

THE MAGISTERIUM
AT THE HEART OF BENEDICT XVI'S TEACHING
TO PREACH THE TRUTH OF JESUS CHRIST



■ BY CAMILLO RUINI

1. SOME PREMISES

One characteristic of the magisterium of Benedict XVI is his great commitment to the question of the truth of the Christian faith, in the current historical situation and in relation to the forms of rationality prevalent today.

In the language of theology, we could say that the Pope is confronting, in his style and in an innovative manner, the central question of apologetics, or – in today's preferred phrase – of fundamental theology.

The aim of this address is, evidently, not that of exploring these problems, and not even that of making a complete presentation of these, but only of entering into them, offering a few main lines of orientation and keys of interpretation, in the light of both the magisterium of Benedict XVI – in particular, the September 12, 2006 address at the University of Regensburg and the October 19 address at the Verona Conference, in addition to the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* – and his previous work as a theologian.

Among his many important books, I refer primarily to

Introduction to Christianity, printed in Italy by Queriniana (referred to hereafter as *Introduction*), and to the two collections of essays, *Faith, Truth, and Tolerance: Christianity and the Religions of the World*, published by Cantagalli in 2003 (referred to hereafter as *Faith*), and *Benedict's Europe in the Crisis of Cultures*, also published by Cantagalli in 2005 (referred to hereafter as *Europe*), because these three books are the most pertinent to our topic.

In fact, although Benedict XVI is very careful to distinguish between his magisterium as pontiff and his work as a theologian, as he himself asserts in the early publication of the preface to his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, due to be released next spring, there is still a profound correspondence and substantial unity between his magisterium and his theology. Attentive examination therefore permits identifying, through both the one and the other, those very fundamental outlines that I will seek to present today.

Before embarking upon this topic, it may be helpful to say a few words on the theological outlook and manner of proceeding proper to Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

Having taught fundamental theology at first and later dog-

matic theology, he has an approach to issues in which theoretical and philosophical exploration is placed within a perspective that is above all historical and concrete.

Furthermore, his formation is essentially biblical, patristic, and liturgical, and he confronts current problems in the light of this. His attitude toward these problems certainly denotes acute critical capacities, but it is marked above all by the desire to be constructive, by openness, and by friendliness. His autobiographical book, *My Life*, is of particular interest for gaining an idea of how he himself views his formation and his work as a theologian.

Coming now to our topic, I think it's right to take as our point of departure the conviction, expressed by Cardinal Ratzinger, that "at the end of the second millennium, Christianity finds itself, precisely in the place of its original diffusion, Europe, in a profound crisis, based upon the crisis over its claim to truth" (*Faith*, p. 170).

This crisis has a twofold dimension: mistrust toward man's ability to grasp the truth about God and about divine things, and the doubts that the modern natural and historical sciences have raised about the tenets and origins of Christianity.

2. THE ORIGINAL NATURE OF CHRISTIANITY: BEING, LÓGOS, AGAPE

The gravity and the radical nature of this crisis can be understood in the light of what is the nature proper to Christianity.

It is certainly true that this is not in the first place "an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1), but it is likewise true that the choice of *lógos* rather than of myth has characterized Christianity itself from the beginning.

J. Ratzinger has argued extensively in favor of this assertion, above all on the historical level, beginning with his inaugural academic address in 1959 at the University of Bonn, entitled "The God of faith and the God of the philosophers," and up until his very recent address at the University of Regensburg.

In concrete terms, well before the birth of Christ the criticism of religious myths advanced by Greek philosophy – criticism that can be described as the philosophical Enlightenment of the ancient world – found a counterpart in the criticism of the false gods made by the prophets of Israel (and in particular by Deutero-Isaiah) in the name of Yahwistic monotheism, and then the encounter between Judaic faith and Greek philosophy gradually developed and found expression even within the Greek tradition of the Old Testament of the "Septuagint," which "is more than a mere tradition" and represents "an important concrete step in the history of revelation" (Regensburg address).

Thus the affirmation "In the beginning was the *Lógos*," which begins the prologue of the Gospel of John, constitutes

"the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis" (*ibid.*).

The patristic world moved along the same line, as emerges from the audacious and incisive expression by Tertullian, "Christ asserted that he was the truth, not custom" (*Introduction*, p. 102) and by the clear choice of St. Augustine, who, referring to the three forms of religion identified by the pagan author Terentius Varro, resolutely places Christianity in the realm of "physical theology," or of philosophical rationality, and not in that of the "mythical theology" of the poets, or of the "civil theology" of the states and the politicians.

