

encompasses and sustains history also became a uniquely single point in history as one man, savior of the world.

Christ Our Center

Joseph Ratzinger's Witness¹

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Abstract: *The author first traces the rise of today's postmodernism from nineteenth-century relativism, both of which reject claims to the possession of an absolute and universal truth. They see such a claim as an imposition of one's own limited perspective on others. This phenomenon rules out Christ as the center of history. He then notes that for him ecumenism is not just for unity in the church but for a united claim to the centrality and lordship of Christ over the universe. He pursues this line of thought through the Christology of Cardinal Ratzinger before he became Pope Benedict XVI. He explores Ratzinger's critique of Marxist-tinged theology as it pertains to pluralistic theology. Namely, both relativize the subjects they address. So the issue is how Christians of different churches can proclaim Christ as the single and universal savior of the human race. This is the task for ecumenical discussion. The goal is to reaffirm together the creedal statement that the Logos that*

Let me begin by quoting from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, a passage that I think can explain why we are here for these conversations:

Catholics must joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood. . . . Nor should we forget that whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian never conflicts with the genuine interests of the faith; indeed, it can always result in the more ample realization of the very mystery of Christ and the Church.²

Of course, when this teaching was promulgated in 1965, nearly all Christian churches affirmed the centrality of Christ. Indeed, the World Council of Churches made it a condition of membership that the applicant church or denomination affirm both the lordship of Christ and an official belief in the Triune God. But in the intervening years, the centrality of Christ to the realization of the salvation of the world has come to be called into question across a

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2. *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 4.

wide spectrum of liberal church bodies and by liberal Christians in general, including by some Catholic theologians.

Largely under the influence of something called postmodernism, itself largely the result of the massive influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, claims to the possession of a universal truth have now come to be seen as a hegemonic imposition of one's particular and entirely limited perspective on cultures and worldviews that do not share that view of the truth. Accordingly, any universal claim to the "truth"—whether it be scientific, philosophical, or religious truth—is almost automatically met with skepticism, and even derision.

Although attacks on the Christocentrism of the New Testament became a force to be reckoned with only after Vatican II (at least in the Catholic Church), the roots of the problem well antedate Nietzsche and can even be plausibly located with the victory of the Copernican worldview in the seventeenth century. Even though Nicholas Copernicus himself certainly held to the centrality of the solar system in the circumscribed world of his own frankly medieval universe, the eventual overthrow of geocentrism led to what astronomers now call the Copernican Principle, which might be colloquially described in these words: "We're not that special, so get over it." Thus, even the whole question of extraterrestrial intelligence on other planets within our galaxy (not to mention in the billions of other galaxies, which are probably forever beyond our ken) inevitably raises Christological questions.

The nineteenth century brought a whole new challenge, first from history and then from the other social sciences, especially ethnography and comparative religion. The eighteenth-century rationalist Benedict Spinoza had already adumbrated the problem in regard to the Hebrew Bible; but perhaps the person who put

the matter most acutely in regard to the New Testament was the late-nineteenth-century theologian Ernst Troeltsch. In a shrewd remark, he once compared Christocentrism in theology to geocentrism in astronomy:

[Historical contingency] also seems to make this conclusion impossible—calling the Christian community the eternal absolute center of salvation for the whole span of humanity. . . . Man's age upon earth amounts to several hundred thousand years or more. His future may come to still more. It is hard to imagine a single point of history along this time—and, as it just so happens, this midpoint of our own religious history—as the sole center of all humanity. That looks far too much like the absolutizing of our own contingent area of life. That would be in religion what geocentrism and anthropocentrism are in cosmology and metaphysics, respectively. The whole logic of Christocentrism places it with these other centrisms.³

Of course, if one asks how a radical historicist and relativist like Troeltsch can get the wherewithal to make such an "absolutist" statement ruling out Christ as the midpoint of history from the outset, he has his answer to that too: he grants the point! He freely admits that *all* statements about history, including his own, are always probabilistic: "Of course," he says, "nothing certain can be said here, but it [Christocentrism] is not probable."⁴

3. Ernst Troeltsch, "The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith," in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, trans. Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1927), 189.

