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“Life without God and against God”*: Joseph Ratzinger on Christianity and the (Secularized) World**

„Życie bez Boga i przeciwko Bogu” –
chrześcijaństwo a (zsekularyzowany) świat
w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera

ABSTRACT: Despite all the efforts of responsible Christians to withstand secularization, the process as shown by various parameters appears to be unstoppable. Joseph Ratzinger developed a much-desired comprehensive, theological understanding of secularization. His theology of the world and his vision of the modern times is presented here succinctly at the time that the Western world seems to dispense with God and even live against Him. First, the article recalls Ratzinger’s 1965 text on the meanings of the term “world.” Any serious thought about the world should first deal with the question of how it is conceptualized. Ratzinger responded by presenting the Christian understanding of the world and confronted it with various philosophical positions and scientific visions. He demonstrated the superiority of Christianity as having the exclusivity of possessing “good news” for humankind. Further, this article offers a comparison of the Christian and increasingly secularized worlds. While denouncing the project of building a secular world (the modern Tower of Babel) and challenging the tenets of the advocates of secularization, Ratzinger also enumerated elements uniting the global community. Finally, the article quotes an important text by Ratzinger brought back to the public attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which he juxtaposed two main mechanisms propelling human history: the development

* J. Ratzinger, *Ministers of Your Joy: Meditations on Priestly Spirituality*, transl. R. Nowell, London–New York 1989, p. 72.

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of a world without God and the operation of the providential “hand of God.” The clash of the belief in God with that of a life without God started at the dawn of history and will continue to the end of time. Ratzinger’s understanding of the world and secularization is realistic, intellectually principled, and very often dramatic, but concurrently full of Christian hope and optimism. His theology rebuts and reverses the common understanding of the terms “liberal” and “conservative.”

KEYWORDS: Joseph Ratzinger, world, Western world, secularization, Christianity versus science, Christianity versus secularization, Tower of Babel, COVID-19, hand of God, Christian optimism

ABSTRAKT: Odpowiedzialni chrześcijanie pragną odpowiedzieć na sekularyzację. Jednak ani pomiary jej parametrów, ani mnożenie programów pastoralnych nie powstrzymują sekularyzacji. Potrzebne jest jej kompleksowe i poważne (głębokie teologicznie) zrozumienie. Joseph Ratzinger miał takie rozumienie sekularyzacji. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja jego (skondensowanej) teologii świata i sposobu postrzegania przez niego czasów współczesnych, w których świat Zachodu zdaje się żyć bez Boga, a nawet przeciwko Niemu. Artykuł rozpoczyna się przypomnieniem krótkiego tekstu Ratzingera z 1965 roku, poświęconego podstawowym znaczeniom słowa „świat”. Każde poważne myślenie o świecie powinno odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czym jest świat. Ratzinger odpowiadał na nie, przedstawiając chrześcijańskie rozumienie świata oraz konfrontując je z różnymi stanowiskami filozoficznymi i naukowym obrazem świata. Wskazywał na wyższość chrześcijaństwa; tylko chrześcijaństwo ma dla świata „dobrą nowinę”. W dalszej części artykuł prezentuje porównanie chrześcijaństwa z ciągle sekularyzującym się światem. Chociaż Ratzinger krytykował projekt budowy zsekularyzowanego świata (współczesnej wieży Babel) i zadawał promotorom sekularyzacji poważne pytania, to jednocześnie wskazywał elementy wspólne dla wszystkich ludzi na świecie. W końcowej części artykułu przywołany został ważny tekst Ratzingera, przypomniany publicznie w czasie pandemii COVID-19, w którym wyjaśnił on współistnienie dwóch głównych mechanizmów napędzających ludzką dzieje: budowania świata bez Boga i działanie opatrnościowej „ręki Boga”. Starcie się wiary w Boga z życiem bez Boga zaczęło się na początku ludzkiej historii i będzie trwało do jej zakończenia. Ratzingera rozumienie świata i sekularyzacji jest realistyczne, intelektualnie odważne, bardzo często dramatyczne, lecz jednocześnie pełne chrześcijańskiej nadziei i optymizmu. Jego teologia prowadzi do zakwestionowania potocznego rozumienia pojęć „liberalny” i „konserwatywny”, a nawet do odwrócenia ich znaczeń.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Joseph Ratzinger, świat, świat Zachodu, sekularyzacja, chrześcijaństwo a nauka, chrześcijaństwo a sekularyzacja, wieża Babel, COVID-19, ręka Boga, chrześcijański optymizm

Today, many Christians in the Western world seem to be deeply confused. They experience a kind of split, dualism, ambivalence and spiritual crisis.¹

¹ A. Rybicki, *The Theology of Spirituality: Its Growing Importance Amid the Transformations of the Modern World and the Church*, “Verbum Vitae” 37/2 (2020), pp. 398–403.