Christianity thus described itself as a "true religion," unlike the pagan religions which had been stripped of their truth by pre-Christian rationality, and with respect to these it carried out a great work of "demythification."

Judaism had already begun a process of this kind, but there remained the difficulty of the special bond between the one, universal creator God and the one Jewish people, a bond that was overcome by Christianity, in which the one God is presented as the savior, without discrimination, of all peoples.

In this sense, the encounter between the biblical message and Greek philosophical thought was not a mere accident, but rather the historical embodiment of the intrinsic relationship between revelation and rationality. And this is precisely another of the fundamental reasons for Christianity's power of penetration into the Greco-Roman world (cf. *Faith*, pp. 173-180).

But with this we have, so to speak, only half of the discussion: the other half is constituted by the radical novelty and the profound otherness of biblical revelation

with respect to Greek rationality, and this concerns above all the central theme of religion, which is clearly that of God.

J. Ratzinger takes great pains in demonstrating, through the examination of the biblical texts, from the account of the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3 all the way to the formula "I am" that Jesus applies to himself in the Gospel of John, that the one God of the Old and New Testaments is the Being, self-existing from eternity, sought after by the philosophers (cf. *Introduction*, pp. 79-97).

But he emphasizes with just as much force that this God radically surpasses what the philosophers had thought about Him.

In the first place, in fact, God is clearly distinct from nature, from the world that He created: only in this way do "physics" and "metaphysics" arrive at a clear distinction from one another.

And above all, this God is not a reality inaccessible to us that we cannot encounter or turn to in prayer, as the philosophers maintained.

On the contrary, the biblical God loves man, and for this

ONE OF THE POPE'S CLOSEST
ASSOCIATES AND ADVISORS
IS HIS VICAR FOR
THE CITY OF ROME,
CARDINAL CAMILLO RUINI, 75.
ON DECEMBER 14, 2006,
RUINI GAVE A LONG TALK TO
THE PRIESTS OF ROME IN
WHICH HE EXPLAINED WHAT
BENEDICT IS TRYING TO DO AS
POPE. IT IS AN EXTRAORDINARY
INSIGHT INTO THE CORE VISION
OF BENEDICT'S PAPACY.
HERE IS THE COMPLETE TEXT
OF THE TALK

Pope Benedict XVI embraces Italian Cardinal
Camillo Ruini during Mass on the seashore
of the Italian city of Bari on May 29, 2005
(CNS photo by Alessia Giuliani)

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reason he enters into our history, gives life to an authentic love story with Israel, his people, and then, in Jesus Christ, not only expands this story of love and salvation to include all of humanity, but he carries this story to the extreme, to the point of “turning against himself” in the cross of his own Son, in order to raise man up again and save him, and to call man to that union of love with him that culminates in the Eucharist (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 9-15, where Benedict XVI sums up with great force what he has explored ever since the beginning of his work as a theologian).

In this way, the God who is Being and the Word is also and identically Agape, the original Love and the measure of authentic love, who precisely out of love created the universe and man.

More precisely, this love is entirely disinterested, free, and gratuitous. God, in fact, freely creates the universe from nothing (only with the freedom of the act of creation does the distinction between God and the world become full and definitive) and freely, out of his measureless mercy, saves sinful humanity.

Thus biblical faith reconciles the two dimensions of religion that were separated from each other at first; that is, the eternal God of whom the philosophers spoke, and the need for salvation that man carries within himself and that the pagan religions tried to satisfy in some way.

The God of the Christian faith is thus indeed absolute Being, the God of metaphysics, but he is also, and just as much, the God of history, the God who enters into history and into the most intimate relationship with us. This, according to J. Ratzinger, is the only adequate response to the question of the God of faith and the God of the philosophers (cf. *Faith*, pp. 180-182).

All of this has inevitable and decisive consequences with regard to man and the way of understanding life, meaning ethics. As Saint Paul explicitly said, “When the pagans who do not have the law act according to the law by nature [...] they show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts” (*Romans* 2:14-15). In the same spirit, Paul asks believers in Christ: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (*Philippians* 4:8).

