationality. Consider Benedict's warning that political reason cannot afford to ignore the Decalogue, which embodies for him the basis of social and political order. Clearly, the pope does not mean to say that politics is to be deduced from revelation, as in a theocracy. Rather, Benedict means that the Decalogue reveals the covenantal significance that is the ultimate *raison d'être* of the natural law. To be sure, reason is capable of discerning the moral order. The Holy Father's concern is rather that, in rejecting the revealed law of God, reason inevitably absolutizes itself and therefore destroys its own foundations. Why? Because the denial of God leads to the belief that man is the master of the order that reason discerns built into nature. The denial of God, then, leaves man vulnerable to the temptation to try to refashion his own nature—which, of course, is ultimately the temptation of some men to refashion the nature of others. As a result, the State, allying itself with science, tends toward totalitarianism even as it talks endlessly about democracy, a tendency observable in the secular ideologies of left and right.¹²

3. *The primacy of ethics*

As politics has become more secularized, with public references to the spiritual as a source of values becoming less frequent, there has been a tendency for the state to expand its claims

¹²The left wants to concentrate power in the hands of the state; the right seeks a more subtle alliance of state and mammoth business corporations with access to all the world's raw materials and markets. Although not as ostensibly totalitarian, the latter model involves a frightening degree of concentration of power of government and business on a global basis. Economically, people become more beholden to the corporations and the state, which ultimately means that they must obey their dictates. Morally and culturally, they become ever more restricted by the mandate that they do nothing to prevent the expansion of the market, even when the market tramples on fundamental moral values, and that they concede turning over the state to secular, liberal forces which do the same.

and to refuse to acknowledge anything beyond its competence. These tendencies are by no means limited to the so-called totalitarian states. In this situation, Pope Benedict explains, among the very first contributions the faith has to make is to declare that the state is not the whole, the totality in which our lives take place. Just as the creation account de-divinizes the cosmos, Christianity de-divinizes the state. By keeping politics focused on ethics, faith therefore preserves it from political utopianisms of any stripe which promise to liberate man through state power, a promise that inevitably subordinates the ethical dimension and man's freedom to the exercise of power.¹³

¹³The pope's modest vision of politics clearly goes against utopian views as we commonly understand the term, but the pope invites us to reconsider the true meaning of utopia. With the profound and broad sense of theological history that is his, the pope sees the roots of the wrong kind of utopian political thought in chiliasm or millenarianism, which read into chapter twenty of the Book of Revelation the promise of Christ's return within history to establish his reign on earth. The pope, echoing the Church's considered judgment, sees in this the duplication of eschatology, "the expectation of a state of salvation within history that in itself transcends the possibilities of political action but is to be established by political means." The fatal flaw in all such approaches is that they inevitably seek to "apply political means beyond their own logic," in the belief that God is somehow going to provide for what is inherently lacking in political activity. An important figure who prepared the way for the wrong kind of utopianism in politics was Joachim of Fiore, who argued that the trinitarian God was the principle of progress within human history. This enabled him to see in monasticism the coming of the final age of the Spirit, in which Christian ideals would be realized within history, thus transforming the eschaton into the goal of this logic of history (see Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 240, 243, 251). The Christian tradition provides other views of utopia that do not partake of such irrationalism and denial of the actual implications of the faith for politics. In Thomas More's *Utopia*, the pope finds a more properly Christian ideal, wherein the author constructs a hypothetical state composed of ideal institutions and morals, in which the institutions and morals were ideally connected. More's *Utopia* proposes an ideal standard by which the real world of politics could be measured. The goal is not to establish the impossible in the future but to critique the present in light of ideal ethical standards grounded in reason. So construed, utopias can be of real use. A second example of a valid utopianism is the monastic ideal, which was "to live the life of paradise now and thus to discover nowhere as somewhere." The monks left the world and went into the non-world to found a new *civitas* grounded in the Gospel. But the realization of this kind of utopia was not to be established in the world and the political order, but was based on voluntary renunciation of the world. The monastery's alternative *civitas* became a point of reference and a model for the world always to keep in mind. Mendicant religious orders that went into

