

## JOSEPH RATZINGER'S CONCEPTION OF REVELATION AND ITS ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS (II)

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**ABSTRACT.** *Joseph Ratzinger's Conception of Revelation and its Ecumenical Implications (II).* The article is an exposition of Joseph Ratzinger's concept on Revelation, from the early analysis in his habilitation thesis to his later, more mature reflections. The works under analysis paint an image of an innovative thinker, who challenged both a Platonizing tendency of bracketing history as a meaningful category for the disclosure of Truth and a radical rationalization of history as a global event of total Revelation. Instead, Ratzinger proposed a concept of Revelation as a personal, concrete event of the self-communication of a personal God, who remains close to his creatures through a mysterious presence in the Church, in a process which simultaneously judges and redeems history itself.

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, Revelation, tradition, ecclesiology, ecumenism

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Joseph Ratzinger/Papa Benedict XVI, Revelație, tradiție, ecleziologie, ecumenism

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### The ecclesiological stumbling block, with some fresh air from anthropology

Until now, this type of theology could be called by most people as modernist and would have the potential to fascinate wide categories of spectators. The real point of conflict occurs with Ratzinger's idea of how this Revelation is mediated in time, beyond the apostolic age. Or, more precisely, the stumbling block is represented by the actual derivation from this bold definition of God's action in history of a Catholic ecclesiology which is not afraid to claim its continuity with a 2000-year old history and its organic connection with the idea of magisterial authority.

Yet such an argumentation always begins with a look at the human role in this historical process, an idea with deep roots and precedents, ranging from Augustine, Bonaventure, Romanticism, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Guardini, Martin Buber. In this perspective, the participation of the human heart (the famous motto of Newman: 'heart speaks unto heart') is essential and continual throughout the generations in the unfolding of new meanings of divine truth. In fact, without a human reception, Revelation does not, in fact, take place. 'A personal and dialogical event precedes scripture and is attested to by scripture[...] Revelation as an ongoing event requires a believing subject'.<sup>1</sup> This subject, through faith <sup>2</sup>, through *metanoia*, radical transformation, opens his heart to the movements of the spirit and the free gift of grace, following the Word on the path of deification, *theosis*.

Yet this does not imply an unlimited trust in the authority of the individual Christian in interpreting for himself, or even devising for himself, a new understanding of the Word. First, the stressing of the role of the individual in the *manifestatio* of Revelation also implies his responsibility in understanding the Word, in the participation, through grace, in the mystery of Christ, a responsibility derived from the freedom with which the Creator has endowed him. In this always unique encounter between two freedoms, he can really become the *universale concretum*, in which the Infinity of God opens itself to a person, in a dialogical encounter. <sup>3</sup> In a volume co-authored with Karl Rahner, Ratzinger affirms:

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<sup>1</sup> De Gaal, *The Christocentric Shift*, 93.

<sup>2</sup> ...which, as some recent scholars say, originally meant 'faithfulness, obedience to Christ', being faithful to Christ and his teachings, and not just a simple intellectual assent to the truth of Resurrection. *Pistis* thus involved a radical existential reorientation towards Christ, an attitude which necessarily included the requirement of virtue.

<sup>3</sup> De Gaal, *The Christocentric Shift*, 102.

Denn Offenbarung wird immer und nur erst da Wirklichkeit, wo Glaube ist [...] Insofern gehört in die Offenbarung bis zu einem gewissen Grad auch das empfangende Subjekt hinein, ohne dass sie nicht existiert. Man kann Offenbarung nicht in die Tasche stecken, wie man ein Buch mit sich tragen kann. Sie ist eine lebendige Wirklichkeit, die den lebendigen Menschen also ort ihrer Anwesenheit verlangt.<sup>4</sup>

Second, *precisely* because each individual is endowed with the dignity of being the receiver of a unique *manifestatio* of Revelation, the collective experience of *all individuals* and, from one generation to another, the historical experience of this divine act must be taken into consideration. If it is normal that an individual checks his personal experience against the lived experience of the entire body of the Church in his time, and if this body must, if it were to be honest with itself and modest in respect to its own possibilities, look towards the past at the experience of the previous generations, then here the historical acquires a vital importance. Only in the *Überlieferung*, the passing-on, the transmission, or, simply, the Tradition, can the subjective experience receive its validation, or correction. This is the main problem of a reflection proposed by Ratzinger in 1982, in *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie* [*Principles of Catholic Theology*].

