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## A Call to Authentic Discipleship: Pope Benedict XVI, Kierkegaard and *Entweltlichung*

Wezwanie do autentycznego uczniostwa –  
papież Benedykt XVI, Kierkegaard i *Entweltlichung*

**ABSTRACT:** The article pursues the aim of demonstrating that both Pope Benedict XVI and Søren Kierkegaard call for genuine Christian discipleship. They apprehend in Christianity ever anew the danger of a bourgeois accommodation of the Christian gospel to the prevalent *Zeitgeist*. In the first part of this article the author presented the views of Kierkegaard, for whom threat comes from the state-established Danish Lutheran Church. The second part of the article discusses the viewpoint of Joseph Ratzinger. In his opinion, the threat may also come from a close relationship between Christianity and the state. The real danger in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was graver than that in 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark. It comes from secularised Christology, from emphasis being put on the humanity of Jesus which ignores His divine personhood and nature. The last part of the article draws attention to the essential differences between the approaches adopted by both thinkers and the solutions proposed by them, which, however, only accentuated the greatness of these intellectuals. In his own words, Kierkegaard will always remain “a little pinch of cinnamon.” In contrast to the Danish radical Christian, by writing seminal texts from within the wisdom of the ever self-same Catholic Church, Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, especially on account of his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, inaugurates *à la longue* an epochal Christocentric shift. Assuredly, posterity will honour him with the title “Doctor of the Church.”

**KEYWORDS:** Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, introduction to Christianity, Søren Kierkegaard, discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christocentric shift, *Entweltlichung*, Hegelian system, das Ganze im Fragment

**ABSTRAKT:** W artykule wykazano, że zarówno papież Benedykt XVI, jak i Søren Kierkegaard wzywają do autentycznego chrześcijańskiego uczniostwa. Dostrzegają w chrześcijaństwie wciąż na nowo niebezpieczeństwo mieszczańskiego dostosowania

chrześcijańskiej Ewangelii do panującego *Zeitgeistu*. W pierwszej części artykułu przedstawiono stanowisko Kierkegaarda, dla którego zagrożenie to pochodziło od ustanowionego przez państwo Duńskiego Kościoła Luterńskiego. W drugiej części tekstu omówiono poglądy Josepha Ratzingera. Jego zdaniem o ile zagrożenie może wynikać także z bliskiego związku chrześcijaństwa z państwem, o tyle prawdziwe niebezpieczeństwo w XX wieku było poważniejsze niż to w XIX-wiecznej Danii. Pochodziło ono z „niskiej” chrystologii, z podkreślania człowieczeństwa Jezusa i ignorowania boskiego statusu Jego osoby i natury. W ostatniej części artykułu zwrócono uwagę na różnice w podejściach autorów i znaczącą odmienną proponowanych przez nich rozwiązań, co uwydatniło wielkość obu myślicieli. Kierkegaard, według jego własnych słów, pozostanie zawsze „szczyptą przyprawy”. W przeciwieństwie do radykalnego duńskiego chrześcijanina Ratzinger/Benedykt XVI, pisząc swoje dzieła (zwłaszcza trylogię *Jezus z Nazaretu*) oparte na mądrości wiecznie tego samego Kościoła katolickiego, inauguruje *à la longue* przełomowy zwrot chrystocentryczny. Z pewnością potomni uhonorują go tytułem „doktora Kościoła”.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Benedykt XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, wprowadzenie w chrześcijaństwo, Søren Kierkegaard, uczniostwo, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, zwrot chrystocentryczny, Entweltlichung, system heglowski, das Ganze im Fragment

## Introduction

Admittedly, comparing Pope Benedict XVI (1927–2023) to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is *prima facie* surprising and might strike one as completely unwarranted: too obvious are the asymmetries. In glaring contrast to the Danish thinker, Joseph Ratzinger is one of the most celebrated theologians in recent memory, while Kierkegaard died in obscurity. The former – a universally acclaimed Catholic thinker, the latter – a philosopher who critiqued his own Lutheran Church. Pope Benedict makes but once mention of Kierkegaard, namely in his internationally acclaimed theological bestseller *Introduction to Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran thinker assumed Reformation anthropology throughout his philosophy, as expressed in the clear sobriety of his native Protestant churches, while the Bavarian Ratzinger is joyfully mindful of the transformation of fallen human nature by supernatural grace, as exuberantly celebrated in the baroque and rococo Catholic churches

