

Article

Religion, Culture, and Peace: The Social Doctrine of Benedict XVI

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Abstract: This article situates the papacy of Benedict XVI at the crossroads of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, focusing on theological, cultural, and political developments. It brings out his subtle critique of modernity, his opposition to relativism, and his appeal for a renewed dialogue between Christianity and Enlightenment rationality. It is his sense of faith and reason that, in mutual purifying, forms his support of the public role of religion in peacemaking and moral order. Through moments like the Regensburg Address and his inter-religious dialogues, Benedict XVI emerges as a defender of the place of religion in society while rejecting both religious fundamentalism and secularist reductionism. The paper also examines how Benedict grounded human rights in natural law, thereby differentiating those from other fundamental rights emanating from more contemporary sociopolitical claims. The article places his papacy within the larger frame of Catholic social doctrine, focusing on the role of the Church in promoting peace through cultural and interreligious dialogue, particularly with Islam.

Keywords: Benedict XVI; faith and reason; Catholic social doctrine



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Benedict XVI's pontificate stood at a historical crossroads, when one world was ending and another was still in the throes of birth.¹ He made a significant contribution to Catholic social doctrine, particularly through his reflections on the relationships between Catholicism, religions, and cultures, all directed toward achieving world peace.

Between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Catholic Church has engaged in interreligious dialogue with the goal of forming a religious alliance for global peace. Indeed, religious cultures nurture and condition individual and collective behavior and are therefore crucial for the spread (or lack thereof) of moral, legal, social, and broadly political ideas. Despite what may have been previously believed, the beginning of the twenty-first century showed how much the phenomenon of secularization was in crisis. Some even speak of a general “desecularization” process, of which the Catholic Church could potentially take the lead (Graziano 2010, 2016). This perspective has led some scholars to describe the twenty-first century as the “century of God” (Toft et al. 2011), despite some Western narratives. In this context, the contribution of the religious and distinctly Catholic world would be essential for building a peace-centered society.

Religion is again being conceived in its role as a cornerstone of international order and peace, because it has the ability to establish strong bonds and build bridges between individuals. That is why for years some have tried to influence not only Catholicism but religious paths in general on the international level to bend religions to partisan political agendas.

The most obvious public case emerged in 2016 with the publication of the John Podesta emails from Hillary Clinton's election team, revealing efforts to fund and encourage

Catholic groups aimed at transforming Catholicism from within. As newspapers at the time reported, they wanted to transform it culturally and religiously, changing the bishops' minds on the use of abortion and contraception, promoting gender equality by working within Catholicism from the "bottom up". That is why groups like "Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good" and "Catholics United" were created (Mainardi 2016). One of Podesta's interlocutors was Sandy Newman, President of Voices for Progress, who in February 2012 wrote: "There needs to be a Catholic Spring, in which Catholics themselves demand the end of a middle ages dictatorship and the beginning of a little democracy and respect for gender equality in the Catholic church. Is contraceptive coverage an issue around which that could happen. The Bishops will undoubtedly continue the fight" (Newman 2012).

Catholicism is under scrutiny by contemporary Western culture, which influences it with little effort (Regoli 2022). This dynamic is evident in theological publications, whose texts are increasingly skewed toward issues and approaches that are more sociological than strictly theological.

1. Culture

This is the general context in which the life and pontificate of Benedict XVI lies: the pope does compromise with Western societies that disregard the truth of God, as he foresees only a desolate future for such paths.² At the same time, however, he acknowledges that within modernity are "moral values that also come precisely from Christianity" (Benedict XVI 2010b, p. 40). Benedict XVI does not view modernity as a monolith but approaches it with nuance. It is his theological vision that underpins his critique of modern societies.

One characteristic element of Benedict XVI's pontificate was that of intellectual openness and of engaging with exponents of other cultural and religious traditions. This attitude allowed for various cultural shifts among dialogue partners, who also responded to the common concern that that a civilization cannot survive without a great religion to sustain it and give it life. But the pope's motivation for dialogue went much deeper in that it consisted primarily of a pastoral concern.

Ratzinger's papacy centered on a dialogue with the world on anthropological topics, focusing on the defense of the person and asserting the Church's role in political and bioethical matters.

