Joseph Ratzinger
in the era of Vatican II
A very German conversation in the European world of letters

In an eloquent exposition of the principles under-girding what is sometimes called “the Cambridge school of ideas,” Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that when examining the texts of some scholar, a crucial question is always: Against whom is he writing here? Within what controversy is this or that particular contention to be situated? Scholars “characteristically invite us not simply to assert p, but to assert p rather than q or r, and we will often only understand the point of asserting p, if we know what q and r are.” [1] Reading Ratzinger is no exception.

The Response to Luther

In his early work the young Professor was clearly contending with the unfinished business of the Council of Trent. His exposure to mid twentieth-century Lutheran scholarship helped to raise his awareness of the inadequacies of the Counter-Reformation theology or what Marie-Dominique Chenu was to call “baroque theology.” Although the style of Ratzinger’s papacy was often labelled “baroque” because he wore baroque-style vestments and other pre-modern items of papal regalia, and indeed while the very word “baroque” conjures images of the white wedding cake churches that dot the Bavarian countryside, his theology was anything but baroque.

His earliest interests were in ecclesiology and in the relationship between scripture, revelation and tradition. His heroes were not the baroque scholastics Cano, Cajetan and Suárez but St. Augustine, St. Bon-aventure, and Newman. In plundering these resources he was responding to issues thrown up by scholars such as the Lutheran Oscar Cullmann and the Catholic Josef Geiselmam whose area of study was the treatment of tradition at the Council of Trent. Although the role of tradition in the economy of salvation was one of the most hotly contested issues of the Reformation, the Tridentine decree which addressed the subject failed to define what the Counter-Reformers understood by the concept “tradition.” In contrast, the Lutherans produced volumes on the subject.
In his address at the Augustinian Cloister in Erfurt in 2011 Pope Benedict described the question “How do I receive the grace of God” as the driving force of Luther’s life. He added that “Luther’s thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: What promotes Christ’s cause [Was Christum treibet] was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture.”[2]

The same driving force can also be detected in Ratzinger/Benedict’s own theological contributions. His approach to dealing with the fact of multiple different interpretations of the documents of the Second Vatican Council was to suggest that all the documents be read with a Christocentric accent. He also argued that scriptural exegesis needed to be approached from within the horizon of faith and when in 1969 he published his famous critique of the treatment of human dignity in Gaudium et Spes, he was not shy of suggesting that sections of the document could do with a dose of Luther’s theology of the cross.

The Evangelical Bishop, Wolfgang Huber, has been quoted as saying that Ratzinger is one of the few people who really know Luther’s work and Lutheran pastors who converted during his pontificate often remark that he is the only pope who has ever understood Luther. Ratzinger himself claimed to have read all of Luther’s pre-Reformation works in the original language. This knowledge made possible the historic signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification approved by both the Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation. The language of the declaration was ‘nutted out’ by Cardinal Ratzinger at a private meeting with Bishop Johannes Hanselmann, a former president of the World Lutheran Federation, and long-standing friend.

Ideas can only be fought with alternative ideas that acknowledge whatever truth there is in the proposition or theory to be combatted. Ratzinger, forever the scholar, dealt with the Lutheran tradition in this way. He saw it as the outcome of a poorly handled crisis in late medieval scholasticism and used his knowledge of the history to bring about a high degree of healing.

**The Response to Kant**

In the aftermath of the theological trauma of the 16th century, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) set about offering an account of religion within the bounds of reason alone, and in particular he sought to offer an account of morality by reference to reason unaided by Christian revelation. He was also of the view that whether there are 3 persons in the deity, or 10, it makes no difference.

