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Benedict XVI and the Foundations of Politics

Benedykt XVI i fundamenty polityki

ABSTRACT: This article aims to present the political theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. The first paragraph focuses on Ratzinger's interpretation of selected New Testament source texts and the basic assumptions of what he called the "service to politics rendered by the Christian faith." The second paragraph deals with Ratzinger's interpretation of the key relevant logion: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17). It cut the knot of the legal, moral and cultic order, on which states based their status, regarding the binding character of its laws as an expression of the divine will. The Enlightenment, according to Ratzinger, was faced with the necessity of cutting the equation "in two," this time in the Christian world, by exposing the Gospel-rooted model of separation of Church and State. The fundamental task of Christians then is to maintain the balance of the dual system as the basis of freedom. The third paragraph traces the development of Ratzinger's reflection on the greatness and weaknesses of the contemporary vision of democracy. The *clou* of this reflection was the reference to the "Böckenförde paradox," particularly topical in the era of the "dictatorship of relativism" that destroys democracy. The author refutes the criticism of the "Böckenförde paradox" made by Chantal Delsol in her book predicting the end of the Christendom, and concludes with a presentation of the *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (2002), which is, in his view, the culmination of Ratzinger's thought on the foundations of politics in the light of fundamental theology and Catholic social teaching.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, foundations of politics, faith and politics, critique of the Christian state, separation of church and state, Böckenförde paradox, dictatorship of relativism, end of the Christendom, Chantal Delsol

ABSTRAKT: Przedmiotem artykułu jest teologia polityczna Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI. W paragrafie pierwszym przedstawiono dokonaną przez niemieckiego myśliciela interpretację wybranych źródłowych tekstów nowotestamentowych i podstawowych założeń teo, co Ratzinger nazywał „służbą wiary chrześcijańskiej

wobec polityki”. W paragrafie drugim zajęto się Ratzingerową interpretacją kluczowego w tym zakresie logionu: „oddajcie Bogu, co boskie, a cesarzowi, co cesarskie” (por. Mk 12,17). Rozciął on splot porządku prawnego, moralnego i kultowego, w którego ramach państwa czerpały swój wiążący charakter z tego, że stanowiły wyraz woli boskiej. Oświecenie, zdaniem Ratzingera, stanęło przed koniecznością nowego „rozcięcia splotu” – tym razem w świecie chrześcijańskim. Dokonało tego, odsłaniając zakorzeniony w Ewangelii model rozdziału Kościoła od państwa. Podstawowym zadaniem chrześcijan w tej sferze jest utrzymywanie równowagi dwoistego systemu jako podstawy wolności. W trzecim paragrafie prześlędzono rozwój refleksji J. Ratzingera nad wielkością i słabościami współczesnej wizji demokracji. *Clou* tej refleksji stanowiło odwołanie do „paradoksu Böckenfördego”, szczególnie aktualnego w dobie niszczącej demokrację „dyktatury relatywizmu”. Autor artykułu zbija krytykę „paradoksu Böckenfördego” dokonaną przez Chantal Delsol w książce *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego* i kończy prezentacją *Noty doktrynalnej o niektórych aspektach działalności i postępowania katolików w życiu politycznym* (2002), będącej w jego przekonaniu ukoronowaniem refleksji Ratzingera nad fundamentami polityki w świetle teologii fundamentalnej i katolickiej nauki społecznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Joseph Ratzinger, Benedykt XVI, fundamenty polityki, wiara a polityka, krytyka państwa chrześcijańskiego, rozdział Kościoła od państwa, paradoks Böckenfördego, dyktatura relatywizmu, koniec świata chrześcijańskiego, Chantal Delsol

The subject of this article is the political theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. Ratzinger never related this term with his reflections. He believed that “New Testament is acquainted with political ethics, but not with political theology.” This means, he argued, that the Gospel as a rule rejects attempts to elevate the Kingdom of God to the status of a political project and that politics is the province of ethics.¹ With this opinion, Ratzinger reacted to the views of his prominent university colleague from Münster, Johann Baptist Metz. He was convinced that his new political theology² takes a direction “which brings faith into politics in the wrong way,”³ which had become a reality in the radical currents of South American liberation theology that inspired it. He did,

¹ J. Ratzinger, *A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy? On the Indispensability of Christianity in the Modern World*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics. New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, transl. M. Miller, San Francisco 2008, p. 204 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *O niezbywalności chrześcijaństwa we współczesnym świecie*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Kościół – ekumenizm – polityka*, Poznań–Warszawa 1990, pp. 253–254).

² See J.B. Metz, *Teologia wobec cierpienia*, transl. J. Zychowicz, Kraków 2008; see H. Seweryniak, *Teologia fundamentalna*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2010, pp. 37–43.

³ Benedict XVI, P. Seewald, *Last Testament: In His Own Words*, transl. J. Phillips, London 2016, p. 150 (Polish edition: Benedykt XVI, P. Seewald, *Ostatnie rozmowy*, transl. J. Jurczyński, Kraków 2016, p. 179).

however, agree with Metz on some significant points,⁴ and recognised that it was possible to practise political theology in a broad sense.⁵ At the end of his life, replying to Peter Seewald's question about his interest in politics, he stated:

I have never attempted to exert myself politically, but I always had a great personal interest in politics, and the philosophy that stands behind it. Because politics lives off a philosophy. Politics cannot simply be pragmatic, in the sense of 'we'll do something.' It must have a vision of the whole. That has always concerned me.⁶

In this article, I take up the most important issues of this "vision of the whole" that concerned Benedict XVI: analyses of the source texts of Christianity in an attempt to extract from them, despite their reserve towards power, politics and the state, the fundamental principles of what he called "the social and political responsibility of faith"⁷ or the "service to politics rendered by the Christian faith";⁸ reinterpretation of the question of separation of religion and state; reflection on the "dictatorship of relativism" that threatens modern democracy.

Source texts – a telling reserve

Initiating in the 1970s an in-depth reflection on the sources of Christian political commitment, Joseph Ratzinger made it clear that the search in the New Testament for references to political problems and Christian responsibility for

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger admitted it when he took part in a session organised in Westphalian Ahaus on the occasion of Metz's 70th birthday. Cf. J. Ratzinger, J.B. Metz, *Gott, die Schuld und das Leiden. Gespräch*, [in:] *Ende der Zeit? Die Provokation der Rede von Gott*, eds. T.R. Peters, C. Urban, Mainz 1999, pp. 50–55.

⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy?...*, op. cit., p. 204 (cf. J. Ratzinger, "O niezbywalności chrześcijaństwa we współczesnym świecie," op. cit., p. 254). For more on this issue from the perspective of fundamental theology: T.R. Rourke, *Fundamental Politics: What We Must Learn from the Social Thought of Benedict XVI*, "Communio" 35/3 (2008), pp. 432–450.

⁶ Benedict XVI, P. Seewald, *Last Testament...*, op. cit., p. 116 (Benedykt XVI, P. Seewald, *Ostatnie rozmowy*, op. cit., pp. 141–142).

⁷ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World: Assessment and Forecast*, transl. B. McNeil, San Francisco 1994, p. 76 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie. Miejsce Kościoła i świata*, transl. M. Mijalska, Kraków 2005, p. 63).

⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics...*, op. cit., p. 144 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, [in:] *Kościół – ekumenizm – polityka*, op. cit., p. 198).

the state is difficult and may end in disappointment. An example of this is the description of the temptation scene in the desert, placed by all the synoptics at the beginning of the public activity of the Master from Nazareth. At this critical moment in His life, He was confronted with Satan's offer of universal power: "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me" (Matt 4:9). Despite the conviction The Old Testament, as well as part of the Judaic texts from the intertestamental era, was characterised by the conviction that the future Messiah would bring about Israel's victory over the other nations. In the Gospels, therefore, a significant inversion takes place in this regard – this conviction is seen as a temptation of the Evil One.

The inversion – according to Joseph Ratzinger – can also be seen in Jesus' reaction to Peter's behaviour, who, at the decisive moment of the Master's public activity, after the multiplication of bread and its surprising climax – the call to carry the cross – seems to say: "that's not consistent with your mission; you must be successful; you cannot go to the Cross [cf. Mark 8]. Thereby Peter repeats the temptation from the days in the wilderness, which is presented to us as Jesus' one temptation, to be a Messiah of success, to climb on the political bandwagon."⁹ This temptation also recurs in the reproach of the disciples at Emmaus: "And we expected that He would deliver Israel..." (Luke 24:21).

'O, foolish men,' summarises Ratzinger the reply of the Risen One, 'and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!' [...]. Jesus, however, repeats to us what he said in reply to Satan, what he said to Peter, and what he explained further to the disciples of Emmaus: No kingdom of this world is the Kingdom of God, the total condition of mankind's salvation. Earthly kingdoms remain earthly human kingdoms, and anyone who claims to be able to establish the perfect world is the willing dupe of Satan and plays the world right into his hands.¹⁰

This is precisely why Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI will often warn radical factions of liberation theology against a temptation analogous to Christ's "third

⁹ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, transl. H. Tylor, San Francisco 2002, p. 238 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Bóg i świat. Wiara i życie w dzisiejszych czasach. Z kardynałem Josephem Ratzingerem rozmawia Peter Seewald*, transl. G. Sowinski, Kraków 2001, p. 219).

¹⁰ J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, San Francisco 2007, p. 43 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jezus z Nazaretu*, vol. 1: *Od Chrztu w Jordanie do przemienienia*, transl. W. Szymona, Kraków 2007, p. 49).

temptation.” It is not true that “Mankind would be saved if everyone had enough money and possessions”;¹¹ that Christianity will only be authentic and effective when it becomes a distinctive instrument for the political transformation of the world;¹² that it will fulfil its purpose when the attempt to construct “a Marxist version of Christianity, which would finally create the ideal society.”¹³ “In the case of the radicalized political theologians, [...]” Ratzinger concluded, “the New Testament is taken back into the Old; redemption becomes the Exodus, interpreted in a political way, as the secular act of liberation, and thus the Kingdom of God becomes the product of the human act of liberation.”¹⁴ It is important for the Church to be concerned with the problem of injustice, hunger and oppression. But it should not evolve into a social association nor begin to heal man from without, but from within.¹⁵ For the message from the narrative of the third temptation is that power, politics, governance, if pursued without God, spoil man. This was proved by political experiments which treated the Creator as an illusion and attempted to satisfy human desires through the structures of power itself: Marxism, National Socialism, Fascism, Maoism or Pol Pot.¹⁶ It is true, Ratzinger concludes, that the power of God is quiet in this world, but it is a real and lasting power. The kingdoms that Satan showed Christ have disintegrated and are still disintegrating. Their splendour, their glory has turned out to be a sham – Christ’s glory, which is humble, loving, and ready to suffer, endures.¹⁷

The author of *Introduction to Christianity* recalls another difficulty in defining the foundations of Christian reflection on politics. In his view, it lies in the fact that the fundamental texts of the New Testament were written in

¹¹ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *God and the World...*, op. cit., p. 238 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Bóg i świat...*, op. cit., p. 219).

¹² J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *God and the World...*, op. cit., p. 238 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Bóg i świat...*, op. cit., p. 219).

¹³ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *God and the World...*, op. cit., p. 238 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Bóg i świat...*, op. cit., p. 233).

¹⁴ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?...*, op. cit., p. 77 (J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie...*, op. cit., p. 64). Cf. J.L. Allen, *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican’s Enforcer of the Faith*, New York 2000 (German edition: *Joseph Ratzinger. Biographie*, Düsseldorf 2005, pp. 115–127).

¹⁵ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?...*, op. cit., p. 77 (J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie...*, op. cit., p. 64).

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?...*, op. cit., p. 77 (J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie...*, op. cit., p. 64).

¹⁷ Cf. Matt 4:8 “the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor [literally: *doxa* – ‘glory’]” (RSV).

a world in which Christians were not allowed to shape their state nor to share the responsibility for it, but rather suffered persecution from its authorities. In other words, they could only endure what the state did, living a life of Christians in spite of it. The persecutions during the reign of Nero and Domitian (54–96) made them think that they were strangers in a state that in their eyes resembled Babylon, in which Israel, six centuries earlier, had painfully experienced its plight as “objects of that state.”¹⁸

In spite of these reservations, in the 1970s Joseph Ratzinger discovered in the epistles of Paul and Peter the impulses relevant for Christian political reflection. In his view, the state does not set the boundaries of human hope because it is, in the sense of Christian theism, much greater (here J. Ratzinger used for the first time the phrase “great hope” and “greater hope,” which would become central to his encyclical *Spe Salvi*¹⁹). This is precisely what provoked Rome’s repression – the early Christians with their “great hope” demythologised the state as a divine reality, the ultimate.²⁰ For wherever the prospect of a “greater hope” is lost, the myth of the divine state, various forms of cult of the leader or cult of the individual appear, even if they take the form of the myth of the abolition of the state in the final phase of the development of societies (Marxism) or the myth of the kingdom of God on earth (Ernst Bloch’s neo-Marxism).²¹ “Such politics, which declares that the kingdom of God is the outcome of politics [...], is by its very nature the politics of enslavement; it is mythological politics.”²² The service of Christian faith to politics consists in that “it liberates man from the irrationality of political myths,” and political morality resists “the seductive force of the big words for which humanity and its chances are being gambled away. The moral thing is not adventurous moralism, [...] but rather honesty, which accepts man’s limits and does man’s work within

¹⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., pp. 143–144 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., pp. 198–199).

¹⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., pp. 143–144 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., pp. 197–198).

²⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 144 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., p. 198).

²¹ On Ratzinger’s relationship with Ernst Bloch, author of the three-volume work: *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* [The Principle of Hope] (1954–1959), see P. Seewald, *Benedykt XVI. Życie* [Benedict XVI. Life], transl. W. Szymona, Kraków 2021, pp. 471–472, 490–491.

²² J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 144 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., p. 198).

them. Not the uncompromising stance, but compromise is the true morality in political matters.”²³

Although, as mentioned, the Christian sources sometimes compared the Roman state to Babylon (1 Pet 5:13; Rev 18:2), they also recognised, as Ratzinger emphasises, the positive significance of the state as such. For the metaphor of “Babylon” also invoked the letter addressed to the exiles by the prophet Jeremiah (VI century BC) and the encouragement contained therein: “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce. [...] Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer 29:5, 7). For the sake of these prophetic words, the authors of 1 Peter and 1 Timothy were also concerned about the prosperity of their country. They encouraged the first generations of Christians living as if in exile: pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim 2:2); “maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:12); “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet 2:17). In these words, Ratzinger observes, it is not a matter of encouraging cowardice or easy compromise, for the martyrs from the times of Nero became paragons for all generations of believers. Recognising the limits of the rulers’ demands, they did not bow to them when the rulers opposed God’s will. They followed their own way of living in the state; the teachings of the Roman schools of Peter and Paul and, for example, of the *Epistle to Diognetus* from the second century reveals how they fought what was amoral with what was moral, evil with good. They prayed for the rulers so that the rulers could rule justly and honestly, and in this sense they also were obedient to them. The obedience, however, was not absolute and it ended when the ruler attempted to take the place of God.