There is a clear reference here to the ethical interpretation of nature, which was cultivated in the morality of the Stoics. This interpretation was then taken up by Christianity, but at the same time it was surpassed: when the encounter with the living God replaces a God who exists only in thought, the passage takes place from a theoretical ethics to a communitarian moral praxis that is lived out and put into action in the faith community, and concretely through the crystallization of all morality in the twofold commandment of love for God and for neighbor.

And just as God creates and gives himself in freedom, so

also faith in him cannot be anything but a free act, which no statutory authority can prohibit or impose: thus “fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. *Matthew* 22:21)” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28).

This is, in its fullness, the reason for the missionary dynamism developed by Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. This was convincing because it reconnected within itself the bond between faith and reason, and the orientation of action toward “caritas,” loving care for the suffering, the poor, and the weak, apart from any distinction of social condition.

We can therefore conclude that the power that made a worldwide religion out of Christianity and made convincing its claim to being the “true religion” consists of the synthesis that this has been able to achieve among reason, faith, and life (cf. *Faith*, pp. 182-184, and also the address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005).

**“THE GOD OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IS THUS INDEED ABSOLUTE BEING, THE GOD OF METAPHYSICS, BUT HE IS ALSO, AND JUST AS MUCH, THE GOD OF HISTORY, THE GOD WHO ENTERS INTO HISTORY AND INTO THE MOST INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH US”
—CARDINAL RUINI,
DECEMBER 14, ROME**

Opposite, Pope Benedict, with Cardinal Ruini in the background

3. THE SEPARATION OF REASON AND FREEDOM FROM CHRISTIANITY

This synthesis and this claim have endured for many centuries, despite many historical vicissitudes, and were at the basis of the later phases of Christianity’s missionary expansion (cf. the Verona address).

At this point, J. Ratzinger forcefully poses this question: “Why is this synthesis no longer convincing today? Why are reason and Christianity, on the contrary, considered today as contradictory and even as mutually exclusive? What has changed about the former, and what has changed about the latter?” (*Faith*, p. 184).

So let us examine, in the first place, the changes that have taken place in “reason.”

In a very summary manner, we will say only that the relational unity between ratio-

ality and faith, to which Saint Thomas Aquinas gave systematic form, was gradually and increasingly demolished through the major phases of modern thought, from Descartes to Vico to Kant, while the new synthesis between reason and faith attempted by Hegel does not really restore to faith its rational dignity, but tends instead to convert it completely into reason, destroying it as faith.

The next phase, which has emblematic figures like Marx and Comte, overturns the position of Hegel, who reduced matter to spirit, in reducing spirit to matter instead – with the exclusion of the very possibility of a transcendent God – and by again diminishing, in the line of principle, a “metaphysics” as distinct from “physics.”

Contextually there took place a transformation of the concept of truth, which ceased to be the understanding of reality existing independently from us, to become the understanding of what we ourselves have done in history, and then of what we can accomplish through the empirical sciences and technology (a “functional” concept of reason and life).

Thus the primacy of (metaphysical) philosophy was replaced by the primacy of history, later replaced by that of sci-

ence and technology. This latter primacy is today fairly clearly visible in Western culture, and, to the extent to which it claims that only scientific understanding is really true and rational, must be described as “scientism” (cf. *Introduction*, pp. 27-37; *Faith*, pp. 186-187).

In this context, the theory of the evolution of species proposed by Darwin has ended up taking on – among many scientists and philosophers, and to a great extent within modern culture – the role of a kind of vision of the world or of “first philosophy,” which on the one hand would be rigorously “scientific” and on the other would constitute, at least potentially, a universal explanation or theory of all reality, based upon natural selection or casual mutations, beyond which other questions about the origin and nature of things are not supposed to be necessary any longer, or even licit.

The assertion that “in the beginning was the *Lógos*” is thus overturned, with the placing at the beginning of everything matter-energy, chance, and necessity, and thus something that would not itself be rational (cf. *Faith*, pp. 187-190).

Even among those who do not believe in Christ, such positions are certainly not shared by all, often being perceived as an insufferable dogmatism that claims to be “scientific” but blurs the intrinsic limits of scientific knowledge.

But J. Ratzinger observes that, because of that great change by which, from Kant on, human reason is no longer thought to be capable of understanding reality in itself, and above all transcendent reality, the alternative to scientism most culturally accepted today seems to be, not the affirmation of God the Word, but rather the idea that “*latet omne verum*,” all reality is hidden, or that the true reality of God remains entirely inaccessible and incomprehensible to us, while the various religions are thought to present only images of God relative to different cultural contexts, and thus all are equally “true” and “untrue.”

