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Early sources on Joseph Ratzinger's idea of a Catholic University of the future

Primeras fuentes sobre la idea de Joseph Ratzinger de una Universidad Católica del futuro

Este artículo pretende también ser un homenaje a la extraordinaria labor que realiza el Institut Benedikt XVI para promover la figura y el mensaje de Joseph Ratzinger/Benedicto XVI a través de la publicación de su recopilación de obras.

This paper also seeks to be a tribute to the extraordinary work that the Institut Benedikt XVI engages in to promote the figure and the message of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI through the publication of his collected of works.

The writings and speeches over sixty-five years that Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI devoted to the subjects of knowledge and universities are innumerable. I do not intend here to provide a summary of them. Instead, I will confine myself to a brief comparative analysis of his first and last pronouncements on these subjects with the aim of bringing out certain constants of his thought. Thus, with reference to these constants, I would like to offer an answer to the following question: are these constants mainly a witness of a certain historical

period or are they more intuitions, that can by useful also today? And, how far has the higher education of a Christian inspiration should fully grasp?

As is known, the first speech of Joseph Ratzinger at a university and for universities was his inaugural lecture as holder of the Chair of Fundamental Theology at the University of Bonn in June 24, 1959, exactly sixty-five years ago. With a certain amazement felt by those present, the then thirty-two-year-old newly appointed professor did not begin by discussing, we might say, a specific theological question, as in the tradition of this kind of *lectures*. Instead, he laid emphasis on highlighting a challenge of historic proportions which certainly related to Faculties of Theology but also, and more in general, concerned the whole of the Christian university world or the university world of Christian inspiration —a challenge that was so decisive that it took the form of an authentic educational challenge.[1]

If the origins and the justification of a university lay in general terms in the yearning for knowledge that is specific to man, in knowing both what he himself is and everything that surrounds him is —namely, in knowing the «truth»— then Ratzinger»s time marked an epochal turning point, with the establishment in the world of universities, even those of Christian inspiration, of an idea of reason that recognised as «truth» only what was positively verifiable and measurable. In this outlook one could not rationally aspire to know any other kind of truth, in the reasonable certainty that in a not distant future every «secret of nature» would be scientifically explainable, that is to say that everything that man at one time attributed to the transcendent (God *is* nature) could be referred back to nature and its laws. Consequently, the idea was spreading that in the final analysis the task of a successful Christian university in the future would consist of fostering this trend: becoming increasingly less «authoritarian» and increasingly «tolerant»; increasingly less inclined to impose truth from above and give «objective» value to everything which, instead, from an empirical point of view was not «real» in a strict sense.

Certainly, nobody would be denied the right to believe subjectively in a transcendent dimension, but the involvement of this dimension in the domain of the process of knowledge was in the final analysis a contradiction in terms. Given this, the discipline that at that moment Joseph Ratzinger was preparing to teach seemed to have its days numbered. In this new panorama, theology, namely systematic and rational thinking about God, appeared as absurd and as unacceptable.

Now, the phenomenon of the scission between the «God of the philosophers (that is to say of the «physicists») and the God of faith» —this was the title of his first speech— was to be located for the young Ratzinger in a wider context marked by another two special phenomena linked to the first and which, together with the first, were the most significant and important of his epoch.

The first of these other two phenomena —which he described some months before in a conference called *«The New Pagans and the Church»*— was «infra-ec-

1 Joseph Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der theologia naturalis*, in: JRGS [=*Joseph Ratzinger Gesammelte Schriften*]3/1, *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Philosophische Vernunft-Kultur-Europa-Gesellschaft*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2020, 189-210.

clesial neo-paganism».[2] Contrary to what the official statistics on the number of baptisms might have led people to believe, in reality his time was a time of the rapid spread of a new practical paganism, of which believers were in varying ways aware, *within* the Church, which thus became at the level of facts a small minority. With a significant reduction in her members, the Church would, more or less rapidly, also lose a large part of her influence in public life and thus a large part of the privileges and institutions that had derived from her being a mass phenomenon. But precisely this trend also constituted a great opportunity: a «minority» Church made up of small «Christian fraternities» out of conviction and conscious decisions and not habit, a Church made up of «creative minorities», of «leaderships» —not a, *ipso facto*, «*all in* Church»— a Church in which, for example, the sacraments are administrated with prudence and full consciousness, not given away, cheapened, made worthless; this Church of «leaderships» would have brought *out* once again her attractiveness. The secularisation that was underway thus in reality should have been understood in positive terms as the beginning of a rebirth; the beginning, certainly painful but also health-giving, of a process of «de-worldliness», a kind of modern «return to the origins», on the condition, however, that the meaning of the moment and the opportunities that it offered were fully grasped.