The end result of the Kantian revolution was that Catholic scholars found themselves defending the reasonableness of the Catholic faith at the Bar of Kantian rationality. It was rather like engaging in a fight with one hand tied behind one’s back. Revelation was not allowed entry to the battle. Catholic scholars looked somewhat equine speaking out of both sides of their mouths. To non-Catholics they used a philosophical argument, to Catholics a theological argument. The two were not often presented in an integrated form. The necessary side-lining of the Trinity in the philosophical defences gave rise to what Ratzinger calls ‘moralism’ – the reduction of religion to mere ethics, and an ethical framework constructed without any reference to Christ.

The response to Kant entailed an engagement with the triad of concepts – reason, revelation and tradition. Ratzinger began this work in his habilitationsschrift wherein he was critical of the account of revelation found in the works of Francisco Suárez, described as the ‘clutch purse of doctrines’ theory. At Vatican II, Ratzinger, Karl Rahner and others worked on the drafting of Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. They set aside the Suárezian approach and presented revelation as an historical event in which God the Son reveals God the Father to humanity through the aid of God the Holy Spirit.

In a preface to his collected publications Ratzinger reflected that “if neo-Scholastic theology essentially understood Revelation as the divine transmission of mysteries, which remain inaccessible to the human mind, today Revelation is considered as God’s manifestation of himself in an historical action, and salvation history is seen as a central element of Revelation.”[3] The fact that this is so is largely due to the efforts of Johann Adam Möhler, Romano Guardini, Gottlieb Söhngen, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner and Ratzinger himself. The only non-native German speaker on this list is de Lubac.

Far from wanting to keep philosophy and theology chastely separate, Ratzinger’s work often drew faith and reason into a symbiotic or intrinsic relationship. In this context it is said his approach accorded more with the Thomism of Josef Pieper and Étienne Gilson than with so-called Aristotelian Thomism. Pieper never accepted a sharp dichotomy between theology and philosophy. This was in part
due to his acceptance of Werner Jaeger’s interpretation of Aristotle. Jaeger argued that behind Aristotle’s metaphysics there lies the *credо ut intelligаm* – I believe in order that I may understand.

In his Theology of Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar drew attention to the following paragraph from Pieper’s *Über das Ende der Zeit*: [4]

All real philosophizing necessarily oversteps the boundary of ‘pure philosophy’ to make statements the import of which are not the result of the human effort to know but come to us as something to be accepted. And indeed the basic impulse to pursue philosophy that gets to the roots of things goes beyond the border that divides philosophy from theology, faith and revelation. Thus a philosophy that would insist on remaining a ‘pure philosophy’ would be untrue to itself and would cease being philosophy.

An excellent overview of the different ways Catholic scholars have construed the relationship between theology and philosophy is Aidan Nichols’ *Faith and Reason: From Hermes to Benedict XVI*. Nichols argues that one can find in the works of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI a desire to unite “philosophy and theology in a single, internally differentiated but also internally cohesive, intellectual act.” [5] This means that there is ‘a convergence of the mainly philosophical disclosure of logos with the chiefly theological revelation of love’.

In his 1969 essay on *Gaudium et Spes*, Ratzinger rejected the notion of ‘reason alone’. He commended Augustine for his recognition that the “necessary purification of sight takes place through faith (Acts 15:9) and through love, at all events not as a result of reflection alone and not at all by man’s own power.” [6] This theme is echoed in *Lumen Fidei* which he drafted.

As Gregory Baum and others have argued, there is a need to understand how Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* offers a much richer theological epistemology than Vatican I’s *Dei Filius*, which did not address the issue of how knowledge of God based on human reason is related to the saving actions of God revealed in Christ. Fergus Kerr has noted that “it remained unsettled at Vatican I whether the natural light by which reason can attain knowledge of God should be equated with the prelapsarian light enjoyed by Adam in the Garden of Eden or the light in which someone in a state of grace might exercise his reasoning powers, or the light which someone might supposedly have independently of the effects of sin and grace.” [7] Similarly, Noel O’Sullivan has suggested that what is interesting about *Dei Filius* is not so much what it says but rather “what it doesn’t say” and in particular “one is struck by the absence of a Trinitarian dimension in the definition of 1870.” [8]