In this way, the Western world is again inhabited by that approach to the divine that is proper to the great Eastern religions or visions of the world, like Hinduism and Buddhism (although the two are very different), and that Neoplatonism tried to propose in its own way as an alternative to Christianity, during the first centuries of the Christian era (cf. *Faith*, pp. 184-186).

It is not difficult to realize how such ideas are in practice spread among our people. A God, or better a “divinity,” thus understood tends to identify itself with the most profound and mysterious dimension of the universe, present at the foundation of all reality: it is therefore difficult to attribute a personal char-

acter to this divinity, and prayer itself, rather than being a dialogue between God and man, takes the form of spiritual stages of self-purification, which culminate in the reabsorption and dissolution of our ego in the primordial infinity.

And so, in the end, there does not seem to be such a radical difference between these forms of religiosity and the agnosticism, or even atheism, that goes together with the scientist approach (cf. *Faith*, pp. 184-186, and also pp. 23-43; 125-134). As the Christian faith in a God who is Being, Word, and Agape has embodied itself in a precise form of life and ethics, something analogous has taken place and is taking place with the

forms of rationality that tend to take the place of Christianity, and which in their turn express themselves in concrete ethical guidelines.

If “all truth is hidden,” or even if only that is rationally valid which can be experienced and measured, at the same time on the practical level of life and behavior the fundamental value becomes that of “tolerance,” in the sense that no one should or can maintain that his own convictions and choices are preferable and are better with respect to those of others. This is the current and apparently full-grown figure of Enlightenment philosophy, which defines itself concretely through the rights to freedom, with the individual freedoms as the supreme and decisive criterion by which all others are measured, and with the consequent exclusion of any possible discrimination that might harm anyone.

There is therefore the diminishing, especially at the social and public level, of moral conscience as something objectively valid, because it refers to what is good or bad in itself. But since some morality is necessary in any case in order to live, this is in some way recovered by making reference to the calculation of the useful or harmful consequences of one’s behaviors, and keeping always as the guiding criterion the principle of not limiting another’s freedom (cf. *Europe*, pp. 35-37).

On the level of content, to the conception of the world that absolutizes the evolutionistic model there corresponds an ethics that places at the center natural selection, and therefore the struggle for survival and the triumph of the strongest, while in the perspective of those forms of religiosity that refer to an incomprehensible and tendentially impersonal divinity, the human person himself, with his inalienable rights, freedom, and responsibility, loses his own consistency and becomes something relative and transitory, tending to dissolve into an indistinguishable totality.

So also the irreducible difference between good and evil ▶



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becomes relativized, and becomes merely the opposition of two aspects, both necessary and complementary, of the single original whole.

* * *

Let us now look more quickly at the changes in Christianity itself that have contributed to the divorce that has taken place between it and reason in our age.

In the discourse at Regensburg, Benedict XVI put particular emphasis on the theme of the “de-Hellenization” of Christianity, which first emerged in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation: the intention was that of returning to pure biblical faith, liberating it from the influences of Greek philosophy, or of metaphysics. Such an intention can also be found in Kant, although in a rather different form.

The second wave of the process of de-Hellenization emerged from liberal Protestant theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it also held strong interest for Catholic theology. In the thought of its most radical representatives, like Harnack, this was a matter of returning to Jesus strictly as man, taken as the Jesus of history, and to his simple moral message, thought to constitute the apex of the religious development of humanity, liberating it from its later philosophical and theological developments, beginning with the very divinity of Christ. At the roots of this is the modern self-limitation of reason to that which is verifiable.

The third wave of de-Hellenization now spreading concerns the problem of the encounter between Christianity and the many cultures of the world: the synthesis with Hellenism made by the ancient Church is supposed to be an early inculturation that should be shaken off now, to return to the simple message of the New Testament in order to inculturate this anew within the various socio-cultural contexts. The result is inevitably that of relativizing the bond between faith and reason established since Christianity’s beginning, maintaining that this is merely circumstantial, and therefore disposable.

Another and even more relevant change has been the one by which, with the passing of the centuries, Christianity unfortunately became to a great extent a human tradition and a state religion, contrary to its nature (cf. the words of Tertullian: “Christ asserted that he was the truth, not custom”). Although the search for rationality and freedom has always been present in Christianity, the voice of reason has been too domesticated.