Even if they know the whole world (as God's creation) to be good, they are confronted with the modern world as functioning increasingly without God and even against Him. Pastors of the Church and theologians are at their tether's end; they also seem to be disoriented. Measurements of the parameters of secularization and the development of new pastoral programs as the Church's response have been of no avail.² Worse, some of them compromise more or less with the world's rationale, which runs counter to the Gospel and the moral principles of the Christian faith. Worse still, today's Christianity is divided and confused: there are liberal and conservative Christians, while many are simply indifferent. Liberals and conservatives are at loggerheads. They denounce each other on the grounds of the same Scripture. The clergy and theologians minds are beset with conflicting thoughts and ideas that have emerged recently: condemnation of the world and the technological progress by the Catholic anti-modernism, theology of secularization as something liberating and willed by God, modern culture as anti-culture and anti-civilisation (John Paul II), "rainbow" theology. Many Catholics were astonished by the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Church.³ This document deepened the discordance among bishops and raised serious doubts about the authority of the Church's Magisterium.

In this chaos, which started a long time ago, Joseph Ratzinger's voice must be heard and remembered. His entire theological output can be viewed as a distinct voice coming from a true Christian, a profound thinker and pastor, and a responsible theologian always engaging in a constructive dialogue with the world and about the world, notably the world of today. We often find him engaging in a polemic with the world and expressing a strong criticism of it, articulated on behalf of Christianity and the Church.⁴ Ratzinger, however, does

² P. Mąkosa et al., *Religiosity and Secularisation of Polish Youth in the 21st Century. Quantitative Research Analysis*, "Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej" 22 (2023), pp. 186–202; D. Lipiec, *Pastoral Care as the Church's Response to the Phenomenon of Secularization*, "Diacovensia" 28/1 (2020), pp. 95–106.

³ Dicastery For the Doctrine of the Church, *The Declaration Fiducia Supplicans on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings* (December 18, 2023), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddd_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html [access: 14.10.2021].

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, transl. B. McNeil, San Francisco 2006; J. Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, San Francisco 2009; J. Ratzinger, *Western Culture Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2019; J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe. The Church in the Modern World: Assessment and Forecast*, transl. B. McNeil, San Francisco 2010. Cf. T. Rowland, *The World in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI*, "Journal of Moral Theology" 2/2 (2013), pp. 109–132.

not seek to win a discussion or an argument; rather, he tackles with the most fundamental issue of understanding the world (as it truly is) and the current historical moment from the perspective of the Christian faith.

This article's purpose is to summarize Ratzinger's main reflections on the world and modern times, marked by growing secularization. The source material for this article is Ratzinger's intellectual oeuvre, currently available only in German⁵ and Polish.⁶ Wherever possible, the quotations are taken from Ratzinger's texts published in English.⁷

What is the world?

The word and the accompanying concept of the world are fundamental in all languages and cultures. It is unequivocal and occurs in diverse contexts. Ratzinger drew people's attention to how fundamentally the West and the East differ in their understanding of the world despite being two parts that make it up. He was among very few Western theologians who explained how the great religions of Asia view the world.⁸ While taking part in the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger wrote in 1965 a short text which was a draft of cardinal Joseph Frings' speech at the 135th General Congregation on Scheme XIII.⁹ The text criticizes the scheme heavily. The future Pope Benedict XVI

⁵ J. Ratzinger, Series: Gesammelte Schriften, ed. G.L. Müller, Freiburg im Breisgau 2009–2022.

⁶ J. Ratzinger, Series: Opera Omnia, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, Lublin 2012–2022.

⁷ Otherwise, quotations have been translated into English by Tomasz Pałkowski from the Polish edition of all works by Ratzinger's Opera Omnia. In these cases, the corresponding pages in the German version (JRGS) are given in brackets.

⁸ "The world (and man with it and all personhood) is understood [in Asian religiosity] as the finite *appearance* of the infinite, appearance only and not being. This is where the turnabout occurs: if the world is only appearance, then ultimately it is not something separate or independent at all alongside the sole Absolute, which is the only reality. There remains the identity of a single true Being, from which only empty appearance separates us. In this way, of course, the contrast with Israel's faith is now fully and radically demonstrated" (J. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, ed. F. Schuller, transl. M.J. Miller, J.R. Foster, A.J. Walker, San Francisco 2012, p. 46).

⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Należy wyjaśnić pojęcia „lud Boży” i „świat”!* [Szkic przemówienia na 135. Kongregacji Generalnej 24 września 1965 r. na temat schematu XIII] [The Terms 'God's People' and 'World' Need to Be Clarified!"] (A Draft Speech at the 135th General Congregation on Scheme XIII, September 24, 1965), [in:] J. Ratzinger, *O nauczaniu II Soboru Watykańskiego. Formułowanie, przekaz, interpretacja*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. W. Szymona, vol. 1, Series: Opera Omnia 7/1, Lublin 2016, pp. 247–249 [hereafter referred to as JROO 7/1] (J. Ratzinger, *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Formulierung,*

demonstrated the crucial referents of ‘world’ in Christian understanding: all created things (the whole creation), all human products whose number is constantly growing (by the way, Ratzinger contends that the Church does not realize how profoundly they change and will change the human condition), the recipient of Divine Love, and finally the present standing of the world, especially the time which “resists the work of Christ” in it.¹⁰

The central issue springing to mind facing the many answers to the question about the nature of the world boils down to the question whether the world should be conceived with or without man? This issue is of paramount importance. In other words, we should ask: is man an insignificant “product” of the world’s evolution or is man crucial to understanding the universe whose evolution led to the appearance of man and the history of humankind? Ratzinger believes that today’s scientific and technological reasoning favours the first solution, which obviously has specific and very significant ramifications. Such thinking implies that for all practical purposes man does not exist, that man does not matter in large-scale processes taking place in nature. Man is, all in all, a tiny and imperceptible particle of matter amidst a great many biological organisms. Therefore, one can hardly speak of a sense in his existence that would transcend the boundaries of the world’s immanence: an immanence of cosmos and the universe. A mindset in which man is practically of no consequence to the world is appalling, is it not? Ratzinger recalls the obvious fact that fundamental human rights that form the ideological substrate of modernity were formulated clearly in the Age of Enlightenment. One of them is Immanuel Kant’s principle that treating a human being as a means to an end is despicable. Ratzinger points out that today this principle is violated – up to the point of endorsing experiments on human embryos.¹¹

In religious thinking, especially biblical and Christian, the world is conceived as a universe that includes man. This is quite obvious because it is through man that the universe perceives itself. Hence for Ratzinger and Christianity, man is

Vermittlung, Deutung, ed. G.L. Müller, vol. 1, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 7/1, Freiburg im Breisgau 2012, pp. 283–286 [hereafter referred to as JRGS 7/1].

¹⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Należy wyjaśnić pojęcia „lud Boży” i „świat”!*..., op. cit., p. 248 [JRGS 7/1, p. 285].

¹¹ “[N]o one has the right to use some other person, however poor or weak he may be, simply as the means to God knows what end, however high it may be. With reference to experiments on humans—and also precisely to experiments on embryos—that has now become a really significant truth, a truly important safeguard of human dignity. The basic law of human rights is just this, that no human being may become the means to any end but must retain his own inalienable dignity” (J. Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, transl. H. Taylor, San Francisco 2002, p. 110).

the key to understanding the world's beginning, purpose and meaning. That is the reason why understanding man leads to understanding the world. The definitive solution to man's own dilemma was accomplished by God in Jesus Christ – and this is the core of Christianity. For Ratzinger, Christianity is “the most radical humanism,” which proclaims the most intimate bond between God and man: the whole of humanity and the entirety of its historical existence.¹² Perhaps most succinctly Ratzinger encapsulated the core of Christianity as the most radical humanism in these words: “The substance of the Christian Gospel is this: man is so important to God that he himself suffered for him.”¹³ Only God's totally self-sacrificing love can serve as a solid basis for people opening up to one another and positively building (evolving) the world and evolving man.¹⁴ With Ratzinger's thought in mind it should be said that the most intimate bond – the bond of love – connects God not only with man but also with the whole world and the whole universe. This is because the Christian Gospel accommodates both humans and the world – it is a Gospel for all that exists.

For all that exists... Which brings up the question whether there is one world or whether there are or multiple worlds. Is the hypothesis of the existence of a so-called multiverse true? Obviously, we are not interested here in the metaphorical sense of the word “multiverse.” In the metaphorical and everyday sense there are many “parallel” and separate worlds that will never come together. Case in point: nearly extinct geographically separated cultures will never come

¹² “Must we not much rather claim Jesus enthusiastically as *man* and treat Christology as humanism and anthropology? Or should the real man, precisely because he *is* wholly and properly such, be God, and God be the real man? Ought it to be possible for the most radical humanism and faith in the God who reveals himself to meet and even merge here?” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, ed., transl. J.R. Foster, San Francisco 2004, p. 109).

¹³ J. Ratzinger, *Jezus z Nazaretu. Studia o chrystologii*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. W. Szymona, vol. 2, Series: Opera Omnia 6/2, Lublin 2015, p. 879 [hereafter referred to as JROO 6/2] (J. Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth. Beiträge zur Christologie*, ed. G.L. Müller, vol. 2, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 6/2, Freiburg im Breisgau 2013, p. 961 [hereafter referred to as JRGS 6/2]).