He begins with a reflection on modernity and its attempt to isolate reason from its present and past historical context and lift it to the status of ultimate criterion and source of values. The immediate consequence is that, in principle, anything is possible or justifiable, as the pure products of human thought can dispense themselves from the truth of Being and from the all the information and experience of past generations. These are times of revolution and Ratzinger attempts to counter-pose a different argument. He therefore asks with his specific caution: 'Ist die Neuzeit nun die Befreiung des Menschen zu sich selbst oder der Beginn seiner Zerstörung? Ist sie der späte Aufbruch in die eigentliche Menschwerdung des Menschen oder der Anfang seines Endes?'<sup>5</sup>

He expresses his uneasiness with a conception of progress which ignores the past, as the very humanity of man may be at stake. For him, historicity is a precondition of man's self-realization: 'Humanität und Geschichtlichkeit, Geist und Geschichte

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1965) at 35.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie* (München: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1982) at 89.

stehen in einem unlöslichen Zusammenhang. Menschlicher Geist schafft Geschichte, Geschichte bedingt menschliche Existenz.’<sup>6</sup>

The human spirit, being immersed in time, communicates itself to others and thus produces a memory. Memory, in turn becomes tradition, a transmission in history of vital knowledge about the human spirit. The present man will be able to form himself by entering into this communion overarching the passing of time, a communion with the historical experience of the entire humanity (or at least of his own community), while bearing in mind that this experience is sometimes the recording of an encounter with God. The echoes of Martin Buber’s theory about the initial encounter between the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’ which lies at the origin of any culture are clearly heard here.

Geist erweist sein Geistsein als Gedächtnis- Gedächtnis stiftet Tradition- Tradition realisiert sich in Geschichte- Geschichte als vorgedunern Zusammenhang des Menschsein ermöglicht wiederum Menschsein, das ohne die notwendig transtemporale Relation der Mitmenschlichkeit nicht zu selbst erwacht und sich nicht auszudrücken vermag.<sup>7</sup>

This also reminds of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s beautiful theory about the constituting of the human self after birth, through that first contact with the mother’s smile. In response to the Cartesian notion that the self is somehow self-sufficient and builds itself through its autonomous reason, with no need of contact with the outside, von Balthasar states that, on the contrary, our very humanity is formed through an initial contact with the love, with the self-gift of Another. And this first situation cannot be other than the baby’s contact with the mother’s smile, to which he also responds with a smile. To the freedom of the mother which makes this act of love, the child freely responds, for the first time in his life, with a smile in what constitutes the first instance in which the child really awakens to self-consciousness. Man is what he is only in communion with the other.<sup>8</sup>

So it is clear that, for Ratzinger, man can truly become what he is called to be only in a state of relationality with the other, with the world, with the past. Developing the latter point, it will become obvious ‘daß Tradition als Konstitutivum

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<sup>6</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 90.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. David Schindler, ‘Surprised by Truth: The Drama of Reason in Fundamental Theology’, *Communio: International Catholic Review. English Edition*, 31 (Winter 2004) 587-611, at 598-602.

von Geschichte für ein real sich vollziehendes Menschsein, für die *humanitas homini* konstitutiv ist.<sup>9</sup>