Morality – doing good – is the true resistance, and only the good can be a preparation for a turn for the better. There are not two kinds of political morality: a morality of resistance and a morality of ruling. There is only one morality: morality as such, the morality of God’s commandments, which cannot be temporarily suspended in order to bring about a change in the status quo

²³ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 144 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., p. 198); cf. T. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Oxford 2008, p. 157 (Polish edition: T. Rowland, *Wiara Ratzingera. Teologia Benedykta XVI*, transl. A. Gomola, Kraków 2008, p. 190).

more quickly. One can build by only building up, not by destroying – that is the political ethics of the Bible.²⁴

It is worth remembering that this way of thinking was absent from the political thought of modern Christianity for centuries, and even today many still have problems with it. When, in the nineteenth century, representatives of liberal, anti-Church political circles began to rule in France and Catholics found themselves once again in the political “foreign land,” many considered this state of affairs to be completely incompatible with the ideal of the Christian state, conceived as the only proper form of the “state-Church” relationship. It was then that Pope Leo XIII addressed the Catholics of the Hexagon with his encyclical *Au Milieu Des Sollicitudes* (Amidst the Cares), in which he called for a redefinition of the relation between Church and government, encouraging them to follow the path of *ralliement*, by which he meant the acceptance of the republican form of government and the renunciation of treating such a state as an instrument of hostile force. The social good, the Pope proclaimed, demands “respect due to constituted power.” On the other hand, “upright men should unite as one to combat, by all lawful and honest means, these progressive abuses of legislation” (no. 24). Leo XIII illustrated the new situation by recalling the story of the Emperor Julian Apostate, reigning from 361 to 363, who, quoting St Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmis* 124,7,

was an emperor unfaithful to God, an apostate, a pervert, an idolator. Christian soldiers served this faithless emperor, but as soon as there was question of the cause of Jesus Christ they recognized only Him who was in heaven. Julian commanded them to honor idols and offer them incense, but they put God above the prince. However, when he made them form into ranks and march against a hostile nation, they obeyed instantly. They distinguished the eternal from the temporal master and still in view of the eternal Master they submitted to such a temporal master.²⁵

Similarly, according to Joseph Ratzinger, the responsible political action of Christians consists of the convictions that the persecuted early Church prescribed as the core of the political ethos: that morality is not a private matter, but has

²⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., pp. 145–146 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., p. 199).

²⁵ Leo XIII, Encyclical *Au Milieu Des Sollicitudes*, 1892, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_16021892_au-milieu-des-sollicitudes.html [access: 12.11.2023].

public significance; that the centre of responsible political action must be the dimension of God's commandments also in the public sphere; that only where good is done and recognised as good can coexistence between people flourish.²⁶

Conclusions and implications

[1] From the beginning of his path of theological reflection, Ratzinger argued that authentic Christianity does not equal the Kingdom of God with the realisation of political visions. Consequently, he denied the validity of the postulate to govern the state according to the "principles of revealed truth,"²⁷ leaving politics to reason and morality. Vaticanum II gave this norm the name of autonomy of earthly realities.²⁸ It is not, however, an absolute autonomy. Christianity is seen within it as a source of knowledge that illuminates the meaning of political activity. It is not this source as a revealed religion, but as leaven and a form of life that has stood the historical test. Among other things, it has proved itself by demonstrating the need for faith in ultimate truth, the indisputable nature of conscience, the value of following witnesses to truth, conscience and love, defying the state's pursuit of absoluteness, which always ends in totalitarianism.

[2] In the field of politics, too, the correlation of reason and religion, called to refine each other, must be sought. Religion must give up its aspirations to earthly power, for it then loses its inherent nature; reason should learn in this encounter to recognise its limits. Without this, so-called pure rationality ends up threatening the self-destruction of humanity (nuclear weapons) and treating human beings as products (experiments on embryos, euthanasia). The same question was put forward by an American thinker and convert, Richard Neuhaus (d. 2009), who criticised what he termed the *naked public square*

²⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., pp. 146–147 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, op. cit., p. 200).

²⁷ In 1968, J. Ratzinger strongly supported the *Bensberger Kreis Memorandum*, which was a profound response of German Catholics to the famous *The Pastoral Letter of the Polish Bishops to their German Brothers* of 18 November 1965. However, he demanded the removal of the aforementioned postulate from the *Memorandum*, which he described as a "false political theology." For: P. Stachowiak, *Poczucie winy, poczucie zobowiązania* [A Sense of Guilt, a Sense of Obligation], "Przewodnik Katolicki" (June 25, 2023) No. 25, p. 45.

²⁸ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 36; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004, no. 45, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html [access: 14.11.2023].

(“meaning public life stripped of religion and religiously grounded argument”). Its “alternative,” he argued, “is not the sacred public square, but the civil public square.”²⁹ In this public square, on the one hand, citizens respect the religious neutrality of the state and, on the other hand, the state respects the religious views of citizens.

[3] According to Ratzinger, any “interpretation of Jesus that makes him a failed rebel paints a totally false picture of him. Jesus was not Barabbas or Spartacus, but precisely Jesus.” This is a significant consequence – “faith in him goes beyond the social and political realm, but [...] precisely in the mode of responsibility,” which “requires mediation through reason and will.”³⁰ Reason and will must attempt to concretise it with an awareness of the imperfection of human action in history. This action will not build the Kingdom of God on earth, but the very idea of it, the vision of it, calls for reaching out through law and love. The fact that such a hope has been given to humanity gives Christians the courage to take up again and again “the struggle for a just order that is the form of freedom and builds up a dam against the tyranny of injustice.”³¹

[4] From what has been said, there is another important function of religion, which Ratzinger emphasises in the “Church-State” relationship: the limiting function.³² “The State is not the whole of human existence and does not encompass all human hope. Man and what he hopes for extend beyond the framework of the state and beyond the sphere of political action. This is true not only for a state like Babylon, but for every state. The state is not the totality; [looking at political reality *sub ratione Dei*] this unburdens the politician and at the same time opens up for him the path of reasonable politics.”³³ In this way, the Church/Churches help to defend politics from itself – from its transformation into a secular religion, which would seek to create a paradise on earth. “The unlimited state, whether based on Marxist atheism or on the engineered designs of Enlightenment rationalism strives for totalitarian power.”³⁴ By contrast, the “limited state is kept within this limitation by the democratic

²⁹ R.J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon. Notes of a Christian Exile*, New York 2009, p. 187.

³⁰ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?...*, op. cit., pp. 82–83 (J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie...*, op. cit., p. 69).

³¹ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?...*, op. cit., p. 83 (J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie...*, op. cit., p. 70).

³² The excerpt refers to H. Seweryniak, *Apologia i dziennikarstwo* [Apologia and Journalism], Warszawa 2018, pp. 310–311.

³³ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 144 (J. Ratzinger, *Biblijne aspekty tematu: wiara a polityka*, p. 197).