It is to the credit of the Enlightenment that it re-proposed,

often in opposition to the Church, these original values of Christianity, and that it gave voice again to reason and freedom. The historical significance of Vatican Council II lies in its having brought forward again, especially in the constitution on the Church in the modern world and in the declaration on religious freedom, this profound correspondence between Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, aiming at a real reconciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great patrimony to be safeguarded by both sides (*Europe*, pp. 57–59; cf. the discourse to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005).

4. FOR A NEW ACCORD OF REASON AND FREEDOM WITH CHRISTIANITY

And so we arrive at the true objective of all the preceding reflections: to seek out pathways toward a new accord of reason and liberty with Christianity, or, as the title of this address states, “to propose the salvific truth of Jesus Christ to the mindset of our times.”

The reply that J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI gives to this question is, above all, that of “making more room for rationality.”

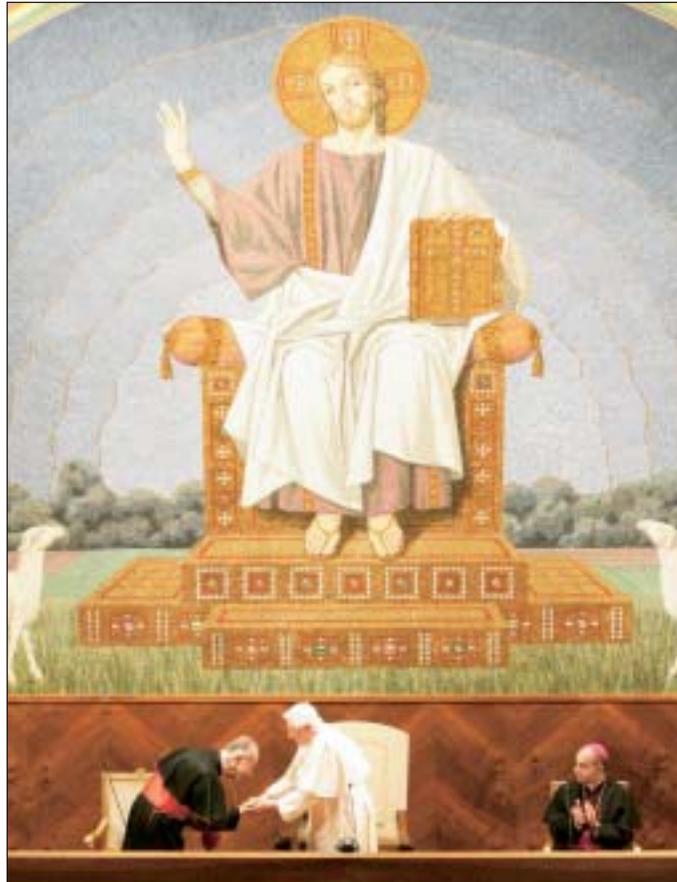
Limiting reason to what can be experienced and examined is, in fact, useful, precise, and necessary in the specific field of the natural sciences, and constitutes the key of their unceasing development. But if it is universalized and held to be absolute and self-sufficient, such a limitation becomes untenable, inhuman, and, in the end, contradictory.

By virtue of this, in fact, man would no longer be able

to ponder rationally on the essential realities of his life, on his origin and his end, on moral duty, on life and death, but would have to leave these decisive problems to irrational emotion.

But this mutilates reason, and man becomes divided within himself and almost disintegrated, provoking pathology in both religion – which, detached from rationality, easily degenerates into superstition, fanaticism, and fundamentalism – and science, which easily turns against man when it is detached from ethics, and in concrete terms from the recognition of the human person as a being that can never be reduced to an instrument (cf. *Faith*, p. 99, pp. 164–166).

The very claim that reality is only that which can be experienced and measured leads inevitably to, among other things, the reduction of the human subject to a product of nature, which as such is not free and is susceptible to being treated like any other animal. This leads to a complete overturning of modern culture’s point of departure, which consists in the affirmation of man and his freedom.



Analogously, on the practical level, when indiscriminate individual freedom, for which in the ultimate analysis everything is relative to the subject, is erected as the supreme ethical criterion, this ends up as a new dogmatism, because it excludes all other positions, which can be licit only as long as they remain subordinate to, and do not contradict, this relativistic criterion.

In this way, there is a systematic censuring of Christianity's moral norms, and excluded from the outset is any attempt to demonstrate that these norms, or any others, have objective validity because they are founded upon the very reality of man. The public expression of an authentic moral judgment thus becomes inadmissible.