It is important to stress, however, that the de-divinization of the state does not necessarily imply what liberals call “religious neutrality,” that is, an absence of reference to God or religious truth on the part of the state. The state is self-limiting precisely to the extent that it acknowledges its reference to a transcendent divine measure. In this sense, Ratzingerian de-divinization of the political runs counter to the current tendency to force morality into the sphere of the private and subjective, where it can be done away with as an effective public force.¹⁴

This is a crucial point to see, because morality is most vulnerable to modern secularizing political trends. Why? Because natural law, while discernible by reason, owes its existence to the creative Logos. By the same token, the rejection of revealed law, even in the form of so-called “religious neutrality,” is tantamount to an irrational self-absolutization of reason. “Irrational,” because, when reason robes itself as absolute king, it places itself in an irresolvable quandary of being all dressed up with no place to go. That is, it is tempted—and inevitably succumbs—to elevate itself above the first principles of the natural law and, therefore, to ignore or attempt to refashion the teleology innate in human nature. This is why the very foundations of Western civilization are currently under attack, particularly in the areas of sexual morality, marriage, and family. As the pope writes, “When the Christian foundations are removed completely, nothing holds together any more.”¹⁵

Modern politics, which calls itself democratic, is forcing Christianity into the private sphere, and the bases of moral order along with it, under the guise of pluralism. The Church is supposedly free to promote its own value system—precisely as a series of subjective preferences that as such have no claim on the laws of the land. By the same token, secularizing politics inevitably leads to the notion that the state is the author of morality, a move that often goes unnoticed because the morality that thereby gets enshrined by the

the world, and later their third orders, were again attempts to transform the world by establishing a utopian ideal within it (see Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 249–251). So, for all of its rejection of false, political utopias, the Church provides, as it were, other utopias which edify the world and push it to a higher, more spiritual standard.

¹⁴Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 147–151.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 217.

state has a content different from the traditional Christian ethics most people commonly associate with “morality.” What passes for “religious neutrality” does not free us from theocracy, but establishes an often subtle totalitarianism that repeats the theocratic problem in a new guise.

Needless to say, the pope concedes, even insists, that the state is entitled to a proper autonomy that the Church must respect. The point is simply that the state itself does not respect this autonomy when, either implicitly or explicitly, it denies its own inner reference to the divine measure. In this sense, the state, while distinct, even autonomous from, the Church, needs to take seriously the truth-claims of the Church, at least insofar as these present themselves as explaining why and in what sense the state should be autonomous. In this sense, the Church, under God, safeguards the proper limits of all earthly powers. It is in this sense that the pope insists on the impossibility of guaranteeing democratic order without reference to God:

Ultimately the democratic system can only function if certain fundamental values—let us call them human rights—are recognized by everyone and are withdrawn from the competence of the majority. To put it another way, the democratic system of the limitation and division of power does not function on its own as a purely formal system. It cannot be applied in a complete absence of values, but presupposes an ethos that is jointly accepted and maintained Democracy cannot function without values and thus cannot be neutral with regard to values. The formal element of its institutions is linked to the material element of an ethos that belongs to the Socratic and Christian tradition.¹⁶

4. Freedom and conscience

On the subject of freedom, Pope Benedict’s critics would characterize him as an enemy of the Enlightenment, but the pope does not reject Enlightenment reason in principle. Rather, he argues that the Enlightenment was consistent with the Christian tradition when it argued that freedom is rooted in reason; the pope knows that a democratic order can exist only when fundamental human values that stand to reason are preserved, just as he knows that these

¹⁶Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 219, 188.

values must be protected by law and removed from the issues to be discussed by party politics in the democratic process.¹⁷

Nevertheless, rescuing the truth of the Enlightenment from itself involves, on Benedict's view, a recovery of the contributions the biblical tradition has to make to our understanding of freedom. In fact, the biblical equivalent of our word "freedom," "eleutheria," really has nothing to do with the modern idea of freedom as the ability to follow one's subjective wants. It means rather to belong, to be a member of the community, and to be able to participate as a fully recognized member. To be free means to have a home, to belong to it, to share fully in its life, its obligations and privileges. Here we see one of the most important practical implications of Benedict's relational view of the person for fundamental politics.