³⁴ R.J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon...*, op. cit., p. 187.

demand for recognition of the transcendent aspirations of human hearts.”³⁵ The presence of the Church “in public discourse relativises the arrogant ambitions of politicians.”³⁶

Church and state – “a new era”

Joseph Ratzinger assigns a decisive role in the formation of Christian political responsibility to the New Testament injunction: “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17; Matt 22:21; Luke 20:25). This logion, he stresses, “inaugurated a new era in the history of the relationship between politics and religion.”³⁷ Ratzinger’s most elaborate interpretation of the logion was made in 2004 in his book *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*. There he states that in formulating the injunction, Jesus teaches that to the extent that the state ensures peace and law, it represents the order resulting from creation, is therefore based on nature and is necessary; to the extent that authority is the guarantor of law, to that extent it can enforce obedience. At the same time, the teacher from Nazareth limits the extent of the obligation to obey which must be shown to it – there is also that which belongs to God. This approach implies that “whenever Caesar exalts himself as God, he has exceeded his limits, and obedience then would be the denial of God”; the refusal to give glory to the Caesar is therefore equal to a negation of all manner of totalitarianism.³⁸

According to Ratzinger, with the injunction: “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,” “the new dualism” emerged in history, involving the separation of state and sacred authority. In the ideology of authority of ancient Israel, the legal order and moral and cultic

³⁵ R.J. Neuhaus, *Liberalizm Jana Pawła II* [Liberalism of John Paul II], “First Things. Polish Edition” 5 (2007), p. 18.

³⁶ [Interview by M. Zięba] R.J. Neuhaus, *Ocalić publiczną rozmowę* [Saving the Public Conversation], [in:] R.J. Neuhaus, *Prorok z Nowego Jorku* [Prophet of New York], eds. G. Górny, R. Jankowski, Warszawa 2009, p. 33.

³⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Theology and Church Politics*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics...*, op. cit., p. 155 (Polish edition: *Teologia a polityka Kościoła*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Kościół – ekumenizm – polityka*, op. cit., p. 208).

³⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Political Visions and the Praxis of Politics*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2007, p. 56 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Wizje polityczne i praktyka*, [in:] *Europa. Jej podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, transl. S. Czerwik, Kielce 2005, pp. 52–58).

order made a fundamental constitution, and Jesus cut them in two.³⁹ Ratzinger analyses this “cutting” not only in the logion, but in the whole teaching of Jesus. It was previously assumed that the political sphere is also a sacred sphere; the state and its laws derived their binding character from the fact that the laws were the expression of the divine will and not merely the will of the ruler.⁴⁰ In other words, Christ, with his Gospel, cut in two “the equation of the state’s claim on men with the sacred claim of the divine will for the world.”⁴¹ No wonder, then, that the Empire saw in the attitudes resulting from this an attack on its foundations. Jesus, by denying the sacral foundations of the pre-Christian world system, nullified the claims of the Roman god-Caesar, who thus became a mere man-Caesar.⁴²

The Age of Martyrs in the Church was followed by the Constantinian Age: Christians assumed responsibility for the state and began to shape the foundations of a Christian political ethic. Something of the legacy of “render to Caesar...” remained. In the West, the doctrine of the duality of power gradually took shape: the emperor and the pope hold power separately, neither of them possessing it in its entirety. Ratzinger recalls that Pope Gelasius I (492–496) formulated it in a letter to Emperor Anastasius, where he stated that Christ because of human

weakness (pride!) separated the two ministries for the following ages, so that no one might become proud. For matters concerning eternal life the Christian emperors needed the priests (pontifices), and the latter, in turn, abided by the imperial ordinances in the course of temporal affairs. In worldly matters, the priests had to follow the laws of the emperor who had been placed in office by a divine decree, whereas he had to submit to the priest in sacred matters. [...] [Thus the principle of] a separation and distinction of powers was introduced, [...] which laid the foundations [...] for what is distinctively typical of the West.⁴³

³⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Theology and Church Politics*, op. cit., p. 156 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Teologia a polityka Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 208).

⁴⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Theology and Church Politics*, op. cit., p. 156 (J. Ratzinger, *Teologia a polityka Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 208).

⁴¹ J. Ratzinger, *Theology and Church Politics*, op. cit., p. 156 (J. Ratzinger, *Teologia a polityka Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 209); cf. J. Ratzinger, *Wizje polityczne i praktyka*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁴² J. Ratzinger, *A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy?...*, op. cit., p. 204 (J. Ratzinger, *O niezbywalności chrześcijaństwa we współczesnym świecie*, op. cit., pp. 253–254).

⁴³ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2007, p. 16 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, transl. S. Czerwik, Kielce 2005, p. 14).

It is undeniable, however, that this conclusion is too optimistic, and that the balance inherent in dualism was often violated, mainly by the fact that both parties manifested “the totalitarian impulse” and “a desire to place one’s own power above the other.”⁴⁴ The process of usurpation took a variety of forms. We find significant elements of it, for example, in the medieval *Romano-German Pontifical*, which was widespread throughout Western Christendom, a variant of which, as could be seen during the coronation of Charles III, is the coronation ritual still used in Great Britain today.⁴⁵ In the political doctrine that can be extracted from there, the legal, moral and cultic orders formed a tight knot;⁴⁶ the merging of state and church often took place; the idea of a Christian state and a state church came to the fore.

It has therefore become indispensable to cut the knot anew – this time in the Christian world. The epoch in which this began to take place was the Enlightenment. Analysing the libertarian ideals of the Enlightenment, Ratzinger will show that this epoch managed to separate and control the power, establish human rights equal for all, establish that religion should not be imposed by the state, but be a matter of free human choice. All of this contributed to restoring the functioning of the principle of “render to the Caesar,” then precisely defined as the principle of separation of Church and State. Ratzinger, however, is by no means as forbearing to the spirit of the Enlightenment as John Paul II⁴⁷ or Cardinal Walter Kasper were.⁴⁸ Replying to Peter Seewald’s question in the *Salt of the Earth* interview whether it is not beneficial that the separation of Church and State took place and that the faith is henceforth not imposed by the State, but “rest[s] upon freely acquired conviction,” Cardinal Ratzinger once again returns to the origins of the idea of separation. He diagnoses that

⁴⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 16 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., p. 15).

⁴⁵ See H. Seweryniak, *Błogosławieństwo nowego króla i królowej w Pontyfikale Płocense I* [Blessing of the New King and Queen in *Pontificale Plocense I*], “Wrocław Theological Review” 29/1 (2021), pp. 269–299.

⁴⁶ It is noticeable in the medieval coronation rites which drew on the figures of Old Testament kings and the model events of their reign (more often than to New Testament figures and events). See H. Seweryniak, *Skarbiec średniowiecznej modlitwy. Błogosławieństwa, modlitwy, egzorcyzmy i dramat liturgiczny w Pontyfikale Płockim I* [Treasury of Medieval Prayer. Blessings, Prayers, Exorcisms and Liturgical Drama in *Pontificale Plocense I*], Płock 2021, pp. 35, 71–80.

⁴⁷ See John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, 2005, p. 82 [Kindle] (Polish edition: Jan Paweł II, *Pamięć i tożsamość*, Kraków 2005, pp. 101–102).