4. *Ibid.*

Such is our situation and constitutes the central reason I consider the Catholic-Evangelical dialogue so important: not just for the central ecumenical reason that Christ wills unity for his Church but also because only here can Christians address Troeltsch's dilemma without first abandoning the very Christocentrism that is at issue. In other words, I am convinced that this problem can only be solved if Christians *first* hold to the centrality and lordship of Christ over the universe and *then* address Troeltsch's challenge in *terms* of Christocentrism.

In the rest of what follows, I want to outline the witness of Joseph Ratzinger, not only because he has thought so long and hard about this but also because I am convinced that his efforts to fashion a Christocentric Christology will prove to be one of his lasting contributions.⁵ As every physician knows, a hopeful prognosis depends on an accurate diagnosis. So how does Joseph Ratzinger diagnose this now burning issue in the church?

First, like any good physician, he must determine how far relativism has extended its ideology into the body of the church and to what extent it poses a danger. Perhaps this might surprise the untutored, but Ratzinger does not condemn all forms of relativism tout court. Like bacteria in the body, which is both essential to metabolism in some forms and dangerous in others, there is a salubrious kind of relativism and a toxic form. For just as bacteria are necessary for digestion, so too certain forms of relativism can serve as an antidote to absolutism, an acid that eats away at dangerous versions of absolutist dictatorships.

5. I shall be calling him throughout "Joseph Ratzinger," not just because he is no longer pope but also because I shall be quoting throughout works written by him before his election to the papacy.

In an important address to the heads of doctrinal commissions for the various bishops' conferences in Latin America in 1996, the future pope pointed out that the greatest challenge for the Catholic Church in the immediate postconciliar years was the claim of liberation theology to represent an authentic translation of the gospel message. Although the Bavarian cardinal was not entirely critical of liberation theology, he certainly saw a problem in those versions of it that uncritically drew on Marxism, which suddenly faced a crisis when the communist polities of Eastern Europe fell in 1989:

The fall of the European governmental systems based on Marxism turned out to be a kind of twilight of the gods for that theology of redeeming political praxis. Precisely in those places where the Marxist liberating ideology had been applied consistently, a radical lack of freedom had been produced, the horror of which now appeared out in the open before the eyes of world public opinion. The fact is that when politics are used to bring redemption, they promise too much. When they presume to do God's work, they become not divine but diabolical.⁶

6. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today; Address to the Presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America, Delivered in Guadalajara, Mexico, May 1996," in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 228; cited henceforth as Ratzinger, "Relativism." A revised version of this talk was also published as "The New Questions that Arose in the Nineties: The Position of Faith and Theology Today," in *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004); cited henceforth as Ratzinger, *Tolerance*. I shall throughout be quoting from the original address.

Having recovered from—or at least having come to realize—the damage caused by the communist illusion, public opinion and political thought reacted by shying away from claims to absolutism, a shift that Cardinal Ratzinger applauds, at least provisionally:

In turn, relativism appears to be the philosophical foundation of democracy. Democracy, in fact, is supposedly built on the basis that no one can presume to know the true way, and it is enriched by the fact that all roads are mutually recognized as fragments of the effort toward that which is better. . . . A system of freedom ought to be essentially a system of positions that are connected with one another because they are relative, as well as being dependent on historical situations open to new developments. Therefore, a liberal society would be a relativist society: only with that condition could it continue to be free and open to the future. *In the area of politics, this concept is considerably right.* There is no one correct political opinion. What is relative—the building up of liberally ordained coexistence between people—cannot be absolute. Thinking in this way was precisely the error of Marxism and the political theologies.⁷

Thus, there can be a legitimate pluralism on the mediate question of politics. But that concession to a legitimate relativism can hardly be the last word. Politics is, after all, concerned with justice. There might be a legitimate pluralism in mediate questions, but ultimate questions are not so easily relativized: “There are injustices,” says Ratzinger, “that will never turn into something just . . . while, at

7. Ratzinger, “Relativism,” 229; emphasis added.

the same time, there are just things that can never be unjust.”⁸ So, the question becomes, as he says, “setting limits” to relativism.