In the allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4, the pope sees an even deeper development of this idea. The difference between being a son of Hagar and a son of Sarah is not so much in what each is allowed to do. No, the distinguishing feature of the freedom that God brings in Christ is "to receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:6). Here we see the defining characteristic of freedom as having a very special status of membership. Freedom at its deepest is incorporation into the divine life made available by the Son of God, something quite different from a sterile voluntarism which indeed has always been a temptation to man, but which can never liberate him from the moral weakness that oppresses him from within. This is why, precisely when Paul is arguing, "For freedom Christ has set us free," that he warns, "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal 5:1, 13). To be free is to be a full citizen of the People of God. But this status demands the avoidance of the works of the flesh, resisting an entire catalog of vices, fifteen of which are named (Gal 5:19–21).

New Testament freedom can therefore be said to build on the initial meaning of freedom as belonging and participation and raise it up to be a participation in the very being of God through grace. On a track altogether different from any indeterminacy, biblical freedom is to be like the trinitarian God, to be transformed into the divine life through grace. One must be educated for this freedom and this education of love is the education of the Cross,

¹⁷Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 185, 187–188.

which is the heart of this entire Pauline notion of freedom; like Paul, the free person is one who finds no glory “except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

With all of this in mind, the pope is able to clarify the ambiguities at the root of the modern conception of freedom, yet always in a way that acknowledges valid instances of progress and never so as to veer into simplistic condemnation.

The modern notion of freedom promised liberation in three interrelated ways. First, freedom was to be a result of the mastery of nature. Secondly, it was to terminate the domination of man by man. Finally, it was to be a freedom of thought and opinion, free from arbitrary constraints. Yet, in all of this there has been ambiguity, bringing a very real threat that modern freedom leads to new forms of servility. With technology, man has mastered nature to a hitherto unrealized degree, but the same technology tends to enslave the would-be masters, if for no other reason than that it involves an unprecedented power of domination yoked to ever-more concentrated economic interests, with the result that there is ever less actual freedom of thought and opinion (think of the prevalence of the media in shaping consciousness).

These ambiguities go back to the origins of the Enlightenment itself. The pope makes the frequently forgotten point that the Enlightenment has not historically been simply a movement for freedom. European monarchs all too frequently appointed themselves the representatives of enlightened reason and did away with the various spheres of freedom that had been built up during the medieval period, during which time the power of monarchs was generally curbed. Hence, many of the older liberties were done away with as the enlightened monarchs centralized authority in the modern state. Moreover, as Benedict points out, the danger of the overly centralized state remains a very serious problem. There is thus a need for the power of the Cross, the capacity to witness to the truth even in the midst of coercion and suffering being imposed as a punishment for having resisted the powers that be. It is the Cross of Christ that in the final analysis witnesses in the presence of the state to a truth that transcends it, that indeed the entire moral law both precedes and transcends it.

An often neglected truth recovered by Benedict is that freedom is a capacity to be frank, to tell the truth in a world dominated by appearances. The Christian speaks not words of

flattery, nor uses words as a cloak for greed, nor speaks to gain glory (1 Thess 2:5–6). When one speaks and acts no longer for reality but for appearance, one is not free but stuck in the worst form of slavery. Freedom is thus tied to truth; freedom is found only in the truth of being itself, and is lost in every act in which we fail to acknowledge the truth of being, whenever we trade being for appearance. Hence the free man is the one like Paul, that is, one who is made free inwardly by commitment to the truth of the Gospel, liberated from desires of the flesh, and also able to withstand any and all opposition arising from the forces in the world arrayed against it.¹⁸