Tradition, by this link with the truth transmitted by the past generation, a truth which is ultimately derived from an initial encounter with God, is fundamental for preserving man's own humanity, as it is the essence of man which is revealed in that encounter. This is the answer to the modern idea that there is no (discoverable) essence of man and a vital check against the immediate consequence of this idea, namely that it is possible for man to determine himself, to transform his nature, to liberate himself from the natural, physical, psychological barriers.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, this does not mean an indiscriminating idealization of tradition. People should be conscious that there are qualitative differences between traditions; moreover, the Church believes that there is 'an original sin' which marks every tradition, 'an infection with the power of the anti-human, which prevents from his [man's] self-realization.'<sup>11</sup> The exact nature of original sin is not of importance here; rather, it worth noting that it is a universal force, passed on from one generation to another, which drives man towards blindness about the full Truth, isolation and ultimately nothingness. Ratzinger's model is therefore not 'traditionalist' or 'reactionary' but simply realistic, sharing an optimism about the real existence of an essence of man with a caution about the limits posed by the human condition. The past is not good per se but only filtered through a deeper instance. It is at this point that the Church's salvific role becomes more clear. For, to start with, it is against this universal nihilistic inclination, present in all generations, that the Church's own tradition, its liberating message, is fighting. In short, it keeps and proclaims the tradition of Jesus Christ, because the contents of his life is understood as the permanent meeting and exchange between Him and the Father.<sup>12</sup> This is the primary initial, historical divine-human encounter which forms the base of the Church's Tradition, which does have some things in common with other religions, but also something completely new: this encounter in fact, takes place in the same Person, as the hypostatic union between the eternally-begotten Son and the man Jesus of Nazareth. By His authority, revealed in historical time, a Holy Tradition is born which shall be kept and transmitted by the Church established by Him.

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<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 97.

For Joseph Ratzinger, the Tradition is the ultimate guarantee of humanity, as it is the link with Christ, the one who, as the now famous article 22 of the *Gaudium et Spes* document of the Second Vatican Council states, reveals man to himself. To believe in Jesus is to believe in a Truth from which man comes and which is his fundamental essence. The emancipation from this is simply the emancipation from being human. Jesus Christ is also the guarantor that the truth proclaimed today is the same as the one revealed in His person. This happens both in the faithfulness to the basic contents of the Gospels and, in a mysterious way, through his perpetual presence as Head of his Body, the Church. Again, the issue of Christocentrism comes to the fore, as Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI has continually stressed in his works and public interventions that any attempt at reform, ecumenical dialogue, or approach of one or the other challenges of modernity must always begin from a deepening of the relationship with Christ, as He is the only mediator between man and God, the archetype, the Alpha and Omega of salvation history. Any act or gesture of the Church or individual Christian must begin from immersing into the prayer of Jesus to the Father. This is why any traditionalism, as well as any radical critique of tradition would fail because both of them do not take into account the connection with the living core of doctrine, Jesus Christ, and what a 2000-year old Tradition has to say about Him, while relying on two idolatries: the first idolizes past per se or usually just a portion of the past, decreeing about it that it is the infallible, 'pure' time of immediate knowledge of God, while what comes after is just a deviation.<sup>13</sup> Radical questioning of tradition, in turn, divinizes human reason, science or some form of radical self-determination, believing that man alone (either as an individual subject or as generic name for the present generation), free from the constraints of the past can fully reinvent himself and the world. In either case, to disconnect man from the living God is to choose nothingness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> One can recognize here different strains of Protestantism, which usually set an arbitrary limit in time, after which what comes next is just 'Catholic deviation', 'political interest', 'discourse of power', 'anti-Judaic sentiment' or, on the contrary, 'Judaic influence'. Usual culprits are the Gospel of John, some or all Pauline epistles, Christianity after the first decades, Christianity after the Constantinian era, Christianity after some or all the Ecumenical Councils. The Eastern Orthodox side usually chooses any post-1054 development as being close to heresy, or even some developments in the Western Church of the first millennium (*Filioque*, papal primacy).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 100-103.