⁴⁸ See W. Kasper, *Rzeczywistość wiary* [The Reality of Faith], transl. J. Piesiewicz, Warszawa 1979, pp. 13–14.

any modern student of history will answer that it was the result of the struggle between the republican, liberal and democratic movements in the 18th and 19th century. As a great apologist, he reversed this way of thinking, insisting that “the idea of the separation of Church and state came into the world first through Christianity.”⁴⁹ He pointed out that in antiquity, both in pagan countries and in Israel, the political system and religion were united, and that it was at this decisive point that Christianity confronted the Empire – Rome tolerated the religions of conquered peoples, but only on two conditions: firstly, that they recognised the state cult and “the aegis of Rome”; secondly, that the state religion prevailed over all private religions as their supreme structure.⁵⁰ Christianity, by challenging this construction in the name of the evangelical principle “render to Caesar..., render to God...,” denied the sacral character of the state. “[T]his separation is ultimately a primordial Christian legacy and also a decisive factor for freedom.”⁵¹ The state is no longer “the sacred power but simply an order that finds its limit in a faith that worships, not the state, but a God who stands over it and judges it.”⁵² What, then, have the Enlightenment liberal, republican and Masonic movements accomplished? They only brought out the “model of the separation of Church and state” that was rooted in the Gospel! And it is only in this sense that the ongoing evolution since the Enlightenment, in which this model was revealed and began to function, can be said to have a positive side.

Conclusions and implications

[1] The author of *Introduction to Christianity* proclaims almost demonstratively: neither state monism, based on so many attempts to eradicate Christianity in Europe, nor religious monism, characteristic of Islam, for example!⁵³ It is clear

⁴⁹ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Salt of the Earth: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church at the End of the Millennium*, transl. A.J. Walker, San Francisco 1997, p. 239 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Sól ziemi. Chryścijaństwo i Kościół katolicki na przelomie tysiącleci*, transl. G. Sowinski, Kraków 2005, p. 205).

⁵⁰ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Salt of the Earth...*, op. cit., p. 239 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Sól ziemi...*, op. cit., p. 205).

⁵¹ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Salt of the Earth...*, op. cit., p. 239 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Sól ziemi...*, op. cit., p. 206).

⁵² J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Salt of the Earth...*, op. cit., p. 239 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Sól ziemi...*, op. cit., p. 206).

⁵³ Also, for example, Richard J. Neuhaus (*Prorok z Nowego Jorku*, op. cit., pp. 293–294) has argued that Islam has no arguments to justify or support democracy and religious pluralism; it is radically monistic in its understanding of spiritual and temporal authority.

that freedom is inhibited where the Church subordinates the state or becomes the state. But it is inhibited above all where the state eliminates the Church from the public sphere, deciding that no equally significant (albeit significant differently) authority can exist apart from it. This is a situation where it arbitrarily claims to decide what is moral and, moreover, exercises this claim (Vendée, USSR, Hitler's Germany, China from Mao onwards with varying degrees of intensity up to the present day). Such a state inevitably becomes totalitarian, for it cannot be opposed by an independent, publicly recognised authority of conscience. "Where such duality is lacking, totality, that is, the totalitarian system is inevitable."⁵⁴

[2] According to Ratzinger, the fundamental task of Christians in this sphere is "to maintain this balance of a dual system as the foundation for freedom." Therefore – in his opinion – "the Church must lay claim to public rights and cannot simply withdraw into the realm of private rights. For this reason, however, she must also make sure that Church and state remain separate and that membership in the Church clearly retains its voluntary character."⁵⁵

[3] How the principle of dualism or separation should be correctly implemented and what shape should be given to it, remains – according to Cardinal Ratzinger – a fundamental problem for the present and future fate of the Euro-Atlantic world.⁵⁶

The democratic model – the Böckenförde paradox

In a number of prominent essays, Joseph Ratzinger traces the path towards a democratic model of statehood in Europe and the modern desacralisation of the state. He reminds us that already in the late Middle Ages the slow decline of the sacred empire as a political reality was perceived; "the sacred foundation for history and for the existence of the State was rejected; history was no longer gauged on the basis of an idea of a preexistent God who shaped it; the State was henceforth considered in purely secular terms, founded on reason and on the

⁵⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Theology and Church Politics*, op. cit., p. 157 (J. Ratzinger, *Teologia a polityka Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 210).

⁵⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Theology and Church Politics*, op. cit., p. 157 (J. Ratzinger, *Teologia a polityka Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 210).

⁵⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 16 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., p. 15).

will of the citizens.”⁵⁷ By now, modern philosophers would be firmly convinced that reason and the people’s will should take the place of inherited social rules in the new, post-revolutionary world. It is in the hands of the enlightened monarch that the task and the right to implement this will should be placed (Thomas Hobbes). And if citizens did not understand freedom in this way, they should be compelled to do so (Jean-Jacques Rousseau); the Enlightenment (as can be seen from the adventures of the European Union to the present day) acts “in destroying these well-developed freedoms, it considered itself the executor of the higher freedom that higher insight bestows.”⁵⁸

Modernity greatly facilitated the process of transformation in the state theory by reducing religion to the realm of subjectivity, of a private affair (Rousseau)⁵⁹ and thus excluding it from the public sphere. Ratzinger does not hesitate to use the word “schism” to refer to this turn in state theory. He recognises this schism in the fact that

for the very first time in history, a purely secular State arose, which abandoned and set aside the divine guarantee and the divine ordering of the political sector, considering them a mythological world view, and it declared God himself to be a private affair, that did not play a role in public life or the formation of the popular will. The latter was seen now solely as a matter of reason, by which God did not appear to be clearly knowable; religion and faith in God belonged to the realm of feelings and not to that of reason. God and his will ceased to be relevant in public life.⁶⁰

There is, however, one problem – the democratic system formed at that time only functions if it is based on accepted and defined fundamental values. It cannot, therefore, do without values; it cannot be neutral towards them and their source cannot be tantamount to the essential mechanism for the functioning of democracy: the decision, the will of the majority. The source is elsewhere. In order to answer the question “where,” Ratzinger refers to a theorem, called

⁵⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 20 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., p. 14).

⁵⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Freedom and Constraint in the Church*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics...*, op. cit., p. 177.

⁵⁹ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Salt of the Earth...*, op. cit., p. 239 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Sól ziemi...*, op. cit., pp. 205–206).

⁶⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 21 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., pp. 18–19).

the Böckenförde theorem, dictum, dilemma or paradox.⁶¹ It reads: “the liberal, secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself.”⁶² This means that it needs the ultimate criteria for its existence: freedom, truth, goodness and, above all, justice. Their source is not democracy, for its fundamental principle is, after all, the rule of majority. Since Immanuel Kant, numerous philosophers have proposed that this source is the “pure insight of reason.” In our own times, the source is located either in the nation, or in the “working people of the cities and countryside,” or in the race, or in the leader. However, as history shows, even such a thing as “pure reason” does not exist; the state has its foundation from outside through reason, which has matured on the basis of historical religious traditions.⁶³

The most universal and rational religious tradition, according to Ratzinger, has proved to be the Christian faith. Even in our own times, it offers to reason the basic moral insight, indispensable for the rational moral measure in the life of society.⁶⁴ Christianity can fulfil this role especially today, when it has overcome the temptation to become tightly related with the state and the temptation to create a Christian state.⁶⁵ That is why, Ratzinger in his conversation with Seewald echoed Böckenförde’s paradox: “democratic society lives thanks

⁶¹ He seems to make his earliest reference in an essay with the distinctive title: *A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy?...*, op. cit., p. 206 (J. Ratzinger, *O niezbywalności chrześcijaństwa we współczesnym świecie*, op. cit., p. 244).