The first place where relativism must be kept at bay for the cardinal—and it is crucial that this *is* the first item on his list—is in Christology.⁹ For him any type of relativism in Christology will inevitably lead to its attenuation. I presume we are all familiar with the passage early in his book *Introduction to Christianity* where he compares the situation in theology to the folk tale told by the Brothers Grimm about “lucky Hans” who traded a lump of gold he stumbled upon for, in turn, a horse, a cow, a goose, and finally a whetstone, which he then threw away as a valueless encumbrance. Such is the consequence of relativism in Christology, he says:

The worried Christian of today is often bothered by questions like these: has our theology in the last few years not taken in many ways a similar path? Has it not gradually watered down the demands of faith, which had been found all too demanding, always only so little that nothing important seemed to be lost, yet always so much that it was soon possible to venture on to the next step? And will poor Hans, the Christian who trustfully let himself be led from exchange to exchange, from interpretation to interpretation, not really soon hold in his hand, instead of the gold with

8. Ibid.

9. It is the thesis of Emery de Gaál, in *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) that Pope Benedict has sought to resolve all theological disputes, in both the pre- and post-conciliar church, from the nature-grace relationship and the nature of the liturgy to the challenge of historical criticism and relativism in Christological terms.

which he began, only a whetstone, which he can be confidently recommended to throw away?¹⁰

Ratzinger shrewdly notes that, despite their formal differences, the loud cries for a relativistic Christology now occupy the same ideological space once taken by liberation theologians—and some of the latter have moved seamlessly into becoming advocates of the former. This swift segue from a Marxist-tinged theology to a relativizing one is, to be sure, not without its ironies, since one of the objections raised against Christocentrism by the pluralists is that it leads to fanaticism and particularism—themselves the besetting sins of communists. Still, the relativizers are not without their absolutes (no surprise there, since everyone is an absolutist about *something*), and never more so than in their *command* to dissolve absolutist claims on behalf of Christ:

The relativist dissolution of Christology, and even more of ecclesiology, thus becomes a central *commandment* of religion. To return to Hick's thinking, faith in the divinity of one concrete person, as he tells us, leads to fanaticism and particularism, to the dissociation between faith and love, and it is precisely this which must be overcome.¹¹

This same contradiction lurks in their call to “dialogue.” Of course dialogue is an important value in relation to the plurality of religions and has long had, moreover, an honored place in both philosophy and theology, as we know from Plato and from the art

of the medieval disputation. I am reminded in this context of an observation from Josef Pieper:

Thomas succeeds not only in presenting the opponent's divergent or flatly opposed opinion, together with the underlying line of reasoning, but also, many times, in presenting it better, more clearly, and more convincingly than the opponent himself might be able to do. In this procedure there emerges an element profoundly characteristic of St. Thomas's intellectual style: the spirit of the *disputatio*, of disciplined opposition; the spirit of genuine discussion which remains a dialogue even while it is a dispute.¹²

But nowadays the call to dialogue in the relativist creed operates in a different ecology and has become an ultimate value. Both Plato and the medievals assumed without further ado that dialogue always aimed at the truth. Indeed Thomas could be so fair to his opponent and so serene in presenting opposing views precisely because he was so confident that dialogue was but the *initiating* moment leading to the *terminating* goal of truth. But once the relativist gives up the notion of truth as an ideal and sees it only as the hegemonic imposition of an opponent's will to power, then dialogue becomes an end in itself.

Note again the irony of the hidden absolutism lurking here in the insistence that dialogue is the ultimate value before which all other claims must be sacrificed. But leaving aside this internal self-contradiction of the relativists, how is someone like Troeltsch to

10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004/1968), 31; cited hereafter as “Ratzinger, *Introduction*.”

11. Ratzinger, *Relativism*, 231; emphasis added.

12. Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 77–78.

be answered, who freely admitted that his critique of an absolutist Christocentrism was merely probable? How do we answer Rousseau's observation that religion is geographically specific, tied to specific cultures not easily transferable to other cultures that operate under different presuppositions? How can the genuine value of dialogue be preserved while also maintaining the church's consistently held view that Christ is the single and universal savior of the human race?