<sup>1</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, transl. J.R. Foster, San Francisco, CA 2004, p. 39. M.D. Dinan, M. Pallotto, *Joseph Ratzinger's "Kierkegaardian option" in Introduction to Christianity*, “International Journal of Philosophy and Theology” 80/4–5 (2019), pp. 390–407.

of his home country.<sup>2</sup> What unites both, however, is the earnestness with which both call upon Christians of all denominations to seriously follow Jesus Christ, and – whether invited or scorned – remind them of the cost of serious Christian discipleship. For both, Jesus Christ is not an abstract, philosophical proposition, but an existential reality. Both have become in their respective unique life paths uncomfortable, disconcerting callers in the desert, second to John the Baptist.

One may think in this context also of the German Lutheran witness of faith and martyr: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). Still, unlike in the case of Ratzinger, Bonhoeffer's heroic legacy has not sunk into *damnatio memoriae*. Certainly, Ratzinger also draws inspiration from Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), who had penned the unsettling, prophetic *History of the Anti-Christ*. He mentioned the Russian thinker in a homily delivered at St. Peter's Church in New York in 1988.<sup>3</sup> In this brief text, Soloviev correctly foresees a situation in which the majority of Christians will subscribe to a bourgeois-pleasing reinterpretation of Jesus Christ supplied by a celebrated Scripture scholar, who actually is the Anti-Christ, while the remnant of real Christians will be marginalized and frowned upon, which is reminiscent of the Arian crisis in the fourth century. While teaching in Münster, Ratzinger recommended Soloviev's book as background reading to retreatants.

The world is God's good creation and Jesus Christ is its true king; not only of the Church and her believers. "World" is an ambiguous term as regards the Bible and St John, because of its eschatological the-already-and-not-yet. Some examples underline this: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is contrasted with the Apostle Paul's warning not to conform to the world (Rom 12:2). This rather negative view is shared by John the Evangelist, whom Ratzinger often quotes. "If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). Our Lord underscores this again, saying: "I am not praying for the world, but they are in the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9); and finally, "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (John 17:16).

Bonhoeffer begins in 1937 his *Nachfolge* (*Discipleship*) with the familiar words corresponding to the title: "Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our

<sup>2</sup> E. de Gaál, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI. The Christocentric Shift*, New York 2010, pp. 13–20.

<sup>3</sup> E. de Gaál, *The Theology...*, op. cit., pp. xiii, 81, 111, and 146.

struggle today is for foolish grace.”<sup>4</sup> This tension between the world and the divine order is acutely experienced by all Christians. While Kierkegaard opts for a radical primacy of the divine, Ratzinger’s view is more balanced: giving eloquent expression to the Catholic “*et ... et,*” “as well as.”<sup>5</sup> There is an inner relationship between *fides* and *ratio* surpassing and contradicting Kierkegaard’s fideism and Neo-Scholasticism’s rationalism. Ratzinger argues that Christ intends to be incarnate ever again in the *hic et nunc*.

Addressing in 1967 a restive body of students and educated people from different academic disciplines with utopian Marxism in the air, young Professor Ratzinger uses Kierkegaard’s analogy of a Christian preacher. A circus clown tries to convince people of an extremely serious message until in the end the village is engulfed in flames. Ratzinger warns his audience, listening with bated breath, that one cannot take the Christian gospel lightly, as a mere option.<sup>6</sup> Prior to his lectures, collected in the *Introduction to Christianity*, he had penned these words:

This is precisely what ultimately constitutes man as man, that he reaches beyond the world, that he is capable of the Absolute, that he carries in himself that referentiality of existence which points him beyond all world contexts to the Eternal Self, and which thus also gives him the surplus value which protects him as a partner of God from any appropriation by the merely worldly.<sup>7</sup>

## Kierkegaard – a necessary signpost and corrective

In intellectual history, Kierkegaard is an enigmatic character. His writings are quirky and yet central. He is a great counterweight to the grand systematisers and rationalizers that had immediately preceded him. He is self-consciously fragmentary, off-beat, one may say – provocatively bizarre. He incurred public opposition and scorn. Quite deliberately he opted for a non-bourgeois existence:

<sup>4</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, München 1983, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens, Kirche als Communio*, Augsburg 2002, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> “Dies eben ist das, was letztlich den Menschen als Menschen konstituiert, dass er über Welt hinausreicht, dass er des Absoluten fähig ist, dass er jene Verwiesenheit des Daseins in sich trägt, die ihn über alle Weltzusammenhänge hinaus verweist auf das Ewige Selbst hin, und die ihn damit auch den Mehrwert gibt, der ihn als Partner Gottes vor jeder Vereinnahmung durch das bloß Welthafte schützt” (J. Ratzinger, *Was ist der Mensch. Vortrag, Tübingen Ende 1966/ Anfang 1967*, Tonbandaufnahme B. Suermann, [in:], *Mitteilungen des Institut-Papst-Benedikt XVI.*, vol. 1, ed. R. Voderholzer, Regensburg 2008, p. 43).

breaking off from his father – at least for a time – and deciding to remain unmarried. He provoked a quarrel with the satirical weekly “*The Corsair*” (Danish: “*Corsaren*”) and this magazine mercilessly reciprocated him by running a series of articles critical of the strange philosopher. Little wonder that he became the object of public ridicule. He fell into depression and became more and more isolated from Danish society. In 1846 he considered the possibility of becoming a Lutheran minister and giving up his career as a philosopher. Finally, he turned away from this prospect and began producing a series of edifying Christian texts. Soon, two major works followed: *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice (or Training) in Christian*.<sup>8</sup> Oftentimes his Christian motivations are ignored. A philosophical<sup>9</sup> or aesthetic<sup>10</sup> valorisation is preferred. But this comes at the cost of not doing justice to his central concerns. In the year 1930 Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) does greater justice to him in his dissertation *Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur*, where he compares Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard fired a passionate broadside against the established Danish Lutheran state Church and its supposed spiritual complacency thereby he antagonized his countrymen even further. He objected to calling the deceased Lutheran bishop Jakob Peter Mynster “a witness to truth” in a eulogy. The obituary composed by Mynster’s successor, Bishop Hans Lassen Martensen, merely secured the Lutheran Church’s prestigious social status and lucrative income. He advocated radical disengagement from all worldly affairs.<sup>12</sup> He critiqued Martin Luther’s cosiness under the protection of the ruler of Saxony and considered celibacy and religious life indispensable for the Church’s credible Christian witness: even speaking of a *character indelibilis*, a term commonly reserved for Catholic priests.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition of Edification and Awakening*, transl. A. Hannay, London 1989; S. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity, and the Edifying Discourse Which ‘Accompanied’ It*, transl. W. Lowrie, Oxford 1941.

<sup>9</sup> M. Theunissen, W. Greve (eds.), *Materialien zur Philosophie Søren Kierkegaards*, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Famously in his dissertation 1933; T.W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, Frankfurt am Main 1986.

<sup>11</sup> H.U. von Balthasar, *Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur*, Einsiedeln 1998.

<sup>12</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, eds., transl. H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Princeton, NJ 2009; M. Kieffhaber, *Christentum als Korrektiv. Untersuchungen zur Theologie Søren Kierkegaards*, Mainz 1987, pp. 110–135.

<sup>13</sup> H. Roos, *Søren Kierkegaard auf der Suche nach dem wahren Christentum*, Series: Institut für europäische Geschichte, Mainz, Vorträge 30, Wiesbaden 1961, p. 22. H. Roos, *Kierkegaard nachkonziliar*, Series: Kriterien 5, Einsiedeln 1967, pp. 67–81.

One of Kierkegaard's great nemeses was the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831), who had produced one of the greatest syntheses of human thought. He divined in Hegel's grand edifice an *Ersatz* reconciliation. In Kierkegaard's view the unhappy consciousness of Hegel that lacked a grasp of a whole as personal meaning, could have been a chance to embrace faith. Alas, Hegel sublimates this sense of alienation from the whole by establishing such a synthesis occurring in history by way of an inexorable process – lacking personal volition, mercy, adoration and virtue. Rather, to the Berlin thinker, the grand symphony occurs in the human mind, where the interpenetration of the infinite and finite occurs. To Danish Kierkegaard such a view ignores the inescapably postlapsarian state of the human being, but – more importantly – also the human pining to personally encounter the divine. All of history attests to human existence being roiled and conflicted as it is already in some kind of relationship with the numinous. It seeks a form of reconciliation it cannot self-generate. Hegel neither confronted the inevitability of evil nor that of personal guilt. He saw the abstract entity of humankind becoming quite solipsistically in the give and take of history the bearer of good tidings on a suprapersonal level.