⁶² The *Böckenförde-Paradox* was first reported in the lecture *Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation* (The Emergence of the State as a Consequence of the Secularisation Process) of Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (d. 2019), German philosopher of constitutional and administrative law, judge of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht*, at the *Ebracher Ferienseminar* held in 1964 (first published in the collection E. Forsthoff, *Säkularisation und Utopie. Ebracher Studien. Ernst Forsthoff zum 65. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart 1967, pp. 75–94). The lecture was addressed to a Catholic audience, to whom Böckenförde had explained the process of the formation of a secular, and therefore no longer Christian, state; the lecture was delivered before 1965, i.e. before the promulgation of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. See E.-W. Böckenförde, *Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation*, [in:] E.-W. Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit. Studien zur Rechtsphilosophie, Staatstheorie und Verfassungsgeschichte*, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 92–114.

⁶³ J. Ratzinger, *Faith and Politics*, transl. M. Miller, San Francisco 2018, p. 147 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Prawda, wartości, władza. Kiedy społeczeństwo można uznać za pluralistyczne*, transl. G. Sowinski, Kraków 1999, p. 83); cf. T. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith...*, op. cit., p. 158 (T. Rowland, *Wiara Ratzingera...*, op. cit., p. 191).

⁶⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 147 (J. Ratzinger, *Prawda, wartości, władza*, op. cit., pp. 83–84).

⁶⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 147 (J. Ratzinger, *Prawda, wartości, władza*, op. cit., p. 84).

to forces that it cannot generate on its own” and will add that Christianity possesses these forces.

The Church is not an organisation among others or a sort of state within a state that would thus have to be formed in exactly the same way as the state according to the same democratic rules of the game. She is something different, a spiritual power, as it were. She has her social and organisational form, but in essence she is a source of energy that provides what the state can't have of itself.⁶⁶

Therefore, Ratzinger emphasised in his essay *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow* that the Old Continent cannot do without showing the face of God as revealed to us – a God full of mercy for the poor and the weak; a God who became man and who, suffering with us, gives dignity to suffering and illuminates it with hope. If we fail to do this, we betray Europe's identity and become incapable of dialogue with others. “For the world's cultures, and especially for Islam, the absolute secularism that has spread in the West is something profoundly alien. [...]. This is why cultural pluralism is a call for us to delve anew within ourselves.”⁶⁷

Assimilating the Böckenförde paradox, Ratzinger will contrast in several different texts the words: “interior” and “exterior.” The interior is to be Christianity, which, while respecting the essence of the state and its freedom, is to recognise itself as a community of convictions, in other words: “a community based on convictions.” At the same time, the Church is to be “exterior” to the State. Only then are both the State and the Church truly what they should be. The Church, like the State, must remain in its place and within its boundaries. It must respect the essence of the State and its own freedom – it is in this way that it can do the State the service it really needs.⁶⁸

Peter Seewald, in his monumental book *Benedict XVI. A Life* recalls that the question of the conditions for a democratic state became the subject of Ratzinger's debate “with the formerly neo-Marxist sociologist” Jürgen Habermas. This debate about “pre-political moral foundations of a liberal state” (*Vorpolitische moralische Grundlagen eines freiheitlichen Staates*) took place on 19 January 2004

⁶⁶ J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Salt of the Earth...*, op. cit., p. 272 (J. Ratzinger, P. Seewald, *Sól ziemi...*, op. cit., p. 233); cf. the abbreviated version in: J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?*..., op. cit., p. 141 (J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie...*, op. cit., p. 126).

⁶⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 33 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., pp. 31–32).

⁶⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Faith and Politics*, op. cit., p. 105 (J. Ratzinger, *Prawda, wartości, władza*, op. cit., p. 84).

in the building of the Catholic Academy in Munich.⁶⁹ “The starting point for the disputation with Habermas was a statement by the former constitutional court judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, a brother of Ratzinger’s former assistant Werner Böckenförde. [...] “The liberal secularized state depends on assumptions it cannot itself guarantee.” In essence, then, the two thinkers agreed to talk about “whether the democratic state succeeded in basing its standards on secular reason alone” or “whether religion was really needed as a pre-political authority.” It was not particularly difficult to predict which position Ratzinger would take. “But the debate really became exciting when Habermas, a last representative of the left-wing Frankfurt School, proved to be in complete agreement with Ratzinger in rejecting an anti-religious society.” As the “pugnacious spokesman for the Enlightenment [Habermas]” argued, where the measure of everything is money, religion can “set values for fulfilling the human task of preserving the creation.” Habermas considered Christianity “particularly fitted for this role”; he had even earlier stressed that the “egalitarian universalism from which the ideas of freedom and living together in solidarity sprang, is a direct legacy of Jewish justice and the Christian ethic of love,” which has “no alternative.” “Unfortunately, this awareness was getting lost and giving way to a ‘narrow-minded Enlightenment’, which rejected faith and religion as ‘irrational’. For and open, rational discussion the contributions ‘of religious as well as non-religious citizens’ were needed, Habermas told [...]. That also went for morally complex questions as abortion, euthanasia or pre-natal genetic modification.”⁷⁰

Ratzinger’s significant achievement is the application of Böckenförde’s theorem to the analysis of the condition of contemporary liberal democracies. In *Truth, Values, Power: Touchstones of Pluralistic Society* (1993), Ratzinger noted that democracy seems inseparable from relativism. There is no ultimate truth, no one can claim to be the proclaimer of truth, only opinions are admissible; one human nature and the rights derived from it are undermined. “It is relativism

⁶⁹ The text of the conference delivered by Cardinal Ratzinger entitled: *That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2007, pp. 47–66 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Co podtrzymuje świat. Moralne i wyprzedzające politykę podstawy państwa*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, transl. S. Czerwik, Kielce 2005, pp. 65–79).

⁷⁰ P. Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, vol. 2: *Professor and Prefect to Pope and Pope Emeritus 1966–The Present*, London 2021, pp. 300–301 [Kindle]; cf. P. Seewald, *Benedykt XVI. Życie*, op. cit., pp. 700–701; see Z. Teinert, *Habermas i Ratzinger: wiara i wiedza w dobie sekularyzacji* [Habermas and Ratzinger: Faith and Knowledge in the Age of Secularisation], “Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne” 20 (2006), pp. 151–168; J.M. Carr, *Catholicism and Liberal Democracy: Forgotten Roots and Future Prospects*, Washington, DC 2023, pp. 191–206.

that appears to be the real guarantee of freedom.”⁷¹ In his homily during the Mass *Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice*, given on 18 April 2005 at the beginning of the conclave, Cardinal Ratzinger puts it more bluntly: Europe is building “a dictatorship of relativism”:⁷² the postmodern relativity of everything has become the principle of the Old Continent’s politics, tolerance is the highest virtue, while the Christian legacy that has defined it for at least 1,500 years, a battlefield. If Europe wants to survive, the Cardinal stressed in a conference presented on 13 May 2004 in the Italian Senate, it needs “a new – and certainly a critical and humble – acceptance of itself.”⁷³ The pluralism that is being spread with such fervour consists, in the first place, in rejecting with a self-hatred what is one’s own, in fleeing from one’s own values and Christian legacy. “But multiculturalism cannot exist without shared constants, without points of reference based on one’s own values. It surely cannot exist without respect for what is sacred.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ See the chapter *Relativism as a Precondition of Democracy* in the book: J. Ratzinger, *Faith and Politics*, transl. M. Miller, San Francisco 2018, pp. 131–133 (Polish edition: J. Ratzinger, *Relatywizm jako przesłanka demokracji?*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Prawda, wartości, władza*, op. cit., pp. 61–87 [especially 64–66]).