¹⁴ “In the history of humanity, the destruction of the brotherhood [of all people] is always the work of an evil power, never the work of God's power. Justification of true brotherhood always has a Christian element in it” (J. Ratzinger, *Lud i dom Boży w nauce św. Augustyna o Kościele. Rozprawa doktorska oraz inne opracowania nauki Augustyna i teologii ojców Kościoła*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. W. Szymona, Series: Opera Omnia 1, Lublin 2014, p. 590 [hereafter referred to as JROO 1] (J. Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche. Die Dissertation und weitere Studien zu Augustinus und zur Theologie der Kirchenväter*, ed. G.L. Müller, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 1, Freiburg im Breisgau 2011, p. 633 [hereafter referred to as JRGS 1]).

into contact. Also, there is a lot of truth in the claim that every person, with his or her history and inner self, is, as it were, a distinct world.

So long as the multiverse hypothesis is not proven we can very reliably assume that the world is one. Despite its extreme complication, the world is one, whole, and real. If something exists, it belongs to the world. Ratzinger argues that man, humanity and cultures must have always had and still have some primary attitude to the world, even if intuitive. Somehow man always relates to the world (reality) as a whole – to existence. It has always been, remains and will be this way. According to Ratzinger, this postulate springs from rationality and common sense. He admits that the basic relationship of people with the world (reality) has never been homogeneous; rather, it is imbued with, materialistic, religious, polytheistic, monotheistic, atheistic, dualistic, pantheistic, or mysterious apprehensiveness with the last element mentioned presupposing that there is a hidden, mystery in the world and even more so beyond it.

Does science know where the world is heading? Christianity does

Ratzinger insists that today, especially in the West, the dominant attitude to the world is scientific, technological, empirical, pragmatic, yet consequently destructive. The acquisition of competence, proficiency and knowledge is the prevailing attitude, with the core assumption that the world (reality) is inherently chaotic and formless, and that it must be subordinated to human needs and ambitions.¹⁵ In the Western secularized world naturalism has come to the fore; it says that the world (or the multiverse) is just what it is, and there is no sense in trying to find a “secret compartment” in it or beyond it – another dimension or mysteriousness [Yet, searching for multiple worlds is looking for a secret compartment]. If we were to follow Ratzinger’s way of reasoning, at this point we could ask whether naturalism is not too easy an escape from having

¹⁵ “We are inclined today as a matter of course to suppose that only what is palpably present, what is ‘demonstrable,’ is truly real. But is it really permissible to do this? Should we not ask rather more carefully what ‘the real’ actually is? Is it only the ascertained and ascertainable, or is ascertaining perhaps only one particular method of making contact with reality, one that can by no means comprehend the whole of reality and that even leads to falsification of the truth and of human existence if we assume that it is the only definitive method?” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 32–33). See R. Millare, *The Renewed Christocentric Synthesis in Joseph Ratzinger’s. Logos-centric Symphony*, “Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny” 31/2 (2023), pp. 246–249.

to wonder what the world is, how it was formed, what its destiny is, and what governs it. Can we claim with all responsibility that the world as such is far from extraordinary, enigmatic, or even mysterious?

Today, as Ratzinger believes, the following trends are being revived, much as they were practised in antiquity: deification of cosmic forces (“deification of the cosmic cycle”), fear of the universe, utter determinism or chaos, unpredictability and obviously fear of death as an absolute annihilation.¹⁶ In light of scientific data/assumptions/theories, death is also the fate of the universe. Yet, Ratzinger makes it clear that Christianity is not afraid of such forecasts.¹⁷ He seems to ask: What permanent sense of the world (universe) can one extract from the sciences alone if all they do is predict its demise?

Ratzinger echoes Johann Baptist Metz, saying that “everything changes, whether God exists or not.”¹⁸ If He exists, the conception of the world also changes – completely. This conception changes even further becoming very optimistic, if one believes in the Christian God. From Ratzinger’s writings it clearly follows that Christianity has and has always had its own conception of

¹⁶ “It [believing in God] is a profession in the fullest sense of this word, that is, it is not the registration of one view alongside others but an existential decision. As a renunciation of the gods, it also implies the renunciation both of the deification of political powers and of the deification of the cosmic cycle” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 58); “The world is now seen as something rational: It emerges from eternal reason, and this creative reason is the only true power over the world and in the world. Faith in the one God is the only thing that truly liberates the world and makes it ‘rational.’ When faith is absent, the world only *appears* to be more rational. In reality the indeterminable powers of chance now claim their due; ‘chaos theory’ takes its place alongside insight into the rational structure of the universe, confronting man with obscurities that he cannot resolve and that set limits to the world’s rationality. To ‘exorcise’ the world—to establish it in the light of the *ratio* (reason) that comes from eternal creative reason and its saving goodness and refers back to it—that is a permanent, central task of the messengers of Jesus Christ” (J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, transl. A.J. Walker, New York 2007, p. 174).

¹⁷ “If we hold on to Christ, he is the one who guides us through the dark night of death and gives us eternity, which we can conceive of as something that we have always desired but will never attain: true and complete fulfilment, happiness that need not be afraid of the end or falling apart” (J. Ratzinger, *W rozmowie z czasem*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, vol. 3: *Wybrane wywiady*, Series: Opera Omnia 13/3, Lublin 2018, p. 1222 [hereafter referred to as JROO 13/3]; J. Ratzinger, *Im Gespräch mit der Zeit. Interviews – Stellungnahmen – Einsprüche*, ed. G.L. Müller, vol. 3, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 13/3, Freiburg im Breisgau 2016, p. 346 [hereafter referred to as JRGS 13/3]).