In contrast to Hegel's great harmony in which all of humankind is moving towards in one, grand, collective movement, Kierkegaard emphasizes the individual, the particular, the unique, the tragic and the salutary moment. This is brought out eloquently in his writings *The Concept of Anxiety*<sup>14</sup> and *Sickness unto Death*. The last and ultimate reality is the individual person standing in disarmed solitude before God and forced to address his reality, discovering to his anguish his estrangement from God, being lost in sin and despair. The fallen human being faces guilt and from such guilt experience flows the awareness of having passed definitively and irreversibly a boundary which leads to despondency and sickness unto death. Such a situation is inescapable. To Kierkegaard's mind it is a question of existential veracity to acknowledge it. Nothing within human reach can lift us up; this includes *pace* to German Idealism, the human mind, the preferred space of action for Hegel.

As Kierkegaard develops in *Philosophical Fragments*,<sup>15</sup> salvation must come from without. It requires a radical leap of faith that puts to shame all the great rational constructs. All human beings need to move from a mere aesthetic,

<sup>14</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin*, transl. A. Hannay, New York 2015.

<sup>15</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, eds., transl. H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Princeton, NJ 1987.

uninvolved posture to an ethically grounded sense of responsibility and finally towards commitment on a third and final level, which he calls the religious level of conversion. The Socratic or Hegelian mindset is content to articulate thoughts which are immanent to and seemingly affirm the human person. Such Socratic thinking must be interrupted to reach *the* moment.<sup>16</sup> In Jesus, a radically new question comes to the fore. Christ must become the *pierre de touche* for the human being's subsequent life. Man must admit that he is not in possession of the truth – unlike Hegel – and discover that he is untruth. Only the human being is responsible for such alienation from God. God alone saves him from his self-destructive imprisonment. Such is the nature of the fleeting moment, when man experiences divine mercy or providence, such when Abraham is willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac. This moment becomes the fullness of time, when the eternal enters the temporal, personal realm.<sup>17</sup> Here God acts out of sheer, self-emptying charity.

God appears provocatively in the form of a servant. Such lowliness is not mere livery. The human mind must reel at this “paradox” – contra Hegel. The cerebral, passionless mind à la Kant flees from this reality and retreats to the limited range of human reason as the last and final court of appeal, writing off the paradox as irrational absurdity.<sup>18</sup> Against Kant and Hegel, Kierkegaard favors loyalty to the paradox of the incarnation.

## Ratzinger's spirited defense of Christian discipleship

Since the 1960's, Ratzinger had increasingly appeared as an at times isolated, upright prophet in an increasingly secularized German Catholic Church. This becomes glaringly obvious when considering the German public's reaction – *unisono* both secular and Catholic – to the speech he delivered to 1,500 men and women representing Catholic intellectuals and people working for the institutional Church at all levels – from chanceries to parishes, while visiting Germany in Freiburg im Breisgau on September 25, 2011 in its concert building, ever since famous. There he questioned with a calm voice and the serene style of a gentleman much like St. John Henry Newman (1801–1890) this particular Church's suspiciously confident self-perception, structures and lifestyle. Without

<sup>16</sup> Here is not the proper place to critique Kierkegaard's claim that Socrates intended a sweeping unified grasp of reality in the Hegelian sense.

<sup>17</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments...*, op. cit., pp. 9–22.

<sup>18</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments...*, op. cit., pp. 37–54.

discussing the merits of his arguments, let alone responding equally graciously, the German *Verbandskatholizismus* (associational Catholicism) reacted with scorn and rejection to his, almost Kierkegaardian admonishments. He said: “Blessed Mother Teresa was once asked what in her opinion was the first thing that would have to change in the Church. Her answer was: you and I.”<sup>19</sup>

All Catholics baptized are equally members of the Church and are called to personal conversion to Christ ever afresh. Reorientation to its source, Jesus Christ, rejuvenates the Church. He elaborated: “In the concrete history of the Church, however, a contrary tendency is also manifested, namely that the Church becomes self-satisfied, settles down in this world, becomes self-sufficient and adapts herself to the standards of the world.”<sup>20</sup> He continued:

Secularizing trends – whether by expropriation of Church goods, or elimination of privileges or the like – have always meant a profound liberation of the Church from forms of worldliness, for in the process she as it were sets aside her worldly wealth and once again completely embraces her worldly poverty. In this she shares the destiny of the tribe of Levi, which according to the Old Testament account was the only tribe in Israel with no ancestral land of its own, taking as its portion only God himself, his word and his signs. At those moments in history, the Church shared with that tribe the demands of a poverty that was open to the world, in order to be released from her material ties: and in this way her missionary activity regained credibility.<sup>21</sup>

The project of *Entweltlichung* had been a *cantus firmus* throughout his life. In 1958 he had used the term when discussing *The New Pagans and the Church* in a lecture.<sup>22</sup> In 1966 he had used the term again in a talk titled *Weltoffene Kirche* (a Church Open for the World). He wrote: “De-worldliness of the Church, which, as it were, strips itself of its worldly wealth and again assumes all its worldly poverty.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Concert Hall, Freiburg im Breisgau, September 25, 2011*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110925\\_catholics-freiburg.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110925_catholics-freiburg.html) [access: 16.02.2022].

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche*, “Hochland” Oktober, 1958; reprinted in J. Ratzinger, *Kirche, Zeichen unter den Völkern: Schriften zur Ekklesiologie und Ökumene*, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 8/2, Freiburg im Breisgau 2010, p. 1149.

<sup>23</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Entweltlichung der Kirche, die sich gleichsam ihres weltlichen Reichtums entblößt und wieder ihre ganze weltliche Armut annimmt*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils: Formulierung – Vermittlung – Deutung*, Series: Gesammelte



Had his 2011 words been given the proper attention they deserved, people would have discovered that he did not advocate the abolition of the debatable Church tax, but a change of heart. Neither structures nor bureaucracy, but the inner mindset needs to be converted to Christ. Christians are called to evangelize, “to proclaim the gospel to all creatures” (Mark 16:15). As he bore out to a full house:

The Church ... must constantly rededicate herself to her mission. The three Synoptic Gospels highlight various aspects of the missionary task. The mission is built first of all upon personal experience: “You are witnesses” (*Lk* 24:48); it finds expression in relationships: “Make disciples of all nations” (*Mt* 28:19); and it spreads a universal message: “Preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (*Mk* 16:15). Through the demands and constraints of the world, however, this witness is constantly obscured, the relationships are alienated, and the message is relativized. If the Church, in Pope Paul VI’s words, is now struggling “to model itself on Christ’s ideal”, this “can only result in its acting and thinking quite differently from the world around it, which it is nevertheless striving to influence” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 58). In order to accomplish her mission, she will need again and again to set herself apart from her surroundings, to become in a certain sense “unworldly”.<sup>24</sup>

The Holy Father emphasized the need for a proper orientation towards the transcendent reality, in order for the created order to find its proper gravitational centre and purpose. Therein lies the actual point of the gospel. With these words Benedict XVI slipped into the role of an emaciated John the Baptist or of the revolutionary Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1492). Like an uneasy prophet, Ratzinger reminded his audience of their lost, suppressed mission amid all worldly concerns. Like a prophet of old, Benedict forecast the future after a clear and unvarnished analysis. This is fulfilled today even more. Much like consulting firms, also elements of the Church prefer impersonal “structural reorganization” versus personal conversion of hearts. Such forms of immunization vis-à-vis the truth which is Jesus Christ, disinvite a much-needed correction of self. Such a mindset – *incurvatus in eo ipso* – detects in spiritualizing impulses annoying interruptions that must be pushed aside and vilified. A systemic complacency sets in, enamored with its own goals and values. The institutional Church in

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Schriften 7/2, Freiburg im Breisgau 2012, p. 999. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Wendezeit für Europa?*, Einsiedeln 1991. It is there that the term “Entweltlichung” is mentioned as well.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

Germany is a closed system developing its own laws. Such self-obsession is fatal for the Church as she is by her very nature open to God and reaches out to the ends of the world. He observed: "... the Church, ... gives greater weight to organization and institutionalization than to her vocation to openness towards God, her vocation to opening up the world towards the other."<sup>25</sup>

He might have added that the Church has her origin in God – *inter alia* her origin is to be found in the angel's annunciation to Our Lady. The Church has her beginnings in Mary's trusting *fiat*. Mary is the first believer, believing more in "the greater possibilities of God" than in her own talents and priorities.<sup>26</sup>