This leads us to the theme of conscience, which is central to how the pope understands the non-coercive, yet intrinsic political role of the Christian account of freedom sketched just now. The pope cites Reinhold Schneider's novel about Bartolomé de Las Casas, which the pope sees as demonstrating the role of conscience.¹⁹ On the one hand, Benedict highlights the prophetic conscience embodied by Las Casas himself, which shakes the powerful and disturbs *their* consciences. The example of Las Casas shows, in fact, that the Christian faith gives conscience its prophetic voice down through history, reminding everyone of the variety of injustices the world permits. Nevertheless, the pope sees the first and purest form of conscience reflected in innocent suffering endured in love for the benefit of the guilty. "Only power that comes out of suffering," Benedict writes, "can be power for healing and salvation; power shows its greatness in the renunciation of power."²⁰ The measure of the Church's involvement in politics—an involvement that is necessary if politics is to remain at the service of the common good—is found in the crucified Christ. He coerces no one, yet none of the passersby can avoid seeing him hanging on the Cross; none can avoid taking a position for or against him.

¹⁸Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 200.

¹⁹The citation is to Reinhold Schneider, *Las Casas vor Karl V. Szenen aus der Konquistadorenzeit*, in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 168.

²⁰Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 165–179; 177. The pope speaks of a third exercise of conscience, wherein conscience is joined to the actual exercise of authority in a conscientious way.

5. Culture and society

In his role as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the then Cardinal Ratzinger took a strong stand against the post-conciliar embrace of utopian political thought, most notably in his critiques of the theology of liberation.²¹ This stance reflected, in part, Ratzinger's refusal of a naïve optimism about "progress" that, in his view, had been too influential in the drafting of *Gaudium et spes*.²² By downplaying original sin and its consequences, Ratzinger thought, "the authors [of *Gaudium et spes*] seemed to think that the world of faith was a second world that was unnecessary to understanding the world and was like a second world running alongside it," so that "people should not be prematurely bothered by this second world."²³

²¹See especially the two instructions from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation" (1984) and "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" (1986).

²²His treatment in *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966) could suggest at times a critical overall reading of *Gaudium et spes*. To clarify his position, it is important to point out that the article focuses more on the development of the document than the final product itself. Of course, we know that a critical attitude toward the initial draft of Schema 13 was widely held. As David Schindler indicates (following Joseph Komonchak), a number of German theologians made similar evaluations. Despite the changes that were made, some of these theologians still suspected a "naturalistic semi-Pelagianism" in the final version (see David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996], 48–49). Although Ratzinger was clearly among the critical group, he nowhere states such a criticism of the final text. Clearly, Ratzinger accepted the document as a definitive and authoritative document of an ecumenical council, with all that such a designation entails, whatever his reservations about some of the influences on its formation. Furthermore, when one considers Ratzinger's treatment of the broader factors of the time that influenced the text, the council, and that period of history, it is clearly not the case that Ratzinger ever held that the text of *Gaudium et spes* was responsible for the mistaken directions taken by many in the Church after Vatican Council II. Indeed, if we take the famous christocentric passage in *Gaudium et spes*, 22, in conjunction with *Lumen gentium*, we have a clear formula for a renewal of the relationship between the Church and the world that would be quite consistent with Benedict's views.

²³Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, quoted in Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*, 51–52.

Rather than fostering “progress,” then, the post-conciliar Church’s optimistic embrace of “the world” actually makes the crisis of the West even more acute, since the roots of this crisis are precisely the modern predilection to form a culture that separates itself from its own roots in God. This separation finds a sort of *Realsymbol* in reproductive technology, in which man, attempting to refashion his very nature, thereby attempts to take control of the moral order written by God into that nature. This bid for control of the moral order finds expression, in turn, in the pervasive ideology that holds that morality belongs essentially to the sphere of the private, which is really just another way of saying that its content is entirely man-made. In Benedict’s words:

[Man] has investigated the farthest recesses of his being, he has deciphered the components of the human being, and now he is able, so to speak, to “construct” man on his own. This means that man enters the world, no longer as a gift of the Creator, but as the product of our activity. . . . In this way, the splendor of the fact that he is the image of God—the source of his dignity and of his inviolability—no longer shines upon this man Man is nothing more now than the image of man—but of what man? . . . Moral strength . . . has diminished, because the technological mentality confines morality to the subjective sphere. Our need, however, is for a public morality The true and gravest danger of the present moment is precisely this imbalance between technological possibilities and moral energy.²⁴

Many fail to see the stakes in this privatization of morality, because de facto it extends only or mainly to sexual matters, while at the same time we are bombarded by a new moralism emphasizing admittedly important themes such as universal justice, peace, and preservation of nature. As just noted, this moralism is selective, and its selectivity stems from its ideological character. For the new moralism tends to a kind of utopianism that, consisting in the dream of a universal extension of the right to re-define one’s own given nature, necessarily attacks the right to life. It is no accident, then, that the new moralism combines incessant talk of “tolerance” with a great deal of hostility to those who support the traditional morality of the West, which it actively seeks to exclude from public life. It

²⁴Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 27.

goes without saying that this trend works hand in glove with the centralizing and totalitarian political trends mentioned earlier.

When reason begins to construct its own morality without the sense of man as created and having ends and purposes written into his nature, the result is not simply the disappearance of moral passion, but its diversion into an effort to overcome the limitations imposed by the concept of human nature itself—and to neutralize the political influence of those who still defend them. This is the origin of the culture of death or, as Benedict put it, “the dictatorship of relativism.” Another way of putting the problem is to say that the modern West consciously cuts itself off from its own historical roots. This is perhaps most visible in the attempt to write a new European Constitution deliberately excluding mention of its Christian origins. The appeals here to “tolerance” are transparently disingenuous, as neither a traditional Jew nor a Muslim would be offended by such a message; both are far more threatened by the invasion of the culture of rationalism than they are by reference to an obvious fact of history. Behind the facade is a real attempt to construct a human community that excludes God absolutely. Hence, for the pope, the real cultural fault line:

is not that between diverse religious cultures; rather, it is the antagonism between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on the one hand, and the great religious cultures, on the other. If we come to experience a clash of cultures, this will not be due to a conflict between the great religions The coming clash will be between this radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures.²⁵

²⁵Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, 44. The pope sees the culture wars playing out differently in the United States and Europe. In the United States, there never was a state church, which in a sense allowed religion simply to be itself and not to have to take on functions secondary to its nature. Insofar as the United States practices a separation of Church and state without an anti-clerical animus à la française, it is in some respects superior to both French-style laicism and to the pre-revolutionary altar and throne arrangements. “In some respects,” because the question remains as to whether there still isn’t an inherent tendency to a subtler neutralization of religion even in the relatively benign American model of church-state separation. I agree with David Schindler and others, who argue for an affirmative answer to this question. I suspect that Benedict would as well, given the role of the Enlightenment in the founding of the United States. Nevertheless, this is a further question that the pope has not explicitly dealt with, though his thought contains the principles for a discernment of the subtler secularism of the American

At this point, it is worth emphasizing Benedict's claim that the liturgical worship of God is in some sense the fount of a healthy social order. Worship stands in opposition to all manipulative attempts to control nature and remake ourselves as we wish. Worship and contemplation come first, prior to all activity. All the way back to the original covenant on Mount Sinai, "there is an essential connection between the three orders of worship, law, and ethics." By the same token, where God is not worshiped, man is belittled:

It is only . . . when man's relationship with God is right that all of his other relationships . . . can be in good order Worship . . . is essential for the right kind of human existence in the world. It is so precisely because it reaches beyond everyday life. Worship gives us a share in heaven's mode of existence, in the world of God, and allows light to fall from that divine world into ours. In this sense worship . . . has the character of anticipation. It lays hold in advance of a more perfect life and, in so doing, gives our present life its proper measure. A life without such anticipation, a life no longer opened up to heaven, would be empty, a leaden life.²⁶