To better understand Ratzinger's cultural framework, it is necessary to take a brief step back to the days preceding his election to the papacy.

On 1 April 2005, upon receiving the Saint Benedict award at the monastery of St. Scholastica in Subiaco, the cardinal gave a lecture on Europe and the crisis of cultures.³ On that occasion, Ratzinger pointed out that the "true opposition that characterizes today's world is not that between different religious cultures but that between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on the one hand, and the great religious cultures on the other".

The fundamental problem, according to Ratzinger, is relativism, which he views as a form of "dogmatism". From his perspective, this culture "increasingly leads to the brink of the abyss, toward the total sidelining of humanity", and it can only be addressed through a new framework for living and directing one's life *veluti si Deus daretur* (as though God exists). He then proposes a renewed dialogue between Enlightenment thought and Christianity, emphasizing that Christianity has always understood itself as "the religion of the *logos*, as the religion according to reason".⁴ This theological and cultural conception sheds light on the magisterial teaching of the future pope.

2. The Role of Religion in Society

The new pontiff's thinking is clearly expressed in the well-known Regensburg Address (September 2006). This speech directly addresses the issue of the relationship between faith and reason and between religion and culture, ultimately affirming that "not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature" (Benedict XVI 2006b). Other high-profile speeches by the pope are in the same vein. At the White House in 2008, Ratzinger recalled that "the principles governing political and social life are intimately linked to a moral order based on the dominion of God the Creator" (Benedict XVI 2008a). In his address to French intellectuals at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris (Benedict XVI 2008d), he recalled that the Word of God, which reaches us through human speech, must always be interpreted, thereby safeguarding against fundamentalism. In 2010, at Westminster Hall in London, the pope dealt with the question of the role of religion in society. He underscored the importance of identifying "objective moral principles" (Benedict XVI 2010a), which reason and therefore politics must then apply. Religion can fulfill this function only if it does not degenerate into sectarianism and fundamentalism. In other words, religion must embrace the "purifying and structuring role of reason within religion". It should be noted that he does not place the world's religions on the same level. As early as 2009, the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* made this quite clear: "There are certain religious cultures in the world today that do not oblige men and women to live in communion but rather cut them off from one other in a search for individual well-being, limited to the gratification of psychological desires. Furthermore, a certain proliferation of different religious "paths", attracting small groups or even single individuals, together with religious syncretism, can give rise to separation and disengagement. One possible negative effect of the process of globalization is the tendency to favour this kind of syncretism by encouraging forms of "religion" that, instead of bringing people together, alienate them from one another and distance them from reality. At the same time, some religious and cultural traditions persist which ossify society in rigid social groupings, in magical beliefs that fail to respect the dignity of the person, and in attitudes of subjugation to occult powers. In these contexts, love and truth have difficulty asserting themselves, and authentic development is impeded" (Benedict XVI 2009a).

In the same context the pope declared, "while it may be true that development needs the religions and cultures of different peoples, it is equally true that adequate discernment is needed. Religious freedom does not mean religious indifferentism, nor does it imply that all religions are equal. Discernment is needed regarding the contribution of cultures and religions [...]. Such discernment has to be based on the criterion of charity and truth". The encyclical speaks of "indifferentism" and not of "relativism" (a term immortalized by the well-known expression "dictatorship of relativism", used by the then-German cardinal during his homily for the *Missa pro eligendo Pontifice* in 2005, and more widely recognized in the reflections of the Bavarian theologian (Ratzinger 2005a). The term "indifferentism" has been a part of Catholic reflection since the 1820s and 1830s, where it was used to condemn religious indifferentism—the opinion that the creed one professes is irrelevant, as living a morally good life alone is enough for eternal salvation (Leo XII 1824; Gregory XVI 1832). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Newman himself speaks of "religious liberalism", a concept that serves as a precursor to the concept of "relativism", which, curiously, is not found in *Caritas in veritate*. In any case, we are in the same semantic family.

From the Ratzingerian perspective, reason and faith need one another: both have a mutually purifying role. What does this mean in the political and democratic dynamics of the early twenty-first century? It means that the democratic criterion of majority rule is not enough for drafting good laws (Benedict XVI 2011). It is fundamentally about the role of

religion in the public sphere and therefore within democratic societies. Ultimately, it has to do with the issue of secularism.