Christocentrism's logical consequence is the Eucharistic ecclesiology. Since Christ, the Head of the Church is present, prayer is essential for entering into this communion. Yet, the public dimension of this communion is essential in preserving the unity of truths and hearts, as the only way in which this communion is actualized is in the mystery of the Eucharist. Centered on the real, physical presence of Christ, the celebrating Church actualizes this spousal relation in which Christ offers Himself in a gesture of boundless love to his Bride, the Church. It nourishes itself from this real presence and strengthens its character as living Subject, as bearer of the contents of historical Revelation.<sup>15</sup>

Ihr Subjektcharakter ist durch die Identität des Geschichtszusammenhangs und durch die Gemeinsamkeit der sich konstituierenden Grunderfahrungen gegeben. Dieses Subjekt ist folglich die Bedingung der Möglichkeit für die reale Partizipation an der *traditio* Jesu, die es ohne diese Subjekt nicht als geschichtliche und geschichtsbildende Realität, sondern nur noch als private Erinnerung gibt.<sup>16</sup>

Earlier, I have said that the stumbling block for many commentators of Ratzinger or, on a more general level, of the critics of Catholic ecclesiology is the derivation, from a bold theology of Revelation which states that the act of God far supersedes ontologically any human means of transmitting its contents, whether this is Scripture, Tradition or theological opinion, of an ecclesiology of authority, in which the Church is seen as the essential mediating actor of the contents of Revelation, with binding power over the issues of doctrine and moral teaching. A justification of this authority is not a central point to this thesis; some of the arguments have already been briefly touched upon above. What I believe to be an original contribution of Joseph Ratzinger to this debate are his reflections on the importance of tradition in telling something about and in preserving the essence of man, his own humanity and sense of purpose. He thus brings an anthropological argument into the ecclesiological debate, arguing that man needs relationality, communion, memory and transmission in order to *be* what he is truly meant to be. Jozef Pieper's influence is clearly seen here, as he paid a lot of attention in his work to the concept of tradition. But also a distant echo of Newman's anthropological considerations can be detected, especially his idea that the individual, subjective

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<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 137.

<sup>16</sup> Ratzinger, *Prinzipienlehre*, 104-105.

conscience is not enough in order for man to take the right decisions, but always needs an objective authority- in this case, the Magisterium- according to which or against which to measure its own thoughts and decisions. Since tradition is vital in the preservation of the very essence of man, in other words, the historical continuity and mediation is vital for preserving an ontological attribute, it would then result that in Christianity, the importance of tradition is even greater. For we are not talking of merely a tradition, culture or religion among others, which 'bears the seeds the Truth' and has a vague, incomplete knowledge of the Triune God and His plan for the salvation of humankind. We are talking, instead, of a Tradition which has canceled definitively all these other alternatives and centered all human history on a single axis, the salvific Cross. We are talking of a visible institution which proclaims itself to be the living Subject which carries forward, until the end of time, in perpetual adoration of its head, Jesus Christ, who is also physically present in the Eucharist- the liberating contents of Revelation, as a custodian of the manifestations of these Truths in history and as a 'hearer' of future manifestations. The Church, founded by Christ himself in a historical moment, keeps the memory of His time on earth and actuates herself from this continuing presence. Pope Benedict XVI, in his address towards the Protestant representatives in Erfurt, has stated again, probably to the dismay of 'progressive', 'open minded' theologians and laity, that he cannot award 'ecumenical gifts', cannot 'negotiate' the truth of faith, because faith is not something for man to mold according to his will. It is something given, received and the Church, as a custodian of it, cannot act according to its own will. The authority of the Church is derived from the authority of Jesus Christ, from his eternal communion of love with the Father, from his Incarnation which fundamentally changed the world, and from the mission he gave to the apostles and their successors to spread the Good News.

### **Concluding remarks**

This final part of the thesis will mark a few directions for future reflection, in a style which, if it were to do full justice to Ratzinger's own method, will only set some boundaries, a grounding base and some proposals for a later, fuller treatment. To start with, the ecumenical implications of Ratzinger's concept of Revelation arise in an indirect way from what has been stated above; he himself wouldn't venture deeper, at least in his personal work, notwithstanding the fact that the work at the



Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith did prompt him to more direct statements. Nevertheless, his constant approach is to begin with urging all sides to deepen their relation with Christ, thereby remaining faithful to his lifelong conviction that Christ is the ultimate Revelation of God, the center of all knowledge and history, the ever-present Head of the Church, as Word unfolded in time through the work of the Holy Spirit, and as real presence in the Eucharist. At the end of the day, he believes, unity can only be a work of God, for which all sides must make themselves ready through prayer, liturgy and only after thorough theological and historical research. Regarding the latter side, his method always involves a return to the Gospels, usually to some very basic statements of faith (for example "Jesus Christ is the Lord"), and then to the creedal formulas of the patristic era. He invites the partners from the other confessions to the common ground of the historical time in which the Church was not yet divided, to observe the way in which it functioned and thought, with special emphasis on its understanding of the dynamics of Revelation in time, on its understanding of Eucharistic celebrations as being essential to the unity and purity of doctrine, on the high importance it awarded to 'catholicity' as guarantor of the validity of certain decisions and on its convictions that the universal Church is the living Subject, the body of Christ which bears the contents of Revelation through the centuries. Much can be gained, he believes, by returning to the Fathers, as they can be recognized as the representatives of the age of unity. For example, Gregory of Nazianz's conviction that there is a progression in time, that history is witness to continuous discoveries of new understandings of the Revelation may help some to understand how can the Catholic Church legitimate some dogmatic developments. Or, the acknowledgment of the primacy of the see of Rome at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, followed by Alexandria and Antioch, should perhaps awake some new self-critical reflections in the Eastern Orthodox churches; equally, the fact that the eastern bishops, who formed the majority at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople (381), wrote a letter to the bishop of Rome asking for his approval of the results of the Council.<sup>17</sup> Or, new historical-linguistic analysis may help prove that the initial understanding of the word *ekklesia* comprised a universalistic notion, in contrast to Luther's polemic-inflated translation as *Gemeinde*, local community.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology. Building Stone for a Fundamental Theology* [*Theologische Prinzipienlehre*], translated by Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987 [1982]) at 118-122.

Yet beyond the forest of ecumenical disputes, there lies a deeper problem which, Ratzinger believes, fuels not only interconfessional misunderstandings, but a whole range of other problems which can ultimately be summarized under the following questions: what do tradition, the Church, history have to say about the ultimate mysteries of Being? For Pope Benedict XVI, all the intellectual turmoil within 20<sup>th</sup> C. thought comes from the disagreement about the relation between faith and history, or history and ontology.

In *Theologische Prinzipienlehre* he underlines a few major points in the history of this problem. He explains that, very early on, the contact with Platonic thought allowed the Christians to reconcile their shattered expectations about the imminent eschaton, and devise a synthesis in which history could be transcended, hanging between the 'already' and the 'not yet', between the Kingdom which was already present 'within you' (Lk 17:21) and the final Judgment at the end of history, between a spiritual, already accomplished salvation, and a historical one, about to arrive. Thus the 'sojourner' character of the Church will be the dominant understanding in the Patristic era, a fine equilibrium between faith in the authority of the Body of Christ, and a lucid view about its imperfections and about the character of the fallen world. Yet, in the Middle Ages, a first transformation takes place, so that Christian history will simply be understood as coinciding with world history, a sort of universalistic view which was able to explain or justify all events in a theological way. However, the radical break would come with Luther, as he rejected history altogether. His target was the Church of his time, which he saw as no longer representing the message of salvation. Instead of the old understanding of Christian existence in which the common celebrations and the universal Church were seen as essential, Luther invents a *pro me*, personalist orientation. For him there is no 'in itself', an event or reality which is outside subjective inclinations, nothing outside what is 'for me'. To seek another independent reality is 'foolish objectivism'.<sup>18</sup>

This break with history (and with metaphysics) would have deep consequences. For history would not be seen anymore under the sign of promise and fulfillment, as the scene in which the Church sojourns as a living sacrament of salvation until the moment of final restoration of Creation, but rather as the story of the fight between law and gospel. The old ontology is denounced as Scholastic/Hellenistic abuse, while the real axis of human history revolves around the Incarnation and the Cross; the

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<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles*, 156-157; 186.

last one especially would become the symbol of a radical discontinuity and negation of historical existence and forms.<sup>19</sup>