⁷² This seems to have been the first use of this famous phrase (see J. Ratzinger, *Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice*, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html [access: 14.11.2023]). In the extended interview Benedict XVI, P. Seewald, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, transl. M.J. Miller, A.J. Walker, San Francisco 2010, a whole section was entitled *The Dictatorship of Relativism* (pp. 61–70). This theme apparently recurred in: Benedict XVI, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings*, January 8, 2007, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070108_diplomatic-corps.html [access: 14.11.2023]; Benedict XVI, *General Audience. John of Salisbury*, December 16, 2009, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20091216.html [access: 14.11.2023]; Benedict XVI, *Homily, Bellabouston Park, Glasgow*, September 16, 2010, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100916_glasgow.html [access: 14.11.2023]. See: S. Jaśkiewicz, *Relatywizm – od idei do dyktatury. Wybrane zagadnienia z nauczania kard. Josepha Ratzingera – papieża Benedykta XVI* [Relativism – From Idea to Dictatorship. Selected Issues from the Teaching of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – Pope Benedict XVI], “Częstochowskie Studia Teologiczne” 34 (2006), pp. 15–25; B. Gienza, *Kościół wobec dyktatury relatywizmu* [The Church against the Dictatorship of Relativism], “Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny” 16/1 (2008), pp. 89–103; J. Warzeszak, “Dyktatura” relatywizmu w ujęciu Benedykta XVI [Benedict XVI’s Approach to the “Dictatorship” of Relativism], “Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne” 24/1 (2011), pp. 291–322.

⁷³ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 33 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., pp. 31–32).

⁷⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 33 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., pp. 31–32).

The paradox of Böckenförde has been repeatedly attacked by liberal political philosophers (Gerhard Czermak, Michael Haus, Gerhard Himmelman).⁷⁵ In 2021, they were joined by Chantal Delsol from France, a well-known Catholic philosopher. In her book *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego. Inwersja normatywna i nowa era* [The End of the Christian World. Normative Inversion and a New Era],⁷⁶ she wrote: “The secular liberal state is based on assumptions that it cannot guarantee by itself”⁷⁷ and referred to the legacy of Christian principles. In French Catholic thought, she recalled, long before the German constitutionalist, the liberal state was accused of “parasitising” on these principles, appropriating them and destroying them at the same time. Charles Péguy even compared ungrateful and unfaithful post-Enlightenment modernity to a clergyman who has abandoned the priesthood and taken his furniture with him, and to a cuckoo who shamelessly lays its eggs in the nests of other birds.⁷⁸ “I have a different perspective on these issues,”⁷⁹ argued Delsol. “Modern people realise that their world is full of rules that they somehow unconsciously use, and in doing so they no longer know them, have no control over them and are not convinced by them.”⁸⁰ Although the modern state came into being by liberating itself from the influence of religion, it relied on its religious legacy, according to the paradox. “Must the only conclusion be to recognise that the state is a parasite, a thief and a hypocrite, and by this fact is dramatically immoral? Does this thought mean that its days are numbered?”⁸¹

Analysing these vicissitudes of French political thought and posing her question, however, Delsol does not predict the end of the liberal state, but of “the end of Christian civilisation” (see the book’s title). The arguments presented

⁷⁵ E.-W. Böckenförde, *Freiheit ist ansteckend* [Interview with Joachim Frank], “Frankfurter Rundschau” November 2, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101104053317/http://www.fr-online.de/kultur/debatte/-freiheit-ist-ansteckend-/-/1473340/4795176/-/index.html> [access: 14.11.2023]: “From the point of view of the state,” said Böckenförde, “the liberal order needs a unifying ethos [...] of those who live in the state. The question then arises: what feeds this ethos, which can neither be enforced nor enforced by the state? One might say: first and foremost from a living culture. But what are the factors and elements of this culture? This brings us to sources such as Christianity, the Enlightenment and humanism.” Which source is primary, Böckenförde was not asked.

⁷⁶ Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego. Inwersja normatywna i nowa era* [The End of the Christian World. Normative Inversion and a New Era], transl. P. Napiwodzki, Kraków 2023.

⁷⁷ Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 142.

⁷⁸ Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego...*, op. cit., pp. 139 and 142.

⁷⁹ Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 142.

⁸⁰ Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 141.

⁸¹ Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego...*, op. cit., p. 142.

are intended to support her thesis of this very end. She believes that the fact of appropriating other, earlier principles is the usual way in which successive societies behave. Each new epoch makes use of the legacy of its predecessors, building on what it has taken over and at the same time turning against it. Often these hypothetical epochs do not acknowledge this legacy, distorting the meaning of what they have taken over, even degenerate what they have inherited. Professor Delsol believes that a good illustration of this phenomenon is the palimpsest – a new manuscript on a parchment from which the previous text has been removed.⁸²

One can assume that the mechanism of the reception of tradition looks resembles Chantal Delsol's description. In the Böckenförde paradox and its interpretation by Joseph Ratzinger (Delsol never refers to Ratzinger's analyses in her book), however, it is not the mechanism that is important, but two other specific issues. Firstly, the liberal state does not derive its so-called fundamental values from the majority rule (by negotiation; these values cannot be established by voting). Therefore, the state derives them from elsewhere. Secondly, in the Euro-Atlantic world, the state finds the whole range of these values in Christianity (e.g. justice, equality, mercy, forgiveness, the sense of suffering) and by referring to them it was able to create an original concept of human rights that is unknown elsewhere. This was already signalled by John Paul II in *Memory and Identity*, when he noted that the

"European Enlightenment not only led to the carnage of the French Revolution, but also bore positive fruits, such as the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, values which are rooted in the Gospel. Even when proclaimed independently, these ideas point naturally to their proper origin. Hence, the French Enlightenment prepared the way for a better understanding of human rights. Of course, the Revolution violated these rights in many ways. Yet this was also the time when human rights began to be properly acknowledged."⁸³

In this sense, too, it would be defeatist to predict the end of Christian civilisation.

⁸² Cf. Ch. Delsol, *Koniec świata chrześcijańskiego...*, op. cit., pp. 145–148.

⁸³ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, op. cit., p. 90 (Jan Paweł II, *Pamięć i tożsamość*, op. cit., pp. 111–112).