This has led to the development in the West of a form of culture that deliberately severs its own historical roots, and constitutes the most radical contradiction possible, not only of Christianity, but also of the religious and moral traditions of humanity (cf. *Europe*, pp. 34-35, and the Regensburg address).

To demonstrate how the limitation of reason to what can be experienced and measured is not only full of negative consequences, but is also self-contradictory, J. Ratzinger concentrates his attention on the structure and the presuppositions of scientific knowledge, and in particular on the position that would like to make of evolutionary theory the universal explanation, at least potentially, of all reality.

A fundamental characteristic of scientific understanding is, in fact, the synergy between mathematics and experience, or between mathematical hypotheses and their experimental verification: this synergy is the key to the enormous and constantly growing results obtained through technology, in working with nature and placing its immense energies at our service.

But mathematics as such is a creation of our intelligence, the pure and "abstract" result of our reasoning.

The unavoidable correspondence between mathematics and the real structures of the universe – without which scientific forecasts and technology would not work – thus poses a great question: it implies that the universe itself is structured in a rational manner, such that there exists a profound correspondence between our subjective reasoning and the reason embodied in nature.

It thus becomes inevitable to ask oneself under what conditions such a correspondence is possible, and concretely, if there must not exist a primordial intelligence that is the common source of nature and of our own rationality.

Thus, precisely in reflecting upon the development of the sciences, we are brought back to the creating *Lógos*, and there is a reversal of the tendency to accord primacy to the irrational, to chance and necessity, and the tendency to reduce to these even our own intelligence and freedom (cf. the addresses in Verona and Regensburg, in addition to *Faith*, pp. 188-192).

Naturally, such a question and such reflection, although

they begin from an examination of the structure and presuppositions of scientific knowledge, pass beyond this form of understanding and arrive at the level of philosophical inquiry: this does not conflict, therefore, with the theory of evolution, as long as it remains within the realm of science. And furthermore, even on the philosophical level the creating *Lógos* is not the object of an apodictic demonstration, but remains "the best hypothesis," an hypothesis that demands that man and his reasoning "renounce a position of domination, and take the risk of a stance of humble listening."

In concrete terms, especially in the current cultural climate, man by his own strength is unable to make entirely his own this "best hypothesis": he remains, in fact, the prisoner of a "strange shadow" and of the urge to live according to his own interests, leaving aside God and ethics. Only revelation, the initiative of God who, in Christ, manifests himself to man and calls him to approach him, makes us capable of emerging from this shadow (cf. *Europe*, pp. 115-124; 59-60, and the Regensburg address).

The very perception of this sort of "strange shadow" makes it such that the attitude most widespread among non-believers today is not atheism – seen as something that exceeds the limits of our reason no less than faith in God does – but agnosticism, which suspends judgment about God in that He is not accessible to reason.

The response that J. Ratzinger gives to this problem brings us even closer to the reality of life: in his judgment, in fact, agnosticism cannot be lived out in practice; it is not a program for human life that can be carried out.

The reason for this is that the question of God is not merely theoretical, but also eminently practical; it has consequences

in all areas of life.

In practice, I am in fact forced to choose between the two alternatives identified by Pascal: either to live as if God did not exist, or to live as if God existed and were the decisive reality in my existence. This is because God, if he exists, cannot be an accessory to be removed or added without any effect, but is rather the origin, the meaning, and the end of the universe, and of man within it. If I act according to the first alternative, I adopt in point of fact an atheistic position, and not a merely agnostic one. But if I decide in favor of the second alternative, I adopt the position of a believer: the question of God is, therefore, unavoidable (cf. *Europe*, pp. 103-114).

It is interesting to note the profound analogy that exists, under this aspect, between the question of man and the question of God: both, because of their great importance, must be faced with all the rigor and effort of our intelligence, but both are always eminently practical questions as well, inevitably connected with the concrete decisions in our lives.

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—CARDINAL RUINI,
DECEMBER 14, ROME**

**Opposite, October 21, 2006: The Pope
inaugurates Rome's academic year in the
Pontifical Lateran University. He is greeting
Cardinal Ruini. Seated on his other side is
Bishop Rino Fisichella
(Photo Grzegorz Galazka)**

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At this point, we are able to understand better Benedict XVI's theological and pastoral approach.

He devotes great attention to the relationship between faith and reason, and to the assertion of the truth of Christianity.