¹⁸ J. Ratzinger, *The New Evangelization: Building the Civilization of Love: Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers Delivered on December 12, 2000*, https://www.piercedhearts.org/benedict_xvi/Cardinal%20Ratzinger/new_evangelization.htm [access: 5.11.2020].

the world. Christian faith explains that the whole world comes from the personal God, Logos and Creator – that the world is in His “hands” and His love.¹⁹ And it will always be so. Consequently, Christianity has a concrete, original and proper attitude to the world.²⁰ Since the world is a gift of love from God the Creator, since it is based on Logos, our attitude to it is and should be one of respect and the desire to know it through reason. Logos is the guarantor of the world to be logical and reasonable.

Christianity does not deify the world; nor is it pantheism in any version. Ontologically, the world is something different than God and it has a real autonomy. Ratzinger writes: “Christian belief in God means that things are the being-thought of a creative consciousness, of a creative freedom, and that the creative consciousness that bears up all things has released what has been thought into the freedom of its own, independent existence.”²¹

Ratzinger sees the world as an essential structure based on freedom and autonomy, which profit, in a sense, in the world of inanimate matter. This freedom-based structure is a perfection of the world. In the eyes of Christianity, the world is autonomous, independent and governed by laws; it exists for real, it is evolving; it was formed in a very complicated evolutionary process and is not an illusion, as the Asian religions claim. Ratzinger captures this thought in a very interesting and succinct manner: “Freedom is evidently the necessary structure of the world, as it were, and this again means that one can only comprehend the world as incomprehensible, that it must be incomprehensibility.”²²

The entirety of the world encompasses its temporal and ontological dimensions: the beginning of everything as well as the end and destiny – therefore,

¹⁹ “The Christian picture of the world is this, that the world in its details is the product of a long process of evolution but that at the most profound level it comes from the Logos. Thus it carries rationality within itself, and not just a mathematical rationality—no one can deny that the world is mathematically structured—not, that is to say, just an entirely neutral, objective rationality, but in the form of the Logos also a moral rationality” (J. Ratzinger, *God and the World...*, op. cit., p. 139); “From the standpoint of Christian faith one may say that for *history* God stands at the end, while for *being* he stands at the beginning” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 125).

²⁰ “We now begin to discern a first vague outline of the attitude signified by the word *credo*. It means that man does not regard seeing, hearing, and touching as the totality of what concerns him, that he does not view the area of his world as marked off by what he can see and touch but seeks a second mode of access to reality, a mode he calls in fact belief, and in such a way that he finds in it the decisive enlargement of his whole view of the world” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 29).

²¹ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 82.

²² J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 83.

the purpose and meaning of being. The Christian conception does not challenge scientific research, but in dialogue with science it asks questions about the legitimacy, assumptions and validity of the so-called scientific vision of the world, especially when this picture – derived from empirical knowledge – is absolutized by scientists. These questions concern truth: the truth of the world as a whole. Christianity does not build a scientific vision of the world as this within the purview of science; instead, it offers its understanding of the world as a whole following from Divine Revelation. In doing so and in order to have a broad picture, Christianity applies faith and rationality (*ratio*), the latter having become intellect (*intellectus*) or wisdom.

For Christianity, there is no ontological duality or intrinsic contradictions, because “the world and God do not exist eternally side by side.” Time and eternity intermingle. Ratzinger says very briefly: “Eternity is not timelessness but dominion over time.”²³ While believing in Jesus Christ as the Omega point, the Christian concept of the world reconciles its evolution and the scientific predictions of the annihilation of its present aeon with the world’s definitive renewal in the Eschaton. Ratzinger writes:

The Christian message expects at one and the same time both decay – in conformity with the way of the cosmos itself, and plenitude – in the new power coming from without, namely Christ. Of course, faith does not see in Christ something simply external, but the proper origin of all created being which, therefore, while coming “from without” can fulfil what in the cosmos is most deeply “within.”²⁴

Christian faith is the hope for redemption of the whole world (not redemption *from* the world!), which already started in the world’s time.²⁵ For Ratzinger, this

²³ “If God really *became* man, then this is a dramatic breakthrough that nothing can surpass. In that case, the world and God are not just eternally alongside each other; only then has God *acted*” (J. Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, transl. M.J. Miller, M.J. O’Connell, San Francisco 2011, p. 43); “Eternity does not stand by the side of time, quite unrelated to it; it is the creatively supporting power of all time, which encompasses passing time in its own present and thus gives it the ability to be. It is not timelessness but dominion over time. As the Today that is contemporary with all ages, it can also make its influence felt in any age” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 162).

²⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, transl. M. Waldstein, A. Nichols, Series: Dogmatic Theology 9, Washington, DC 1988, p. 193.

²⁵ “The Christian hope for salvation, despite the radical spirituality of its assumption, envisages not redemption from the world but redemption of the world itself—this starts in the time

belief unveils the meaning of the world and being, the ultimate truth of being, which surpasses the “faith” of materialism and idealism, and atheism as well.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is not true that Christianity arose from the need for an optimistic vision of the world in response to its unquestionable harshness or even meaninglessness; Christianity does not result from wishful thinking. Messianic and apocalyptic expectations, as well as other expectations and desires of the people living in the time of Jesus, most certainly played a vital role in making the Christian faith authentic, but they could not have “invented” Jesus and Christianity.

The conclusion at point of our considerations is that Ratzinger believes that Christianity alone has “good news” for the world. The Christian vision of the world is realistic and very optimistic, since it proclaims the meaningfulness of the world and its transformation in the Eschaton. Such an understanding of the world carries a special guarantee: the Resurrection of Jesus, which opened up a novel way of being for the whole of being.

Christianity in relation to a world “without God and against God”: The demarcation line

In Ratzinger’s opinion, the root cause of today’s many misfortunes and sufferings is a “life without God and against God” – when God is blotted out or deliberately declined. Secularism, which is most evident in Europe, is a “mutilation of human existence.”²⁷ One of Ratzinger’s pivotal texts, offering a synthetic comparison between Christianity and the secularized world, goes like this:

of this world but ultimately leads to a salvific transformation of this world” (JROO 6/2, pp. 826–827 [JRGS 6/2, p. 905]).

²⁶ “The meaning of the world is the ‘you’, though only the one that is not itself an open question but rather the ground of all, which needs no other ground” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., pp. 43–44); “The Christian belief in God is not completely identical with either of these two solutions [the materialistic solution and the idealistic solution] ... Christian belief in God means that things are the being-thought of a creative consciousness, of a creative freedom, and that the creative consciousness that bears up all things has released what has been thought into the freedom of its own, independent existence. In this it goes beyond any mere idealism. While the latter, as we have just established, explains everything real as the content of a single consciousness, in the Christian view what supports it all is a creative freedom that sets what has been thought in the freedom of its own being, so that, on the one hand, it is the being-thought of a consciousness and yet, on the other hand, is true being itself” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 82).

²⁷ “If secularism wants to oust religion, this is a mutilation of human existence” (JROO 13/3, p. 1208 [JRGS 13/3, p. 1331]).

Life without God and against God, which at first seemed so enticing and liberating, has created in reality only great sadness and increasing anger. Man rages against society, against the world, against himself and against others; his life seems to him like botched handiwork, man like a mistake on the part of evolution. He has lost the element that is really essential for his life, and everything tastes like salt to him – of death and bitterness. Man is destined to breathe the infinity of eternal love – if he cannot he is in prison and deprived of light.²⁸

It is of little avail to ponder what appeared in Western culture first: Was it life without God (religious indifference, neo-paganism) or life against God (militant atheism)? Both in the past and now, these two tendencies go hand in hand and reinforce each other. Ratzinger points out that when Western culture sets the course “without God and against God” and when it blatantly “resists the work of Christ,” it becomes downright diabolical: it permits profits to be drawn and enjoyed from human weaknesses and obsessions.²⁹ For Ratzinger, it is no surprise that in such a diabolical setting people’s eternal temptations are revived: egoism, avarice, greed and “all defects that devastate the life of individuals and the world.”³⁰

Ratzinger is of the opinion that doubtless the contemporary Western world has become what it is a few centuries ago because of its desire for freedom and the struggle for liberty and equality. This is why the world is rife with

²⁸ J. Ratzinger, *The Ministers of Your Joy*, op. cit., p. 72.

²⁹ “There is something diabolical in the coldblooded perversity with which man is corrupted for the sake of money and profit is drawn from his weakness, his temptability and vulnerability in the face of temptation. Western culture is hellish when it persuades men that the sole aim of life is pleasure and self-interest” (J. Ratzinger, V. Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on The State of the Church*, transl. S. Attanasio, G. Harrison, San Francisco 1985, p. 188).