Conclusions and implications

[1] In 2002, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as prefect signed the *Doctrinal Note on Certain Aspects of the Activities and Conduct of Catholics in Political Life*. Although officially a document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it contains numerous elements and practical conclusions from the cardinal's reflections on the foundations of politics in the light of Catholic social teaching. Democracy is praised as "the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices."⁸⁴ The need for the greatest possible participation of lay Catholics in political life is emphasised. When acting in this space, however, they are particularly called upon to reject the "a conception of pluralism that reflects moral relativism."⁸⁵ The *Note* also provides an excellent summary of Ratzinger's critique of this concept:

A kind of cultural relativism exists today, evident in the conceptualization and defence of an ethical pluralism, which sanctions the decadence and disintegration of reason and the principles of the natural moral law. Furthermore, it is not unusual to hear the opinion expressed in the public sphere that such ethical pluralism is the very condition for democracy. As a result, citizens claim complete autonomy with regard to their moral choices, and lawmakers maintain that they are respecting this freedom of choice by enacting laws which ignore the principles of natural ethics and yield to ephemeral cultural and moral trends, as if every possible outlook on life were of equal value. [...] The history of the twentieth century demonstrates that those citizens were right who recognized the falsehood of relativism, and with it, the notion that there is no moral law rooted in the nature of the human person, which must govern our understanding of man, the common good and the state.⁸⁶

[2] The document also addresses an issue particularly close to Ratzinger: the question of the values that should guide the formation of political life. It is thus recalled that these are values and "ethical precepts are rooted in human nature itself and belong to the natural moral law."⁸⁷ It is not, therefore, "a question

⁸⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, Vatican City 2002, no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html [access: 14.11.2023].

⁸⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 3.

⁸⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 2.

⁸⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 5.

of ‘values’ per se”⁸⁸ although the Church transmits them in her legacy, by her teaching she

confirms and defends them always and everywhere as part of her service to the truth about man and about the common good of civil society. Moreover, it cannot be denied that politics must refer to principles of absolute value precisely because these are at the service of the dignity of the human person and of true human progress.⁸⁹

The principle of “secularism” or “laicity” of the State, often invoked today, implies the autonomy of the political sphere from the religious and ecclesiastical sphere. It is also a principle accepted by the Church as a legacy developed by our civilisation on the foundation of the Gospel (“render...”), differentiating it, for example, from Islamic civilisation. Consequently, “the recognition of civil and political rights, as well as the allocation of public services may not be made dependent upon citizens’ religious convictions or activities.”⁹⁰ However, it does not imply autonomy with regard to moral principles. “The fact that some of these truths may also be taught by the Church does not lessen the political legitimacy or the rightful ‘autonomy’ of the contribution of those citizens who are committed to them.”⁹¹ For secularism understood as autonomy implies an attitude of respect for the principles and truths flowing from the natural knowledge of human beings living in the community, regardless of the fact that these truths are also part of the teaching of a particular religion. The duty of the Church’s Magisterium in this regard is to form consciences, especially of those involved in political activity. It is a contribution to the work so that, through politics, a social order more just and corresponding to human dignity is established.⁹²

[3] In a word, relativism is detrimental to democratic life, which needs a true and solid foundation in the form of ethical principles which are “non-negotiable.”⁹³ All “those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a ‘grave and clear obligation to oppose’ any law that attacks human life.”⁹⁴ Catholics working in

⁸⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 5.

⁸⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 5.

⁹⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 6.

⁹¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 6.

⁹² Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 6.

⁹³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 3.

⁹⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 4 (after John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 73).

the public sphere, on the other hand, should know that a special responsibility rests with them in those areas where the integral good of the human person is at stake, i.e. fundamental and indisputable ethical requirements.⁹⁵ Today, this mainly concerns:

- civil legislation on abortion and euthanasia (the latter should not be confused with the morally permissible treatment abandonment), which should protect the fundamental right to life from the moment of conception until one's natural death;

- respect for and protection of the human rights of the embryo;

- protection and development of the family based on monogamous marriage between persons of different sexes. Its unity and permanence, threatened by modern laws permitting divorce, must be safeguarded. In no way can other forms of cohabitation be legally equated with the family, nor can they receive legal recognition as such;

- freedom for parents to raise their own children;

- social protection of minors and the liberation of victims of contemporary forms of slavery;

- “the right to religious freedom and the development of an economy that is at the service of the human person and of the common good, with respect for social justice.”⁹⁶ In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, published in 2009, Benedict XVI formulated a rationale to help people face current social and economic problems more effectively: the widening gap between rich and poor, dependence on new global economic powers and threats from hard-to-control financial markets. He called for a rediscovery of fundamental ethical values. Ethics does not lie outside the economy, it is its inner principle. An exclusive focus on profit, when it is achieved by reprehensible means and not with the common good as its ultimate goal, creates incalculable risks – “social systems had been established which made the needy become dependents.”⁹⁷

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said without a doubt that Joseph Ratzinger was a prominent Catholic systematic theologian, apologist and visionary with regard to

⁹⁵ Cf. H. Seweryniak, *Apologia i dziennikarstwo*, op. cit., p. 306.

⁹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note...*, op. cit., no. 4.

⁹⁷ P. Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, p. 511 [Kindle]; cf. P. Seewald, *Benedykt XVI. Życie*, op. cit., p. 874.

the foundations of politics. By examining the source Christian writings, the Bavarian thinker pointed to their characteristic rejection of political messianism. He saw the danger of the return of this messianism in the radical currents of contemporary liberation theology. Ratzinger extracted further aspects of the Christian approach to politics from the Epistles to the Romans, 1 Peter and 1 Timothy. Their authors, encouraging the first generations of Christians to pray for kings and for all those in authority, so that a quiet and peaceful life could be lived, applied the faith-based model of existence in an unjust state, fighting what is amoral with what is moral. Following in the footsteps of the political ethics of the prophet Jeremiah, they showed, on the one hand, that “one can build up only by building up”; on the other hand, they compared the Roman Empire to Babylon, conveying the unequivocal message that Christian obedience ends where the ruler takes the place of God. In this context, Ratzinger emphasises the inalienable character of martyrdom and the evangelical “great hope” in curbing the temptation of the state to turn into a secular religion.

Ratzinger devoted much of his political theology to interpreting the key logion: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). He argued that Jesus “cut in two” the knot of the legal, moral and cultic order, which ensured the binding character of state laws as an expression of the divine will. The Enlightenment faced the necessity of cutting the knot anew, this time in the Christian world. Ratzinger did not believe that by promoting the separation of Church and State, the Enlightenment had accomplished something new and revolutionary. He argued that it rather had merely unveiled a model of this separation rooted in the Gospel. The primary task of Christians should henceforth be “to maintain this balance of a dual system as the foundation for freedom.”

Ratzinger strongly advocated the conciliar vision of the autonomy of earthly realities in the sphere of politics as well, rejected the vision of a Christian state and refused to give validity to the postulate of secular government according to the “principles of revealed truth.” He believed, however, that it was an important task for both the state and the churches to implement correctly the principle of separation and reciprocity, and above all to give a profound ethical dimension to politics. Deeply convinced that the greatest threat to this task is the contemporary “dictatorship of relativism,” he contrasted it with the “Böckenförde paradox,” which is the observation that a democratic system only functions if it is based on accepted and defined fundamental values, whose source is outside the system, because their adoption cannot be determined by the will of the majority. Thus, although the modern state came into being by liberating itself from the influence of religion, it had to rely on a religious heritage, according

to the “Böckenförde paradox.” The most universal and rational heritage is the Christian faith, which offers a moral insight to the reason. Christianity can fulfil its mission especially today, when it has overcome the temptation of a “marriage” with the state.

However, Benedict XVI had no illusions about the effectiveness of this mission. He reminded us that we became a minority, a small flock. The Church, as a minority, must be able to effectively actualise its great values, and Christians should “contribute to Europe’s recovery of the best of its heritage and thus to the service of all mankind.”⁹⁸ This was an important point of the new evangelisation promoted by the Pope. Perhaps the most important.

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⁹⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Europe: Its Spiritual Foundations Today and Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 34 (J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej duchowe podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., pp. 31–32).

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