But he does this in a way that is not at all rationalistic. On the contrary, he views as a failure the Neo-Scholastic attempt to demonstrate the truths of the premises of faith (the "*praeambula fidei*") through a form of reasoning rigorously separated from the faith itself, and he maintains that similar attempts are also destined to fail, as failure has met the contrary attempt by Karl Barth to present the faith as a pure paradox, which can subsist only in total independence from reason (cf. *Faith*, pp. 141-142).

So in concrete terms, the way that leads to God is Jesus Christ, not only because it is only in Him that we can know the face of God, his attitude toward us, and the mystery of his intimate life itself, of the one and absolute God who exists in three Persons totally "interrelated" – all of the implications of this mystery for our lives and our understanding of God, man, and the world have yet to be elaborated – but also because it is only in the cross of the Son, in which God's merciful and steadfast love for us is displayed in its most radical form, that a mysterious but convincing response can be found for the problem of evil and suffering, which has always been – although it has new power in our humanistic age – the source of the most serious doubts about the existence of God. For this reason prayer, the adoration that opens us to the gift of the Spirit and frees our hearts and minds, is an essential dimension not only of the Christian life, but also of the believer's understanding and the theologian's work (cf. the Verona address; *Introduction*, pp. 135-146; and the 1959 inaugural address at the University of Bonn).

It is not out of mere personal taste, therefore, that Benedict XVI is using "all his free moments" to carry forward his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, the first part of which will be published soon, and portions of the preface and introduction of which have already been released.

The separation between the "Christ of faith" and the real "historical Jesus," which exegesis based upon the historical-critical method, seems to have deepened more and more, constitutes a "dramatic" situation for the faith, because "it brings uncertainty to its authentic point of reference."

For this reason, J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI has dedicated himself to demonstrating that the Jesus of the Gospels and of the Church's faith is, in reality, the true "historical Jesus," and he does this by employing the historical-critical method. He willingly acknowledges the many positive results of this, but he also goes beyond it, taking a broader perspective that permits a properly theological interpretation of Scripture, and which thus requires faith without dispelling the need for historical serious-

ness (cf. the published sections of the preface).

This is a matter, for historical criticism as for the empirical sciences, of "making more room for rationality," and not permitting these to close off within themselves and present themselves as self-sufficient (cf. *Faith*, pp. 136-142, 194-203; *Introduction*, pp. 149-180).

This type of approach to Jesus Christ clearly refers back to the role of the Church and of the apostolic tradition in the transmission of revelation.

In this regard, J. Ratzinger not only upholds the Church's origin from Jesus himself and its intimate union with him, centered upon the Last Supper and the Eucharist (cf. *Il nuovo popolo di Dio* [The New People of God], published in Italy by Queriniana, pp. 83-97), but he intrinsically connects revelation to the Church and tradition.

Revelation, in fact, is in the first place the act by which God manifests himself, and not the objectified (written) result of this act.

In consequence, a place in the very concept of revelation belongs to the subject that receives and comprehends it – concretely, the Church – since, if no one perceived the revelation nothing would be unveiled, no revelation would have taken place.

For this reason, revelation precedes Scripture and is reflected within it, but it is not simply identical with this; it is always something greater. There cannot exist, therefore, a pure "*sola Scriptura*": Scripture itself is connected to the subject that receives and comprehends both the revelation and Scripture, meaning the Church. Together with this comes the essential meaning of tradition (cf. *My Life*, pp. 72; 88-93).

This is also the profound reason for the ecclesial character of the faith, or better, for the indissoluble interweaving of the "I" and the "we," of the ecclesial and personal dimensions, in the act of belief that enters into relation with the "Thou" of God, who reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ (cf. *Introduction*, pp. 53-64), as well as the reason for the insufficiency of a purely historical-critical exegesis.

The proposed way of making Christianity convincing again remains, in any case, today as in the beginning and throughout its history, that "of the unity between truth and love in the conditions proper to our times." This is the meaning of the "great 'yes' that God, in Jesus Christ, has spoken to man and his life, to human life, to our freedom and our intelligence" and which, through Christian witness, must also be made visible to the world (the Verona address).

In concrete terms, as by making more room for our reason and reopening reason to the great questions of truth and goodness it becomes possible "to connect theology, philosophy and science [both natural and historical] with each other in full respect for their individual methods and their reciprocal auton-

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**—CARDINAL RUINI,
DECEMBER 14, ROME**

omy” (*ibid.*), so also, at the level of life and practice, in the current context it is particularly necessary to highlight the liberating power of Christianity, the bond that joins Christian faith and freedom, and at the same time to make it understood how freedom is intrinsically connected to love and truth.