The tempting *Verweltlichung*, or secularization, prompts the Church to seek adulation and confirmation by a world wholly oblivious to the spiritual and divine, and thus the need arises for her to conform to the world even more. Such a foolishly re-configured Church, however, has little to offer the world. She becomes unattractive. Membership in her is uninspiring. Contingency must not define an entity which by her very nature is of divine origin – and indeed finds such an effort wholly unfulfilling. One expects of her tolerance in the mundane sense; eclectic indifference, clad in the garments of humanitarianism, but in its core egoistic. In order to win such a Church over, to coopt her, she is being granted tempting privileges: such as permission to instruct in German public schools and to collect taxes.

On the other hand, *Entweltlichung* or desecularization allows the sovereign God to define the mission and the criteria for authentic life. For a Christian, the Balthasarian *Sendung* or mission, the vertical cross, rules over any horizontal, quantifiable function. For such a conversion to occur, every Christian must pine for the Second Coming of the Lord, must convert his heart ever anew. There must be an urgent sense of a need for redemption. The point should not be to resurrect the old, long bygone social (feudal) status for/of the institutional Church. As the Pope bears out:

It is not a question here of finding a new strategy to relaunch the Church. Rather, it is a question of setting aside mere strategy and seeking total transparency, not bracketing or ignoring anything from the truth of our present situation, but living the faith fully here and now in the utterly sober light of day, appropriating

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, J. Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, San Francisco, CA 2005.

it completely, and stripping away from it anything that only seems to belong to faith, but in truth is mere convention or habit.<sup>27</sup>

Benedict XVI does not take up the cudgels for a manoeuvre initiating a withdrawal of the Church from the world in order to cast off worldliness, but *au contraire*, to be faithful to her Lord and Master and for her to become a leaven, a blessing *for* the world; in the sense of an inspired and inspiring engagement in the world. For, as he continued:

History has shown that, when the Church becomes less worldly, her missionary witness shines more brightly. Once liberated from material and political burdens and privileges, the Church can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world, she can be truly open to the world. She can live more freely her vocation to the ministry of divine worship and service of neighbour. ... The Church opens herself to the world not in order to win men for an institution with its own claims to power, but in order to lead them to themselves by leading them to him of whom each person can say with Saint Augustine: he is closer to me than I am to myself (cf. *Confessions*, III,6,11). He who is infinitely above me is yet so deeply within me that he is my true interiority. This form of openness to the world on the Church's part also serves to indicate how the individual Christian can be open to the world in effective and appropriate ways.<sup>28</sup>

These were words of unusual, prophetic clairvoyance. Since then the Church in Germany has lost much in membership and political relevance. Previously, it had been the case that German politicians of all parties and worldviews, including the president and chancellor, would attend German Catholic Church Diets (*Katholikentage*). For roughly five years this is no longer a given. The Church in Germany has lost her deep faith, unambiguous testimony and clear vision that had marked her during the Nazi regime. The abuse crisis has further compounded this. The terrible crimes painfully highlight the distressing fact that the Church is perceived as unable to offer the sacrament of reconciliation as visible punishment for the perpetrators and healing to victims, let alone articulate meaning of suffering. Christ's cross is absent from the German Catholic institution. The Pontiff had foreseen such a scenario:

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

This scandal, which cannot be eliminated unless one were to eliminate Christianity itself, has unfortunately been overshadowed in recent times by other painful scandals on the part of the preachers of the faith. A dangerous situation arises when these scandals take the place of the primary *skandalon* of the Cross and in so doing they put it beyond reach, concealing the true demands of the Christian Gospel behind the unworthiness of those who proclaim it.<sup>29</sup>

Scandals must be relentlessly exposed – that is clear for Benedict XVI. There is no gainsaying, he laicized more bad clergy than any other pope in history. But an honest examination of conscience must not serve as an excuse to reinvent, or worse, to deny outright divine revelation. Ultimately therein too, lies Ratzinger's provocation in the eyes of the world and of German associational Catholicism (*Verbandskatholizismus*). The mission and the essence of the Church must not be obscured. The source of all mercy and renewal is the life-giving power of the Most Holy Trinity. This is the message of the prophet Benedict XVI.