The third and last phenomenon of his time that the young Ratzinger adjudged «epochal» and of a universal scope was the «gigantic movement of unification of the world» that he saw taking place rapidly in front of his eyes. By now, he wrote in 1961, it was not only possible, for example, to have breakfast in Germany, lunch in Egypt and then supper in some eastern country. It was also, and above all else, possible to speak, discuss and be understood increasingly at a global level through a «single unified language» —that of technical and technological progress of a Euro-American kind.[3]

This «technologisation of the world» had its centre in Europe and above all in the West, and its propulsive force was a sort of «technical *religio*» —a «kind of religious adoration of man for himself»— that was spreading and growing stronger hand in hand with its practical advance. Man increasingly encountered nature through «the filter» of what he —with his intelligence and his will— was able to do with nature, including human nature. The idea of creation and a creature made in the image of God was being increasingly replaced by nature and man as products of man»s own action working for an improvement of the world that would guarantee man all the happiness to which by his «nature» he could aspire. In this case, as well, wrote the young Joseph Ratzinger, it was not a matter of being «pessimists», or even worse of accusing technology of «heresy», and not even of ingenuously being «optimists». Instead, it was a matter of looking at reality lucidly, and then, on the basis of the trends described, of seeing together with the dangers also the opportunities that this absolutely unprecedented historical moment offered to the Church to relaunch her universal mission, specifically at

2 Joseph Ratzinger, *Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche*, in: JRGS 8/2, *Kirche. Zeichen unter den Völkern*. Verlag Herder, pp. 1143-1158.

3 Joseph Ratzinger, *Das Konzil und die modern Gedankenwelt*, in: JRGS 7/1, *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Formulierung-Vermittlung-Deutung*, Verlag Herder 2012, pp. 73-91.

an educational level as well. As is known, John XXIII confided to Cardinal Joseph Frings —who had chosen Ratzinger as his expert at the Second Vatican Council— that he would have liked to have made the speech —the famous «Genoa speech» of 1961— which Ratzinger had written for the Cardinal.

After those by now far off years, Joseph Ratzinger dedicated very many speeches and writings to the subjects of knowledge, universities, and the challenge of education. The last such initiative was in October 2022 and was written specifically for an American Catholic university, for an international conference organised by its department of theology on the idea of the Church of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.[4] On this occasion, he emphasised once again, amongst other things, how illusory it was to think that the Church would be really «updated», that she would become more attractive and really fulfil her mission, primarily her educational mission, if she adopted the scission between faith and reason in a widespread climate of infra-ecclesial neo-paganism. If she, that is to say, definitively abandoned the divine and salvific dimension of Christ by reducing him to a purely human and moral figure, making him, according to time and context, a revolutionary or «a progressivist». Thereby forgetting, however, the most important thing —that paradoxically it is the need for eternal life that confers its absolute urgency on the moral duty of this life. This is because precisely when «heaven» alone is by now in front of us and no longer above us does the interior tension of human existence and its responsibility to the community loosen.

From 1959 to the three-year period 2005-2008, namely from the «Bonn speech» to the last three addresses given by Benedict XVI in universities on universities (at Milan, Regensburg and Rome)[5], the three great epochal and global trends that the young professor talked about —the scission between faith and reason in the field of knowledge; the spread of neo-paganism inside the Church; and globalisation and the mentality that underlies it— had advanced at speed and with a pervasiveness that at that time were unimaginable. In 1959, for example, Joseph Ratzinger cited the Kinsey Report on various kinds of sexual behaviour, without naturally being able to imagine the extent to which the scission between sexuality and fertility would lead to the planning and the production of sets of human beings outside any kind of sexual relationship (with the disturbing consequences and ethical dilemmas that would follow).