The issue at stake is that of the ultimate foundation of the moral action of the human being. In the social encyclical of his pontificate, *Caritas in veritate*, the pope clearly writes: “Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. *Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith*: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, *religion always needs to be purified by reason* in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development.”

And more explicitly for Christianity, “The Christian religion and other religions can offer their contribution to development only if God has a place in the public realm, specifically in regard to its cultural, social, economic, and particularly its political dimensions. The Church’s social doctrine came into being in order to claim “citizenship status” for the Christian religion” (Benedict XVI 2009a).

Benedict XVI stands as a tireless defender of the public dimension of religion, of Christianity specifically, and of the participation of believers in constructing the social order.

This general approach to faith–reason, Church–State, and Church–society relationships elicits many reactions in the intellectual world. If the neo-Enlightenmentists remain entrenched in their positions, others indulge in heated confrontation (Bolgiani et al. 2004).⁵ Consider the dialogue between Benedict XVI and the Italian philosopher Marcello Pera, president of the Senate of the Republic from 2001 to 2006. Also consider the pope’s unexpected intellectual encounter with the Marxist philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Ratzinger and Habermas 2004; Benedict XVI and Habermas 2005),⁶ the resonance of the papal address in France to intellectuals at the Collège des Bernardins, or the Italian Marxist intellectuals in dialogue with Ratzinger’s theology (to be discussed shortly). The intellectual world is stirred by this pope, who elicits and provokes shifts in personal stances, often leading those who engage in dialogue with him to relinquish their previously held positions.

Benedict XVI’s pontificate has exposed the Church on multiple fronts: cultural, political, and ethical. Without excessive concern with consensus-seeking, the pope-initiated processes of dialogue, which touched on the ultimate identity of humanity, elicited both support and opposition. The pope’s early exit from the scene, however, seems to have halted the natural development of those two paths.

Benedict XVI’s interpretation of the political sphere is primarily theological and forms part of the broader international debate that arose after 11 September 2001 on the public role of religion (Coccolini 2013, p. 213).⁷ For the pontiff, Christianity does not possess a “political theology” but “only a political *ethos*”, for which “the *civitas Dei* can never become an empirical state reality” (Coccolini 2013, p. 214)⁸, just as the state can only be a *civitas terrena*. Benedict XVI actually wants to free Christianity from the risk of a theologizing of politics, as well as a politicizing of theology (Coccolini 2013, p. 214). The pope writes that ““Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” was the response of Jesus when asked about paying taxes. [...] Jesus’ answer deftly moves the argument to a higher plane, gently cautioning against both the politicization of religion and the deification of temporal power” (Benedict XVI 2012).

A politicization of religion would result in reducing the religious to the political, leading to a short-circuiting of the distinction between the two spheres. Ratzinger—theologian, archbishop, cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and pope—has a clear vision: one cannot make the Church a carbon copy of democratic rule, due to the nature and origin of the Church (Ratzinger 2021, p. 486). Indeed, democracy ultimately boils down to formal instruments for the functioning of human life, while the Church has

its own inherent nature, “according to which its structures must be shaped” (Ratzinger 2021, p. 487).

None of this precludes the development of a discourse on the theologizing of the human being. And it is precisely on this point that misunderstandings arise in the realm of human rights.⁹

3. The Church and Human Rights

There remain some conflicting questions related to the foundation of rights and, consequently, to their very identification. While the Church and Western society share the recognition of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, there are tensions regarding other so-called rights which are not recognized as such by the Church. Consider reproductive rights (i.e., birth control and abortion) and gender rights (self-determination to choose so-called sexual identity and the recognition of public rights, within the broader discourse of LGBTQ2+ rights), as well as pressures over internal ecclesiastical issues, particularly related to the admission of women and homosexuals to the priesthood.

One can then understand the continuous media pressure on the Church and on the papacy to adhere to an ever-growing list of rights. And at the same time, from a theological perspective, one can also understand the ecclesial commitment to protect so-called inalienable human rights as opposed to an endless list of new ones, to the point that there is an increasing focus on fundamental human rights.