Future reflection would oscillate more and more towards extremes. With Barth, theology becomes dialectic, with the accent put on the radical Otherness of God and the irrelevance of history, natural theology, ontology as having the potential of showing something meaningful about man and God. Bultmann would reject the concept of salvation-history and propose a primacy of the word over event; word becomes the real salvation which would happen anytime when it is spoken, while historical salvation or the eschaton are de-temporalized, being suspended in state of non-determination or perpetuity. Ratzinger observes, perhaps with some irony: 'If the lapse from salvation history into metaphysics was then branded as the Catholic error, it is now the preoccupation with a continuous historical line that progresses by way of a determinate sequence of events that is regarded as the Catholic misinterpretation of the original intention of the New Testament.'<sup>20</sup>

Thus it is clear that one extreme was represented by the lapse into existential theology<sup>21</sup> or any other form which denied that historical forms can point to something permanent and essential in human nature or that they can be a *substantial* dimension in the history of salvation and the unfolding of Revelation. The other extreme is exemplified by Karl Rahner and his attempt to provide a total account of revelation history, reconcilable with modern philosophy. For him, the history of salvation is history itself, comprising the whole of human race, Christians and non-Christians. Man's being itself is historical in character. Through the concept of 'anonymous Christian', he tries to find a maximum openness of the Church but ends up saying

This kind of revelation history [Christendom] is only a species, a segment of universal categorical revelation history, the most successful instance of the necessary self-explication of transcendental revelation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles*, 157-158.

<sup>20</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles*, 177.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Cullman's phrase can be named as the symbol of existential, ahistorical, anti-metaphysical theology: 'We should not say: Christ is Christ 'for me' because he is Christ. We should say, rather, that he is Christ because he is Christ 'for me.' *Heil als Geschichte*, (Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr-Paul Siebeck, 1965) at 97, quoted in Ratzinger, *Principles*, at 186.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1976), at 155. Quoted in Ratzinger, *Principles*, 163.

Christianity, in his universalistic attempt, is inevitably relativized, with its only superiority residing only at the level of a superior reflection, a more concentrated form of what in itself is present always and everywhere. Man, in his existence is already within the relationship with Christ, consciously or not. 'He who...accept his existence... says... Yes to Christ.'<sup>23</sup>

But would this be all, asks Ratzinger? All that man has to do in this life is simply to accept his existence and he would be automatically saved? And would the Church and, in fact, Christianity itself become somehow superfluous, a welcome addition in grand scheme in which being becomes history and history becomes being, in a scheme of necessity? No, he answers, this cannot be everything. For only in the radical transformation of himself, only in stepping out of himself towards the Absolute, can man truly become what he is called to be. This is

The true formula of human existence, which has its 'in-itself-ness' outside itself and can find its true center only in *ex-sistere*, in going-out-from itself.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Rahner's error would be in his too ambitious attempt to reconcile history and the question of being in an over-arching system with Idealist or Hegelian influences; his starting point is not the reality of the Gospel, but a product of human thought into which Christianity is fitted. The final product, thinks Ratzinger, is a philosophy of necessity, in which being and history are combined, if not, in fact moulded into one, with the result that some crucial ideas are missing: sin, the character of *universale concretum* of Jesus Christ, the balance between 'already' and 'not yet', the soujourner character of the Church into a fallen world in which the mystery of Christ is present, yet not fulfilled. A similar valorization of history and a too optimistic view about humanity and its capacity to participate in bringing up an immanentized eschaton resulted in the various political theologies with Marxist influences. On a different direction, but with the same roots, others felt that these ideas signal a loose distinction between Church and the world and that, in fact, the world's own autonomy and rationality could actually be the criterion with which to measure the validity of faith today.

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<sup>23</sup> Rahner, *Grundkurs*, 225-226.

<sup>24</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles*, 190.

Also reminding of von Balthasar's conviction, Ratzinger proposes instead a rediscovery of the character of open system imbedded in Christianity. The Church did not receive the mysteries of being, time, eternity, the natural world. It does not propose, because it does not have, an answer to *the* question of existence. What it proclaims is the Good News about a personal God which has revealed Himself to mankind, out of pure love, in the person of Jesus Christ, for the redemption of humankind. It is a message about a divine act which took place in time, yet, in the Resurrection, becomes timeless, above history. In history, the Infinite becomes finite, God becomes man, so that man may have access to himself, to his true nature which is now forever bound to the Infinite. Ratzinger proposes an original 'biblical ontology', a way of extracting from the Scripture some hints about the ontological relation between God and creature.