It is evident that one is not dealing only with a «physical» challenge. This was said clearly by William Heseltine, the founder and head of Human Genome Sciences, when recently, on the occasion of the establishment of the Society of Regenerative

4 Benedikt XVI., Letter to Rev. Father Dave Pivonka of October 20, 2022, in: http://www.fondazioneratzinger.va/content/fondazioneratzinger/it/ricerca.html?q=pivonka

5 *Speech by the occasion of the Inauguration of the Academic Year of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore,* Policlinco Agostino Gemelli, Roma November 25, 2005(https://romana.org/it/41/romano-pontefice/discorso-in-occasione-dellinaugurazione-dellanno-a/); *Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and reflections.* Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to München, Altötting and Regensburg (September 9-14, 2006). Meeting with the representatives of Science. *Lecture of The Holy Father, Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, Tuesday, 12 September 2006* (https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html); Lecture by the Holy Father Benedict XVI at the University of Rome «La Sapienza», Rome, 17 January 2008. As known, the visit was canceled January 15th.

Medicine he declared: «The real goal is to keep people alive forever».[6] As known, Joseph Ratzinger commented on this and similar issues very early.[7] Lastly in his Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi* on Christian Hope Benedict XVI. asks himself: «Do we really want this-to live eternally? ...In some way we want life itself, true life, untouched even by death; yet at the same time we do not know the thing towards which we feel driven. We cannot stop reaching out for it, and yet we know that all we can experience or accomplish is not what we yearn for. This unknown «thing» is the true «hope» which drives us; and at the same time, the fact that it is unknown, is the cause of all forms of despair and also of all efforts, whether positive or destructive, directed towards worldly authenticity and human authenticity. The term «eternal life» is intended to give a name to this known «unknown». Inevitably it is an inadequate term that creates confusion. «Eternal», in fact, suggests to us the idea of something interminable, and this frightens us; «life» makes us think of the life that we know and love and do not want to lose, even though very often it brings more toil than satisfaction, so that while on the one hand we desire it, on the other hand we do not want it. To imagine ourselves outside the temporality that imprisons us and in some way to sense that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality —this we can only attempt. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time— the before and after —no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in Saint John»s Gospel: «I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you» (16:22).»[8]

To conclude, one should ask oneself: from that time until now, for Ratzinger, has higher education of a Christian inspiration fully grasped those challenges and responded adequately? In this sense, what positive possibilities are offered to such higher education in our time, today? On this subject I would like to highlight three constants in the answer given by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

For him, today as sixty-five years ago, to highlight the limits of modern reason from within does not mean to affirm that one must «go back». What is valid in the modern development of the human mind should be acknowledge without reservations. Who is not grateful to the modern mind for the great possibilities that it has opened up for man and for the advances that have been achieved in the human field? The ethos of the scientific approach —the wish to search for the truth and obey the truth— is, and always will be, an essential part of the Christian spirit and its educational approach. But the criticism levelled already at that time of the modern intelligence has found confirmation today more than ever before specifically in the observation of reality, which is and always will be the last true litmus test of truth (we cannot but remember this even more today, on the seven hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death of St. Thomas Aquinas).

6 https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.290.5500.2249d

7 Cfr. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatologie-Tod un ewiges Leben* (1977), in: Joseph Ratzinger, *Auferstehung und ewiges Leben* (JRGS 10), Verlag Herder 2012, pp. 31-276.

8 https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html

«Thanks to science, for us the creation has become decipherable», Francis. F. Collins, the former director of the Human Genome Project, declared.[9]

But Benedict XVI asked himself in his «Jesus of Nazareth» whether reality does tell us this. He observed how during our epoch a dark sensation of the «non-decipherability of the creation» has been increasingly spreading: a «non-recognisability of truth», not of functional truth (how can I use nature for my ends?) which has become increasingly visible but of the truth about man himself: what he is, where he comes from, why he exists, what good and evil are —that truth that cannot be read in a purely empirical way. This, however, he observed, has as its consequence (in addition to a widespread sense of despair and a strange lack of desire for the future) the real danger of re-establishing in the final analysis the whole of ethics solely on the basis of the law of evolution. This, as is known, ineluctably finds its key notion in the model of selection, and thus in pure pragmatism and the cruel law of the strongest, which, however, in the final analysis, constitutes the negation of everything reason, knowledge and education that want to be really such propose themselves as.[10] Observation at all levels increasingly tells us that technical reason on its own is not sufficient to grasp the totality of truth. Observation at all levels tells us that in this sense we are on the threshold of a possible epoch of a «crisis of humanity», as Joseph Ratzinger was already observing in the year 2000, and as we read, for example, in *Global Trends 2023: Alternative Worlds*, a report of the National Intelligence Council (2012): «We are at a critical juncture in human history which could lead to widely contrasting futures».