Natural law is again, and more strongly, presented as the basis of human coexistence, while the Church is presented as the correct interpreter of those norms, so that in a way it would seem to be the only one who could claim to have “a directive function over all humanity” (Menozzi 2012, p. 259).¹⁰

In a speech given on 18 April 2008 at a meeting with the members of the UN General Assembly in New York (Benedict XVI 2008b), Benedict XVI stated that such rights “are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations”.

Among human rights, the pope includes above all the right to religious liberty (both individual and community), which “permits men and women to pursue their journey of faith and their search for God in this world”.

4. The Church and Peace

Religious freedom grants religions a broad scope of action in the world, which, from the perspective of Catholicism, would lead to processes of peace.

The broader horizon of interreligious dialogue is the commitment to peace, as the pope reminds us on many occasions (Benedict XVI 2009b). It is not only a cultural issue but a diplomatic one.

He considers interreligious dialogue a prerequisite for reaching true and lasting international peace (Benedict XVI 2006c). In a world threatened by fundamentalist terrorism, the pope presents interreligious dialogue (like intercultural dialogue) as a true “vital necessity” (Benedict XVI 2007b). If it is “vital”, it must necessarily be carried out—but in what ways? The essential presupposition of the Ratzingerian perspective is conciliar and de facto implies the denial that other religions can be considered (from the standpoint of doctrines and founders) salvific paths on par with Christianity (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, no. 22).

For a greater understanding of Ratzinger’s authentic thought, we need to look at a private letter he sent in 2008 to the Italian philosopher Marcello Pera. The text in one passage leaves no room for misunderstanding. The pope writes to the philosopher (then president of the Italian Senate): “You explain quite clearly that an interreligious dialogue in

the strict sense of the word is not possible, while intercultural dialogue that deepens the cultural consequences of the underlying religious decision is all the more urgent. While a true dialogue on the latter is not possible without bracketing one's faith, the cultural consequences of basic religious decisions must be addressed in public discourse. Here, dialogue and mutual correction and enrichment are possible and necessary" (Benedict XVI 2008c).

In view of peace, the most significant interreligious dialogue is that with Islam, especially following the September 11 attacks.

Benedict XVI recalls the necessity and urgency of a new union between faith and reason, implying the rejection of violence in the religious sphere. In the well-known *lectio magistralis*, given at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006, he touched on the relationship between religion and reason, condemning the faith–violence duality and aiming to show the reasonableness of faith (Benedict XVI 2006b). The papal goal is to strip every form of violence of religious motivations and to denounce the incompatibility between faith in God and a violent assertion of it or its manipulation.

Beyond the violent reactions to the papal text and the immediate context of that speech (aspects well analyzed elsewhere: Ambrosini 2011; Wenzel 2008b; Nayed 2008; Flasch 2008; Regoli [2016] 2024), it is important to emphasize one fact: that speech opened the door to an authentic dialogue, a dialogue with Islam surrounding the issues of belief, reason, and violence.

Fundamentally, the Regensburg Address highlights "an intrinsic nexus between the relationship that religions have with each other and the anchoring of the discourse of faith to that of society" (Wenzel 2008a, p. 7). This is a rational nexus. From a strictly Catholic perspective, moreover, this address is particularly significant; even if unintentional, it marks a shift away from the Irenicism of the previous pontificate.

In any case, dialogue with "others" is enriched more so than in the past. Not only did Benedict XVI invite representatives from other religions to the 2011 interreligious meeting in Assisi (as John Paul II did in 1986), he also invited representatives of non-believers and agnostics. The pope thereby eliminated the notion that they were coming together in prayer.

Thanks to this initiative, Ratzinger introduces the idea that dialogue should primarily focus on the ethical dimension, where greater consensus can be achieved, as it begins from a shared anthropological foundation and the dignity of the human person.

The culmination of Benedict XVI's papal reflection takes place in his speech on 18 February 2007, in which he said that "for Christians, non-violence is not merely tactical behaviour but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is so convinced of God's love and power that he is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone" (Benedict XVI 2007a). If one were to draw out the ultimate conclusions from such words, they would envision a Catholicism and Catholic cultures that are not only peaceful but thoroughly disarmed. No one seems to have followed this papal direction.