### Conclusion: Kierkegaard versus Ratzinger – John the Baptist versus Athanasius and Gregory the Great

In the eulogy for his *Doktorvater* Gottlieb Söhngen (1892–1971), Professor Ratzinger preached in 1971:

In the breadth of his thinking lay his greatness and also his fate. For he who asks questions so comprehensively cannot present a closed synthesis. Söhngen knew this; he knew that the hour of theological sums had not yet struck again. He knew that he would have to be content with fragments. But he always tried to see the whole in the fragment [*das Ganze im Fragment*] to think the fragments from the whole and to design them as reflections of the whole. This also indicates his basic intellectual attitude: Söhngen was a radical and critical questioner. Even today one cannot ask more radically than he did. But at the same time he was a radical believer.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address...*, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> "In der Weite seines Denkens lag seine Größe und auch sein Schicksal. Denn wer so umfassend fragt, kann keine geschlossene Synthese vorlegen. Söhngen wußte das; er wußte, daß die Stunde der theologischen Summen noch nicht wieder geschlagen hat. Er wußte, daß er sich mit Fragmenten begnügen mußte. Aber er hat sich immer bemüht, das Ganze im Fragment zu schauen, die Fragmente vom Ganzen her zu denken und als Spiegelungen

Here one detects a surprising consonance between Kierkegaard, Söhngen and Ratzinger: the deliberate affirmation of the fragmentary nature of human cognition, the elevation of the human imagination to higher plateaus and the rejection of grand systems. On this point Ratzinger not only rejects Hegelianism with Kierkegaard, but at the same time, as a Catholic theologian – also neo-scholasticism. Neo-scholasticism had still been regnant in his Freising seminary. Faith is far more than the human mind's assent to propositions.<sup>31</sup>

In reaction to the French Revolution (1789), neo-scholastic theologians tried to push back Enlightenment by demonstrating the superior intelligibility of the Catholic statement. Alas, especially in the wake of Vatican I (1869/1870), it became quite rigid and impersonal, denying the need for a creative plurality. It emphasized authority and became formalistic. On the positive side, it did gain a synthetic power that deepened faith and consolidated the Church. By the time Ratzinger entered seminary it had become too impersonal, spent and exhausted.<sup>32</sup>

Kierkegaard had no appreciation for the Church as a sacramental reality. There is no social component in his understanding of Christian existentialism. There only exists to his mind the lonesome individual in front of the awe-inspiring God, as he does not take into account the *communio*-forming reality of the Eucharist. Seemingly, nowadays, the immanentized eschatological hope of Hegel, the welfare state and consulting firms reign supreme.

In contradistinction, both thinkers underscore the absolute primacy of Christian faith. Kierkegaard writes: "Today nobody will stop with faith; they all go further. It would perhaps be rash to inquire where to. ..." <sup>33</sup> To both, contemporary forms of Christianity appear shallow and rootless because they lack a clear sense of sin and divine mercy. Both remind us that only God can

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des Ganzen zu entwerfen. Damit ist zugleich seine geistige Grundhaltung angedeutet: Söhngen war ein radikal und kritisch Fragender. Auch heute kann man nicht radikaler fragen, als er es getan hat. Aber zugleich war er ein radikal Glaubender" (J. Ratzinger, *Der Glaube ist es der das Fragen ermöglicht*, "30 Giorni" 24/1-2 [2006], [http://www.30giorni.it/articoli\\_id\\_10221\\_15.htm](http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_10221_15.htm) [access: 20.02.2022].)

<sup>31</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Milestones. Memoirs 1927-1977*, San Francisco, CA 1988, pp. 41-60.

<sup>32</sup> T. Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Oxford 2008, pp. 2-7. Cf. W. Kasper, *Die Methoden der Dogmatik*, Munich 1967; G.A. McCool, *The Neo-Thomists*, Milwaukee, WI 1994; G.A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism*, New York 1999; G.A. McCool, *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method*, New York 1999.

<sup>33</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, transl. A. Hannay, London 1986, p. 23.

bridge “the infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity.”<sup>34</sup> Both believe that the quest for the historical Christ is unfortunate as it actually distracts from the actual personal nature of faith. The paucity of extra-biblical evidence for the historical Christ leads precisely to a liberation towards genuine faith and personal self-surrender. Both thinkers affirm the historicity of the figure of Jesus Christ. To “redeem” faith Kierkegaard embraces the absurd – much like Tertullian’s supposed *credo quia absurdum*;<sup>35</sup> not, however, Pope Benedict XVI. Ratzinger knows of the supreme *logoscity*: i.e. the rationality of all being and that of the human mind is indebted to Jesus Christ and related to Him. Also in its postlapsarian state human rationality owns a deep kinship with the eternal *Logos*. Ratzinger’s approach is more balanced. Faith is not a blind leap. The human being possesses a fragment that points to that whole it does not possess. The content of faith is not fully revealed at first, but its rationality gradually takes on greater contours in the strength of the divine *Logos*, who is present in the Church.