The idea of attempting a defence of Christian ethics as if the Incarnation had never occurred is a project that held no appeal for Ratzinger. It is often promoted by Catholic leaders who say that if people no longer believe in Christ, then resort must be had to a Kantian style of reasoning since nothing else has any traction. Ratzinger’s approach, however, was one of acknowledging the component of revelation in Christian ethics, and then defending the superiority of Christian ethics over all the various alternatives by exposing the theological presuppositions which implicitly lie at the base of the alternatives. For example, an ethical framework which is implicitly atheistic often rests on an ontology of original violence (life in the state of nature is nasty, brutish and short), rather than upon an ontology of original peace (the lion lying down with the lamb in Eden’s pastures).

In *Principles of Christian Morality*, co-authored with von Balthasar, Ratzinger argued that the fact that the bible’s moral pronouncements can be traced to other cultures or to philosophical thought in no way implies that morality is a function of mere reason. This intellectual position, he declared, was “a premature conclusion we should not allow to pass unchallenged any longer.” [9]

The combined magisterial works of the popes of John Paul II and Benedict XVI foster what the young Ratzinger called a “daring new theological anthropology” which is Trinitarian and Christocentric. As Ratzinger explained in *Deus Caritas Est*, Truth is a Person. [10] This is about as far away from Kant as one can go.

Although many Catholic institutions continue to teach philosophy and theology as completely separate disciplines without any attempt to integrate the two, the fledgling Sophia University Institute located in the village of Loppiano on the outskirts of Florence has attempted to transcend this dichotomy by establishing a Faculty of Trinitarian Ontology. Piero Coda’s *Dalla Trinità l’avvento di Dio tra storia e profezia* (From the Trinity: The Event of God Between History and Prophesy) and the work *La Persona Umana: Antropologia Teologia* (The
Human Person: A Theological Anthropology) co-written by Cardinal Angelo Scola, Gilfredo Maren-go and Javier Predes-Lopez are guides to how this daring new theological anthropology looks when taken out into the academy and expressed in a curriculum.

The Departure from Rahner

Ratzinger’s stance vis-à-vis Kant was a major difference between he and Karl Rahner. Although Ratzinger always gave credit to Rahner for having a nose for the problems facing Catholic theologians in the twentieth century, Ratzinger nonetheless objected to elements of Rahner’s theological anthropology derived from Kant. As he expressed the problem: Rahner appropriated universal reason for Christianity and tried to prove that universal reason leads ultimately to the teachings of Christianity and that the teachings of Christianity are the universally human, the rational par excellence. In the generation that followed Rahner, the direction of his thought was reversed. If the teachings of Christianity are the universally human, the generally held views of man’s reason, then it follows that these generally held views are what is Christian. If that is the case, then one must interpret what is Christian in terms of the universal findings of man’s reason.

In his response Ratzinger rhetorically asked whether it is true that Christianity adds nothing to the universal but merely makes it known: Is the Christian really just man as he is? Does not the whole dynamism of history stem from the pressure to rise above man as he is? Is not the main point of the faith of both Testaments that man is what he ought to be only by conversion, that is, when he ceases to be what he is? Does not such a concept which turns being into history but also history into being, result in a vast stagnation despite the talk of self-transcendence as the content of man’s being? Against Rahner’s treatment of the relationship between history and ontology, Ratzinger suggested that “we must comprehend why God’s universalism (God wants everyone to be saved) makes use of the particularism of the history of salvation (from Abraham to the Church).” and further, that “concern for the salvation of others should not lead us to ignore more or less this particularism of God: salvation history and world history must not be regarded as identical entities just because God’s concern for them must be extended to all.”[11]