Here again, we find a move by the future pope that might surprise both his admirers and his critics. For he rejects the Enlightenment claim that reason can serve as the Great Adjudicator. Indeed, he seems to agree with the postmodernists in at least this point (which they hammer away at consistently): that reason is always historically situated. "For human reason is not autonomous in the absolute," says the cardinal: "It is always found in a historical context. The historical context disfigures its vision. . . . Therefore, it also needs historical assistance to help it cross over its historical barriers."¹³

Remarkably, Ratzinger also concedes that this Enlightenment claim for the absolute validity of universal reason was the besetting error of neo-scholasticism. In a passage that shows he was no unthinking revanchist, the future pope openly asserts:

I am of the opinion that the neo-Scholastic rationalism failed because—with reason totally independent from faith—it tried to reconstruct the *praeambula fidei* with pure rational certainty. All attempts that presume to do the same will have the same result. Yes, Karl Barth was right to reject

13. Ratzinger, *Relativism*, 239.

philosophy as a foundation of the faith independent from the faith.¹⁴

While Ratzinger is by no means a Barthian across the board, he does insist with Barth that Christology must establish its own norms for rationality; for taken in terms of worldly logic, the doctrine of Christ will always be couched in the logic of paradox. This is because reason is both a universal endowment in that being Aristotle defines precisely as a rational animal and is also the human faculty that gives access to the inherent rationality of a structured universe.¹⁵ But Christianity proclaims something revolutionary about that universal *Logos*, that it is *entirely* incarnate in but one man, Jesus Christ: "For in him the fullness of the godhead was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19), the acceptance of which claim leads to the overthrow of worldly logic:

It is only in the second section of the Creed that we come up against the real difficulty . . . about Christianity: the profession of faith that the man Jesus, an individual executed in Palestine about the year 30, the *Christus* (anointed, chosen) of God, indeed God's own Son, is the central and decisive point of all human history. It seems both presumptuous and foolish to assert that one single figure who is bound to disappear farther and farther into the mists of the past is

14. *Ibid.*, 231; emphasis added.

15. Isaac Newton's law of gravity is of course, mathematically, a ratio—not accidentally also the Latin word for reason. No wonder, then, that later historians retrospectively call Newton's century the "Age of Reason," even though that century also witnessed the Thirty Years' War and such outbreaks of irrationality as the persecution of alleged "witches."

the authoritative center of all history. Although faith in the *logos*, the meaningfulness of being, corresponds perfectly with a tendency in the human reason, this second article of the Creed proclaims the absolutely staggering alliance of *logos* and *sarx*, of meaning and a single historical figure. *The meaning that sustains all being has become flesh*; that is, it has entered history and become one individual in it; it is no longer simply what encompasses and sustains history but is a point *in* it.¹⁶

To accept this claim entails an important methodological consideration, one that must overthrow the usual philosophical approach to reality, which seeks out universal patterns, whereas Christianity absolutizes one moment in history:

Accordingly the meaning of all being is first of all no longer to be found in the sweep of mind that rises above the individual, the limited, into the universal; it is no longer simply given in the world of ideas, which transcends the individual and is reflected in it only in a fragmentary fashion; it is to be found in the midst of time, in the countenance of one man.¹⁷

These assertions by no means make Ratzinger a fideist, still less an irrationalist. Indeed, in his commentary on the first section of the creed (“I believe in God”), Ratzinger stressed a key motif that runs through all his writings: the harmony between faith and reason, between the God of faith and the God of the philosophers.

16. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, p. 193; Latin and Greek terms italicized by Ratzinger (or at least the translator); other emphases added.

17. *Ibid.*, 193–94.

Nonetheless, and even with that point conceded, a union of faith and history is for him ultimately based on the union of word and flesh, which of course is much harder for the human intellect to grasp and then to accept.

Edward T. Oakes, S.J., entered the Society of Jesus in 1966 and was ordained a priest in 1979. He received his doctorate in theology from Union Theological Seminary in 1987. He taught systematic theology at New York University, Regis University, and Mundelein Seminary. A founding member of the Academy of Catholic Theology, he was elected president of the academy in May 2013. His interest in Catholic-Evangelical dialogue goes back several decades, since he became a member of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, cofounded by the late Chuck Colson and Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. This experience influenced his most recent book, Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology (2011), which won the 2012 Book Prize from the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue. His publications on Hans Urs von Balthasar, especially von Balthasar’s The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation, led him to conclude that only a forthright confession of the Lordship of Christ can serve as a true basis for ecumenical dialogue. Oakes was a major contributor to the ecumenical magazine First Things on theological and scientific topics and was an influential member of Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Edward T. Oakes passed away on December 6, 2013.