³⁰ “The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries. The inability of joy presupposes and produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice—all defects that devastate the life of individuals and of the world” (J. Ratzinger, *The New Evangelization*, op. cit.); “We are also coming to understand more and more clearly that the apparent liberation of love and its conversion into a matter of impulse mean the delivery of man to the autonomous powers of sex and Eros, to whose merciless slavery he falls victim just when he is under the illusion that he has freed himself. When he eludes God, the gods put out their hands to grasp him; he can only be liberated by allowing himself to be liberated and by ceasing to try to rely on himself...; we are threatened no less than the people of ancient times by the tendency to make absolutes of power, bread, and Eros” (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit., p. 60).

revolutions, wars, humanisms and liberalisms.³¹ For all that, freedom has not been attained – why, it is even slipping away. The same goes for equality and brotherhood. Ratzinger notes that the freedom of the individual is nowadays increasingly arrogated by holistic management systems that are developed to proliferate good and freedom, but – paradoxically – they take them away.³² In his opinion, the modern-age and today’s totalitarianisms grew from revolutions and anarchist slogans which though expressing freedom led to the ruthless terrors of state ideologies and the dictates of political parties.³³ Therefore, Ratzinger asks very important questions: Why is humanity and the modern “liberated” world still stuck between “the Scylla of anarchy and the Charybdis of totalitarianism”?³⁴ Why is there in the world – which was supposed to be perfectly free – so much “manipulation of our souls”? Why is there so much “talk of this world” and “troubled waters of our information and ideologies” and so little freedom?³⁵

³¹ “The ‘absolute’ character of Christianity is not directed ‘against’ others, but its idea is to be ‘for,’ whereby it achieves unity that is greater than all those humanisms and liberalisms could envisage in their relativizing coordination: unity arising from God’s root of the substitute love of the new Adam, in whom we all have become the ‘one’ new man; we are called in our life by his love to constantly become him anew” (JROO 6/2, p. 953 [JRGS 6/2, p. 1041]).

³² “Even in the radical market philosophy there exists a mechanical-materialistic mindset, where individual freedom becomes part of a reliable holistic mechanical system governed by infallible laws. Pure liberalism cannot overcome Marxism” (JROO 13/3, p. 1123 [JRGS 13/3, p. 1241]).

³³ See J. Ratzinger, *Zmartwychwstanie i życie wieczne. Studia o eschatologii i teologii nadziei*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. J. Kobienia, Series: Opera Omnia 10, Lublin 2014, pp. 529–532; J. Ratzinger, *Auferstehung und ewiges Leben. Beiträge zur Eschatologie und zur Theologie der Hoffnung*, ed. G.L. Müller, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 10, Freiburg im Breisgau 2012, pp. 566–569; “These concepts do not allow for the fact that, in the meantime, leftist intelligentsia itself became a *power* and now it corrupts people’s minds using all tricks of the trade; also, the fact that not every institution with its proper law becomes a *power* in the sense always used here” (J. Ratzinger, *Wiara w Piśmie i Tradycji. Teologiczna nauka o zasadach*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. J. Merecki, vol. 1, Series: Opera Omnia 9/1, Lublin 2018, p. 248; J. Ratzinger, *Glaube in Schrift und Tradition. Hermeneutik und Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, ed. G.L. Müller, vol. 1, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 9/1, Freiburg im Breisgau 2016, p. 280).

³⁴ See JROO 13/3, p. 1123 [JRGS 13/3, p. 1241].

³⁵ “In this era, in which so much manipulation of our souls occurs through advertising and by all sorts of other means, it is all the more important to perform the humble service of truth, in which the essential thing, the word of God, remains alive among us” (J. Ratzinger, *Teaching and Learning the Love of God: Being a Priest Today: Selected Writings*, eds. P. Az-zaro, C. Granados, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2017, p. 304); “Leading to green pastures, to living waters, means leading to the place where God’s word is; conducting

Ratzinger argues that the Western world has merged democracy – which is oriented towards freedom and intent on safeguarding it – with the ideology of relativism which holds that its precepts are absolute and enforces them by virtue of the ever more severe positive law. Relativism entertains the idea that it is a new, unfailing “soteriology” – that it will save the world from all conflicts by suppressing every universal truth as potentially antagonizing and hence detrimental. Ratzinger believes that this is not soteriology but the first step towards disintegration of the Western world. He writes: “Frankly, democracy still exists by virtue of inviolable truths and values that are respected by everyone; otherwise, it dissolves into anarchy and invalidates itself.”³⁶ Ratzinger calls to attention that initially the ideas of national socialism in Germany were accepted as democratic and liberating values. This harsh history lesson should lead to a conclusion that without a universal and lasting truth an equitable social life is not possible.³⁷ The advantage of Christianity over the world “without God and against God” consists precisely in its proposal of the most universal and lasting truth (and value at the same time) as the foundation of social life – God.

Was it in the Western world alone that “life without God and against God” emerged? Was it invented there or was it an experiment? Ratzinger says no. He contends that the need to choose between belief in God and belief in

beyond all the talk of this world, beyond all the troubled waters of our information and ideologies, to the living water, to the words that really give us life and make the world green and fruitful again ... We must offer the fresh water as God gave it to us, certain that his word is truth and that we need the drink of truth in order to live” (ibidem, p. 108).