The Response to Bultmann & Dibelius

The long shadow of Kantian rationality also fell over the territory of German scripture scholarship, especially the works of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) and Martin Dibelius (1883-1947). Bultmann denied that readers of the scriptures had any hope of an objective understanding of the events there depicted, and suggested that the important factor was the existential impact of Scripture which could not be spelled out in a dogmatic form. Linked to the methodology of Bultmann and Dibelius was the search for the historical Jesus. The initiator of this quest was the German Deist philosopher H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768) who offered rationalistic explanations for miracles. He was followed by D. F. Strauss (1808-1874), author of The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined, and Strauss was followed by Bruno Bauer (1809-1882). Although Bauer accused Strauss of misrepresenting the ideas of Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), he nonetheless continued the ‘historical Jesus’ project by arguing that Christianity represents a synthesis of the Stoicism of Seneca the Younger and the Jewish theology of Philo. Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998), one of Bultmann’s pupils, started another quest in 1954 and then in the 1990s the project took on a new form in the Jesus Seminar and the work of J.P. Meier.

In response to these waves of rationalist engagements with Christianity’s sacred texts, Ratzinger concluded: Certainly texts must first of all be traced back to their historical origins and interpreted in their proper historical context. But then, in a second exegetical operation, one must look at them also in light of the total movement of history and in light of history’s central event, Jesus Christ. Only the combination of both these methods will yield understanding of the Bible.

Such principles are to be found in a more expanded form in the documents The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993) and The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (2002). These were promulgated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission under the chairmanship of Ratzinger.

The Response to Heidegger

In an essay published in 1976 Bernard Lon-ergan wrote “to put it bluntly, until we move onto the level of historical dynamics, we shall face our secularist and atheistic opponents as the Red Indians, armed with bows and arrows, faced European
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muskets.”[12] Ratzinger was well aware of this problem. In his Principles of Catholic Theology he wrote that the most serious theological crisis of the twentieth century was coming to an understanding of the mediation of history in the realm of ontology. In short-hand terms, it is the Heideggerian ‘being in time’ issue. Catholic anthropology needs to hold the ontological and historical dimensions of human existence together in such a way that one does not eclipse the other.

Joseph Ratzinger dealt with this problem by developing what is called the dimension of relationality – that part of the human person which is determined by his or her relationships with other persons, including each of the Persons of the Trinity. In his essay on the notion of the person in theology he argued that the Boethian definition of the human person as an individual substance of a rational nature offered a woefully inadequate anthropology.[13]

Ratzinger also argued against the view that scripture has nothing to say about being; however, in contrast to the Greek concept of being, Ratzinger emphasised that the Biblical idea of creatureliness means having one’s origin, not in a passive idea, but in a creative freedom. While the Greek God is a pure and changeless being, the hallmarks of the Biblical God are relationship and action. The human being is a being in time, but this being has been made in the image of God and is not a mere product of random social forces.

The Response to Nietzsche

While pre-Conciliar theology was focused upon the transcendental of truth, it had little if anything to say about the Romans for whom the problem with Christianity is not primarily that it is not rational (the 18th century criticism) but that it is not erotic (the 19th century criticism). Updating the idiom of Nietzsche, the charge was that Christianity killed eros. He did so by arguing that the relationship between eros and agape is symbiotic. John Paul II had already broken this ground in his Wednesday audience catechesis on human love and Ratzinger followed through the logic of this intervention.

In earlier publications Ratzinger had acknowledged that the Church’s presentation of sexual ethics had been so poor as to foster what French psychologists called ‘la maladie catholique’. He defined this as a “special neurosis that is the product of a warped pedagogy so exclusively concentrated on the fourth and sixth commandments that the resultant complex with regard to authority and purity renders the individual incapable of free self-development.”[14] Nietzsche may well have been reacting against a similar pedagogy in his own Protestant milieu. The Wojtyła -Ratzinger response was the development of a theological vision which places sexuality within the context of the love shared between the Persons of the Trinity.