In contrast to the Greek concept of being, then, creatureliness means having one's origin, not in a positive idea, but in a creative freedom; it includes, therefore, in a positive way, the temporality of being as the mode of its self-fulfillment, history as substantiality, not mere accidentality, but in such a way that time has its unity in the Creator Spiritus and, because it is sequential, is still a continuity of being by way of succession.<sup>25</sup>

The statement above represents a simple, elegant yet incredibly comprehensive proposal for a new ontology which is in full accord with Tradition and Scripture, yet very modern in its intent, able to provide a way out of the current philosophical stalemate of postmodernism, different forms of Idealism or neo-Thomism. It is a model which argues that creation has its origin in a gesture of freedom, therefore of love, in which the creature is set on the road of *becoming*, in which history becomes a substantial dimension in this path, yet always aiming towards a beyond which will be reached through an *ex-sistere*, a radical transformation effected through the supernatural gift of grace. At the centre of this 'system' is the confession of two fundamental sentences: 'Jesus, the man, is God', an ontological statement which links a specific historical moment to universality, thus gaining a central role in time; second: Jesus is Risen. For Ratzinger, all Christian theology must be a theology of the Resurrection:

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<sup>25</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles*, 162.

It must be a theology of the Resurrection before it is a theology of the justification of the sinner; it must a theology of Resurrection before it is a theology of the metaphysical Sonship of God. It can be a theology of the Cross but only and within the framework of a theology of the Resurrection. Its first and primordial statement is the good tidings that the power of death, the one constant of history, has, in single instance, been broken by the power of God and that history has thus been imbued with an entirely new hope.<sup>26</sup>

Pope John Paul II's project had been the restoration of the image of the human person in in imitation of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of the third millennium, Pope Benedict XVI further builds up on this project with a contribution which aims at the radical reevaluation of the modern idea of the relation between history, being and Revelation. It is a surprisingly simple, yet deep circle which calls for the rediscovery of the basic formulas of faith from the apostolic age, the spirit of the Ecumenical Councils and the Fathers, the rehabilitation of the Augustinians-Franciscan-Bonaventure reflection on Revelation and on the participation of the human subject in its unfolding, only to come back to modernity and suggest an objective dimension according to which one may be able to begin a path of continuous, awe-inspiring discovery. This objective dimension is none other but Jesus Christ, Who, through his Incarnation and Resurrection has radically altered human history and centered it on a single axis of salvation. In history, in the past, there is truth, there is the encounter with the Infinite, a Personal God which sustains our being as a mother smiling to her child and went to the point of becoming one of us. In the present, there is the celebrating Church, gathered in adoration around the Eucharist, the Lord truly present, actuating herself and keeping alive the fire which has been entrusted to her. In the future, there is the restoration of man, the renewal of Creation at a specific moment in time: "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all." (1 Cor 15:28). This calls for belief that the historical forms may disclose the Infinite, yet bearing in mind that the force of sin continues to act. My own suggestion is that, in addition to what is stated above, the field of natural theology does merit a fresh approach, starting from the hypotheses that much of modernity's nihilism and radical subjectivism begins with the disappearance of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *Principles*, 184.

*thaumazein*, the attitude of awe in front of Being and from the radical distrust which modern science and Cartezian epistemology bring against the traditional conviction that Being can disclose itself in the realm of creation. This approach, coupled with the cautionary note introduced by Ratzinger and von Balthasar that, as long as we are in this world, one can have only a fragmentary knowledge of Being and that the only gate to the Infinite is Jesus Christ, may help to restore the confidence of humanity at the beginning of this millennium. Ultimately, man is called to open his heart and approach the Beyond using the three theological virtues: faith, hope, love. Only in this way would he be able to encounter the delicate smile of the Father.

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