Adamantly, both reject clerical or political power, and would now decry the contemporary omnipresence of the media or the dominance of artificial intelligence in the lives of Christians. All three threaten the interiority of the human being. God and the human person are two exalted realities beyond the reach of such categories.

In sum, Kierkegaard is correct in modestly calling his thoughts “a little pinch of cinnamon.”<sup>36</sup> Quite deliberately, he merely intended to refer to a greater truth than the one of his own design. Therefore, it is accurate to designate him “a second John the Baptist.” On the other hand, it seems an accurate assessment to call Pope Benedict XVI “a second Athanasius” and “a second Pope Gregory the Great.” Like Athanasius, he resolutely defended the integrity of the Christological dogma. Like Gregory the Great, who amid the collapsed Roman Empire would prepare the basis upon which the Carolingian Empire would be positioned, Benedict XVI leaves the legacy of the *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy. This is a solid

<sup>34</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity...*, op. cit., p. 139; G. Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons*, Louisville, KY 1999, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> This is an Enlightenment misconstrual as Tertullian in *De Carne Christi* writes: “and the Son of God died; it is [utterly] credible, because it is unfitting; and he was buried and rose again; it is certain, because it is impossible.” et mortuus est dei filius: [prorsus] credibile est, quia ineptum est. et sepultus resurrexit: certum est, quia impossibile. P. Harrison, “I Believe Because it is Absurd”: *The Enlightenment Invention of Tertullian’s Credo*, “Church History” 86/2 (2017), pp. 339–364.

<sup>36</sup> H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong (eds.), *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, Bloomington, IN 1967, < 709, pp. 331f.

fare to master future challenges and to establish a revigorated, global Christian culture. Benedict XVI's theological contributions will inaugurate a significant and long-lasting Christocentric shift. It will not be based on propositional truths à neo-scholasticism, nor on love for grand systems à Hegel, nor will it resuscitate ecclesiastical glories, such as the *flabelli* (peacock fans), but it will open Christianity to a genuine, personal conversion of heart to the second person of the Blessed Trinity, Jesus Christ. Assuredly, the Church will honor him one day as a Doctor of the Church.

The first year of ministry after his ordination in 1951 brought Ratzinger to the Munich parish of *Heilig Blut* (Precious Blood). During the Nazi-Regime this parish brought forth two lay martyrs: Ludwig Baron von Leonrod and Franz Sperr, and two priest martyrs: Hermann Josef Wehrle and Alfred Delp SJ. They protested against the cruelties of Hitler and his minions and had consequently been executed as witnesses to Christ.

Expressing admiration for the brave testimony of these men for the spiritual truth of Jesus Christ over materialistic ideology, Ratzinger penned on May 24, 1952 the following words in the *Poesiealbum* (autograph album) belonging to a little girl in one of his religion classes in *Heilig Blut* Parish:

However the winds blow  
 You should stand against them  
 When the world falls apart  
 Your brave heart may not despair.  
 Without the heart's bravery which  
 Has the courage to withstand unshakably  
 The spirits of the time and the masses,  
 We cannot find the way to God  
 And the true way of Our Lord.<sup>37</sup>

He signed the poem "In remembrance of your teacher of religion, Joseph Ratzinger."

<sup>37</sup> "Wie auch die Winde wehen: / sollt ihnen zum Trotze stehen; / Wenn auch die Welt zerbricht – Dein Tapferes Herz verzaget nicht. // Ohne die Tapferkeit des Herzens, die den Mut / hat, unerschütterlich den Geistern der Zeit und / der Masse zu trotzen, können wir den Weg zu Gott und den wahren Weg unseres Herren nicht finden." (E. de Gaál, *The Theology...*, op. cit., p. 20, incl. n. 35). Cf. B. Pursell, *Benedict of Bavaria: An Intimate Portrait of the Pope and His Homeland*, North Haven, CT 2008, p. 80.

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