It is in the Eucharist that man finds the deepest solidarity. United with Christ in the Eucharist, we find a union with one another beyond the liturgical gathering. The Church originates in the one bread that is the body of Christ. "It is," the pope writes, "when the Eucharist is understood in the full intimacy of the union of each individual with the Lord that it automatically becomes also a social sacrament in the highest degree." That is why the great socially committed saints were also eucharistic saints. The pope cites as a model the example of St. Martin de Porres, born in 1569 in Lima, Peru, who was named the patron saint of interracial justice, the son of a black Panamanian woman and a Spanish nobleman. He lived on adoration of the Eucharist, and spent entire nights in prayer, while spending the entire day tending to the sick, the poor, and the socially disadvantaged. For St. Martin, "the encounter with the Lord, who gives himself to us from the Cross and makes us all members of one body through the one bread, was converted logically into

regime.

²⁶Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 21.

service rendered to the suffering, into care for the weak and the forgotten.” We obviously have in our time the example of Mother Teresa of Calcutta as well. The pope does not mean only that social activism authentically considered can only flow out of the Liturgy, or that there is no orthopraxis without orthodoxy.²⁷ Even more deeply, the pope is telling us that political reason remains most truly itself when it maintains its inner openness to God, who is not just the Creator, but also the Restorer and Consummator of creation in the Eucharist.

6. Deus caritas est

Having said this, I find it appropriate to conclude the present essay with a brief glance at Benedict’s encyclical. Though this text is not generally characterized as a strictly social document, Benedict XVI nonetheless brings to the fore some of the themes echoed in his previous work on social order. In *Deus caritas est*, the pope devotes Part I to an exposition of the meaning of God’s love, and then establishes the intrinsic link between God’s love and human love, with special focus on the distinctions and relations between *agape* and *eros*.

This sets the stage for Part II, where Benedict XVI shifts attention to the practice of love by the Church. Some observers, notably Stefano Fontana and Fr. James Schall, see here a profound kinship with the social encyclicals.²⁸ At first glance, one may balk at the claim; the encyclical really engages no social or political issues per se, as does, say, *Centesimus annus*. Nevertheless, in a very real sense, the encyclical gets to the core of the Church’s approach to the social order, which may perhaps be the emphasis of this pontificate. Once again, we are on the terrain of fundamental politics.

Fontana recalls that *Rerum novarum* ended with a reference to charity as the chief factor needed to bring about the desired changes in the social order, and that Benedict wishes to underline that this indeed is the crucial point, more fundamental than even the soundest

²⁷Ratzinger, *On The Way to Jesus Christ*, 117–119.

²⁸Stefano Fontana, “*Deus Caritas Est*, Social Encyclical,” online at www.zenit.org/article-15146?l=english; James Schall, S.J., “The Encyclical; God’s *Eros* Is *Agape*,” available at www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/print2006/schall_encyclical_jan06.html.

expositions of social philosophy. The encyclical's most profound foray into the Church's social teaching therefore comes when Benedict insists that, although politics is the province of reason, reason is in need of "constant purification" because of the "ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests."²⁹ Political reason needs love's purification "in order to be ever more fully itself."

By way of conclusion, the pope asserts that, precisely as a "most important *human* responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically."³⁰ Again, this is no assertion of theocracy, for Benedict defends reason as the basis of politics, but it is a reassertion that reason needs faith "to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly."³¹ In unpacking this claim, the pope echoes a perennial theme of his social thought, namely, that justice in its fullness is not something that can be brought about without the contribution of faith, nor can it be the result of purely political activity. Reiterating the central point of the encyclical, Benedict reminds us that the service of love is always necessary, and that the Church is called first and foremost to exercise that love as a witness to God's love. As well as any statement, this summarizes the essence of the fundamental politics of Benedict XVI. □

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²⁹*Deus caritas est*, 28.

³⁰*Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

³¹*Ibid.*, 28.