The Alliance with von Balthasar

The presentation of Christian life as a theodrama whose chief actors are the Persons of the Trinity and individual human persons with talents and passions and unique personal histories is somewhat more erotic than the notion of Christianity as a moral code for dutiful nerds. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s five volume Theodramatics re-framed the question of whether or not Christianity is on the side of human freedom and eros. What von Balthasar understood was that the last couple of centuries of European history were a conflict over the foundational myths of European culture, and in particular, over which myth is consonant with the greatest amount of human freedom and self-development.

The conflict reached its climax in the Nazi era with the Jewish and Christian “myths” pitted against neo-pagan Norse mythology, spiced with occult elements, sexual perversions and common garden variety herd behaviour. In his Apocalypse of the German Soul, completed in 1939, von Balthasar concluded that a high degree of the blame for the carnage could be traced to Kant in the sense that the Kantian idea of rationality kick started a diabolical process which taken to its logical extreme ended in Dachau. In his famous 1914 Lecture “From Kant to Krupp” Vladimir Ern also took the view that
“violent outbursts of German nationalism were prepared by the Kantian analytic” and that “the interior transcription of the German spirit in Kant’s philosophy rightly and inevitably coincides with the external transcription of the same spirit in the weapons of Krupp.”[15]

Anyone who has ever stood in the Odeonsplatz in Munich and looked down Ludwigstrasse in one direction and toward Marienplatz in the other is struck by the incongruity. In one direction there is a square dominated by a statue of the Queen of Heaven. At few blocks in the opposite direction Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans were arrested and beheaded for suggesting that there might be something morally problematic about genocide. This was no mere difference of opinion about what is reasonable. In Balthasar’s idiom, this was “a battle of the logos.”

Ratzinger once remarked that it was impossible for him to say how much he owed to Balthasar. No doubt in the future whole doctoral dissertations will be dedicated to this subject. Suffice to say that Ratzinger shared Balthasar’s Trinitarian Christocentric approach to this battle. Even in his dialogue with Jürgen Habermas, who is perhaps the leading contemporary advocate for Kantian-style rationality, Ratzinger spoke of creation and the Creator and suggested that while there can be pathologies of religion, there can also be pathologies of reason.[16] A form of reason which is foreclosed against revelation has a tendency to turn pathological.

THE HOMAGE TO GUARDINI & THE SHOT AT FEUERBACH

Ratzinger, like von Balthasar and Rahner, was a student of Romano Guardini, the co-founder of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria who held various Chairs in German Universities and was for a time chaplain to the German Catholic youth movement. All three have paid tribute to his influence. Rahner described him as a Christian humanist who led German Catholics out of an intellectual ghetto. Balthasar said that Guardini believed that “it is not Christ who is in the world, but the world that is in Christ” and that the “immensity of this reversal” was the very basis of Guardini’s thought. As Victor Consemus notes, Ratzinger praised Guardini for seizing upon philosophical questions of life and existence and illustrating them with literary themes or with great figures of the faith, thereby enabling Catholic theology to remain in dialogue with the broader academic world. [17]

Guardinian watermarks can be found on many of Ratzinger’s pages including the encyclical Lumen Fidei. Sandro Magister has also observed that both Guardini’s 1938 book The Essence of Christianity and Ratzinger’s 1968 book Introduction to Christianity are responses to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), the German philosopher who argued that Christianity is merely a projection of the human imagination to satisfy psychological needs. Karl Marx (1818-1883), yet another German philosopher, took Feuerbach’s materialism and married it to Hegel’s dialectical cosmology with diabolical consequences. As the story goes, the Hegelians of the Left and the Hegelians of the Right met in the battle of Stalingrad, for which the death toll was circa 1 million.

For half a millennium the world of theology has been dominated by people who speak German. The Italians might run the Curia but the Germans provide the lion’s share of the ideas. Ratzinger was the long awaited reply to a series of Germanic wrong turns. The question: “How did we get to Dachau?” could never have been far from his mind. He answered the question as the faithful son of the Bavaria of Altötting, rather than the Bavaria of the Wandervögel.

ENDNOTES


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