On the positive side, however, it is as if today we found ourselves, observed Benedict XVI, at the moment of a kind of «return to the future»; it is as if we found ourselves specifically at the privileged moment of the first encounter of faith and reason when they came together once and for all. Namely, when to Paul —who originally had the firm intention of evangelising Asia Minor— a Macedonian (a Greek) appeared in a dream who called to him and asked him: «Come over to Macedonia and help us!» (Acts 16:6-10). The encounter of Athens and Jerusalem, between faith and reason, since then has made the greatness, of a moral character as well, of the West. Faith allows man to be reasonable; reason allows faith not to up end itself in fanaticism; reason does not make faith useless but from faith reason receives the support that protects it from the precipice and allows it to remain truly itself. Today more than ever before, in the «civilisation of technology» the sense of the useful and the sense of power have urgent need of the help and the support of the sense of God and thus of the energy of the moral conscience. Universities of Christian inspiration are useful as never before to orient knowledge on the basis of an integral reason.

It is obvious that the West, and especially the United States of America are at the centre of «globalisation» and the mentality that underlies it, and this is as true today as it was yesterday. But there is another element of the USA that always particularly fascinated Benedict XVI, an element that means that great atten-

9 Quoted from Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth*. *Beiträge zur Christologie*, Bd. 6/1 JRGS, Verlag Herder 2013, 562.

10 Ibidem, p. 563.

tion should be paid to America. Always opposed to a Church of State, American society has always been particularly aware that humanity and coexistence are possible if founded on a basic moral consensus that reason on its own cannot give and that no majority on its own can generate. This made «secularity» of an American kind particularly valuable in the eyes of Benedict XVI. Today, indeed, it seems to be flourishing again according to a recent survey carried out by the Pew Research Centre which found that 57 % of American adults expressed a positive vision of the influence of religion on American life.

At the beginning of its journey in this world, Christianity did not hesitate to acquire the language of the Greco-Roman «global» civilisation which at that time was shared by and understood by everyone. Today, thanks to this humus of American society as well, Christianity could particularly value and adopt the unified language produced by technological progress which is shared by and understood by everyone.

No institutions more than the traditional institutions of higher education of Christian inspiration have over recent decades experienced the phenomenon of «infra-ecclesial neo-paganism» and a reduction in size because of a decline in the members of the faithful. And yet Benedict XVI saw an opportunity precisely in this development. What applies to new «creative minorities» of the Church that are able «to move mountains» also applies, and applies even more, to creative minorities in the world of higher education.

This reduction in size makes it first of all possible once again for lecturers and students to have a living experience of what makes a *universitas scientiarum* really attractive and in scholarly terms at the cutting edge: that is to say that we —despite all the specialisations that at times make us unable to communicate with each other— shape a whole and work in the totality of a single reason with its various dimensions, thereby acting together in a shared responsibility for the correct use of reason. In mass universities —and this is stated by one who as a student went to the largest university in Europe with more than 120,000 students— this experience is neither possible nor imaginable. And in the large universities of Christian inspiration that are still in existence, one often has the impression that the «strength» due to the positions of power and privileges that still exist is matched by a weakness at the level of ideals, an imposition of uniformity, and a downward levelling of thought. Here again one does not manage fully to reason in terms of a «creative minority».

Naturally enough, nobody, and first and foremost Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI himself, has ever thought that the «return to the future» can take place at a stroke and be led and imposed from without. Benedict XVI was absolutely aware that a «re-flourishing» can only take place gradually, from within and «all together», starting from the relationship with non-believers and the inter-disciplinary and inter-university nexuses. He was, however, convinced that an apparently small university world —a creative minority— which has its basis and propulsive force in the «modern» experience of Christian fraternity and not limited to theology, could offer a very significant impulse to all this.

What the joung Ratzinger, and the old as well, seems to look for as a catholic university of the future is the development of excellencies, of inclusive excellencies based on the experience of «modern» Christian fraternities as their heart, excellencies that become increasingly a centre of scientific and human attraction as well, leaderships of the university world of the future in a logic not of opposition but of encounter, dialogue and mutual enrichment.