Over time the pope would expand on the topic of peace, which, as we have already seen, is proper to cultural and interreligious dialogue, but also a political and diplomatic concern. It is no accident that Benedict XVI thought that the Church and the diplomacy of states have the pursuit of peace as their "common mission". The diplomacy of the Holy See is, then, concerned with promoting among the various possible freedoms, "the right to freedom of religion, since it involves the most important of human relationships: our relationship with God" (Benedict XVI 2006a). Commitment to truth opens the way to forgiveness and reconciliation, which "are indispensable elements for peace".

5. Conclusions

In light of the journey thus far, it is evident that the encyclical *Caritas in veritate* on peace and justice is not only consistent with Ratzinger's thought but a mature fruit of it, now serving as magisterium for the whole Catholic Church. Benedict XVI's approach treats the major themes in a holistic way, presenting a coherent and layered vision in the interpretation of life, faith, reason, culture, theology, economics, politics, peace, religions, and so on. It is an interpretation according to a reasonable faith, anchored in the concepts of truth and charity. It is no coincidence that in the cultural discourse in *Caritas in veritate*, the pope seeks to overcome a pervasive "sentimentality", which turns love into "an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way". He also aims to prevent the emergence of "a culture without truth [. . .] prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions." He therefore proposes ridding society of "emotionalism" and "fideism". This is a titanic task in European, North American, and Western culture, all in the grip of this very "sentimentality" and "fideism" (Benedict XVI 2009a, p. 3), which has killed metaphysics through the absolutization of experience (and *Caritas in veritate* proposes a "metaphysical understanding of the relations between persons" (Benedict XVI 2009a, p. 53), "a metaphysical interpretation of the 'humanum' in which relationality is an essential element" (Benedict XVI 2009a, p. 55). Ratzinger's speech thus serves as the ultimate testament to a world that is no more—one built around the power of reason and faith, which moved elites and peoples, but also appears as an attempt at a wager for the future. Between the swan song and the solitude of a visionary world yet to come, Ratzinger–Benedict XVI placed his bet on the Church and society. History will judge.

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Notes

¹ For more on Pope Benedict XVI, see (Regoli [2016] 2024).

² For the summary, see the first part of the following papal text: (Benedict XVI 2010c).

³ Ratzinger (2005b). See also (Ratzinger 2005c). For more on Ratzinger's thought, see (Regoli 2021).

⁴ "From the beginning, Christianity has conceived of itself as the religion of the *logos*, as the religion according to reason [. . .]. As the religion of the persecuted, as the universal religion, beyond the various states and peoples, it denied the state the right to consider religion a part of the state order, thus postulating the freedom of faith. Christianity has always defined human beings—all human beings without distinction—as creatures of God made in His image, proclaiming as a principle (albeit within the unavoidable limits of social orders) their equal dignity. In this sense, the Enlightenment has Christian origins and arose, not by chance, precisely and exclusively within the framework of the Christian faith. This occurred where Christianity, against its nature, had unfortunately become tradition and state religion. Although philosophy, as a quest for rationality—including of our faith—had always been the preserve of Christianity, the voice of reason had been excessively tamed. It was and is to the credit of the Enlightenment to have reasserted these original values of Christianity and to have restored to reason its own voice. The Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Church in the Contemporary World, once again highlighted this deep connection between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking a true reconciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great patrimony to be protected on both sides. With all this, it is necessary for both sides to engage in self-reflection and be willing to correct themselves". Our translation.

⁵ If Ferrone seeks to demolish Ratzinger's very conception of Catholic-inspired modernity, others, such as Paolo Prodi, hold otherwise.

⁶ The dialogue between the two has received widespread attention. For example, the journal *Humanitas*, no. 59, 2004, revisited their public debate in Munich on 19 January 2004, which focused on the topic "I fondamenti morali prepolitici dello Stato liberale" (The Pre-political Moral Foundations of the Liberal State). In more recent years, moreover, there have been reprints of some of the debates from that time: (Possenti 2014).

- ⁷ For a deeper understanding of Ratzinger's thought, see (Borghesi 2013).
- ⁸ Our translation.
- ⁹ On this theme, see (Bolgiani et al. 2004; Menozzi 2012; Pera 2015).
- ¹⁰ (Menozzi 2012, p. 259). Our translation.

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