Man as such, in fact, is certainly a being “of his own,” conscious and free, but he is just as essentially a being “from,” “with,” and “for,” necessarily open to and in relation with others: for this reason, his freedom is intrinsically connected to the criterion of reality – that is, to truth – and is a shared freedom, a freedom that is realized in the coexistence of many freedoms, which limit but also uphold each other, a freedom that thus builds itself up in charity (cf. *Faith*, pp. 260-264 and, more in general, 245-275).

Vatican Council II’s declaration on religious freedom represented, from this point of view, a decisive step forward, because it recognized and made its own an essential principle of the modern state, without thereby giving in to relativism, but rediscovering and implementing instead Christianity’s deepest heritage (cf. the address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005).

* * *

In the current situation in the West, in any case, Christian morality seems to be divided into two parts.

One of these concerns the great themes of peace, nonviolence, justice for all, concern for the world’s poor, and respect for creation: this part enjoys great public appreciation, even if it risks being polluted by a politically tinged moralism.

The other part concerns human life, the family, and marriage: this is rather less welcome at the public level; even more, it constitutes a very serious obstacle in the relationship between the Church and the people.

Our task, then, is above all that of presenting Christianity not as mere moralism, but as love that is given to us by God and that gives us the strength to “lose our lives,” and also to welcome and live the law of life that is the Decalogue.

In this way the two parts of Christian morality can be reconnected, reinforcing each other, and the “nos” of the Church to weak and distorted forms of love can be understood as “yeses” to authentic love, to the reality of man as he was created by God (cf. the address to the Swiss bishops on November 9, 2006; the Verona address; *Europe*, pp. 32-34). The message for the 2007 World Day of Peace moves precisely in this direction.

But the entire anthropological and ethical approach of Christianity, its way of understanding life, joy, pain, and death, finds its legitimacy and its consistency only in the historical, but above all eschatological, perspective of salvation that was opened up by the resurrection of Christ (cf. the Verona address). J. Ratzinger wrote the book *Eschatology, Death, and Eternal Life*, published in Italy by Cittadella in 1979, on the

themes of death, resurrection, and immortality, which we cannot touch upon here.

Until now, our attention has been focused upon the relationship between the Christian faith and the secularized culture of the modern and “postmodern” West, the victim of a strange “self-hatred,” which goes hand in hand with its distancing itself from Christianity.

But J.Ratzinger/Benedict XVI absolutely does not lose sight of a much broader horizon, that of relations with the other cultures and religions of the world, to which he has dedicated a good part of his reflection, especially in recent years.

The key concept to which he refers is that of the encounter of cultures, or “interculturalism,” which is different from both inculturation, which seems to presuppose a culturally denuded faith that transplants itself in various cultures regardless of their religion, and from multiculturalism, as the simple coexistence – hopefully peaceful – of cultures different from each other.

Interculturalism “belongs to the original form of Christianity” and implies both a positive attitude toward other cultures and toward the religions that constitute the soul of these cultures, and the work of purification and the “courageous stance” that are indispensable for every culture if it really wants to encounter Christ, and that become for a culture “maturation and healing” (cf. *Faith*, pp. 66 and 89, the Verona address, and in particular the dialogue on January 19, 2004, between J. Ratzinger and J. Habermas, published in Italy by Morcelliana in 2005 in *Etica, religione e stato liberale* [Ethics, Religion, and the Liberal State]).

Thus it is precisely Christianity that can help the West to tie the knots of that new and positive encounter with other cultures

and religions of which the world has such great need today, but which cannot be built upon the foundation of a radical secularism.

In the face of the somehow “excessive” greatness of these tasks, J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is certainly not a person who tends to deceive himself about the current state of health of the Catholic Church, and of Christianity more in general.

But he is sure that “he who believes is never alone,” as he continually repeated during his trip to Bavaria, and also that our faith always has “a possibility of success,” because it “finds a correspondence in the nature of man,” who is created to encounter God (*Faith*, pp. 142-143).

This certainty also sustains our lives and our daily toil. ●

The translation from the Italian original is from the web site of Sandro Magister, www.chiesa.espressonline.it, and was done by Matthew Sherry, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. (Used with permission.)

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