³⁶ JR00 13/3, p. 1117 [JRGS 13/3, p. 1234]. “But who is to say what reason is? Must we simply assume that the majority is also an incarnation of greater rationality? All in all, a democratic system can function only if some core values—let us call them human rights—are regarded by all as binding and the majority restrains from violating them ... Democracy cannot function in isolation from values; therefore it cannot be neutral towards values” (J. Ratzinger, *Kościół – znak wśród narodów. Pisma eklezjologiczne i ekumeniczne*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. W. Szymona, vol. 1, Series: Opera Omnia 8/1, Lublin 2013, p. 395; J. Ratzinger, *Kirche – Zeichen unter den Völkern. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie und Ökumene*, ed. G.L. Müller, vol. 1, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 8/1, Freiburg im Breisgau 2015, pp. 432–433).

³⁷ “Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger ... pointed out that a shift has taken place from the question of truth to the question of value and went on to recall that the ideas of nascent National Socialism had managed to legitimate themselves under the guise of constructive and liberating ‘values.’ The statement of Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker which the Bishop cited in his speech deserves to be repeated here: ‘I maintain that in the long run only a truth-oriented society, not a happiness-oriented society, can succeed.’” (J. Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today’s Debates*, transl. A.J. Walker, San Francisco, p. 38).

something or oneself, or in human capabilities, is a ubiquitous dilemma of man and humanity. This choice was already faced by biblical Adam and Eve, who decided to turn away from God. This choice threatens modern man and recurs in the life of nearly all modern people and in every recurring generation.³⁸

When addressing the subject of justifying Christian hope, Ratzinger puts forward an argument concerning the vision of the whole history contained in the Book of Revelation. He writes:

While the course of history depends on human decisions, in this vision it appears as a perpetual recurrence of the episode of building the Tower of Babel. Again and again, the human race tries to use its technological capabilities to fashion a bridge to heaven – that is, make itself God by its own devices. People try to grasp this ultimate freedom, this boundless health, unlimited power, which they take to be the essence of the divinity they would like to fetch from the unattainable height of the Radically Different One to their own existence – “bring it back.” These aspirations, which involve human activities in all periods of history, rely, however, on untruth – on “fettering the truth.” Man is not God but a finite and limited being; man cannot by any authority whatsoever make himself what he is not. Therefore, all these attempts must, notwithstanding their original scale, lead to a fall because their basis is not firm.³⁹

³⁸ “Again and again, mankind will be faced with this same choice: to say yes to the God who works only through the power of truth and love, or to build on something tangible and concrete—on violence” (J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, transl. Ph.J. Whitmore, San Francisco 2011, p. 111); “To bow low before God can never be unmodern, because it corresponds to the truth of our being. And if modern man has forgotten this truth, then it is all the more incumbent on Christians in the modern world to rediscover it and teach it to our fellowmen” (J. Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy: The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence*, ed. M.J. Miller, transl. J. Saward et al., Series: Collected Works / Joseph Ratzinger 11, San Francisco 2014, p. 130).

³⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Wprowadzenie do chrześcijaństwa. Wyznanie, chrzest, naśladowanie*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. R. Biel, M. Górecka, Series: Opera Omnia 4, Lublin 2017, p. 390 [hereafter referred to as JROO 4] (J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum. Bekenntnis – Taufe – Nachfolge*, ed. G.L. Müller, Series: Gesammelte Schriften 4, Freiburg im Breisgau 2014, p. 441 [hereafter referred to as JRGS 4]). Although this text appears in JROO 4 (*Introduction to Christianity*), it cannot be found in an English edition: J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, op. cit. As JROO editors inform (JROO 4, p. 826 [JRGS 4, pp. 941–942]), Ratzinger’s remarks on the Christian hope (which will also appear later on in this article) originally come from his book *Auf Christus schauen. Einübung in Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe* (which has had many editions, for example, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2007). This book contains retreat reflections that Ratzinger addressed to priests of the Communion and Liberation movement in 1986 in Collevallenza, Italy.

Therefore, it becomes valid to ask questions arising on the above: What makes people choose a life “without God” and “against God”? Are their motives not merely negative? Perhaps they do not consist only in the negation and rejection of the existence of God along with – religion, monotheism, and Christianity? Can, however, negation itself provide someone with a permanent basis?

Ratzinger holds that in order to effectively overcome the original sin (i.e., the turning away from God) and the “logic” guiding the builders of the Tower of Babel which appears in almost every generation, a “new Adam” – Jesus Christ was needed. In contradistinction to the first Adam, Jesus is always turned to God – the Father. He always chooses the Father. As a result, Jesus is the true Man and the beginning of a new humanity – this is what Christianity believes and this is what makes Christianity. Ratzinger argues that the “demarcation line separating Christian faith from the contemporary world” lies precisely in the belief in Jesus or in the rejection of Him.⁴⁰

The intersecting points shared by Christianity and the (ever more) secularized world

It would be inconsistent with Ratzinger’s reasoning in mind to simply state that there is such a definitive demarcation between Christianity and the world “without God and against God” that one should actually speak of two parallel, distinct and non-intersecting worlds.

According to Ratzinger, the world itself is such common ground, a locus of unity and equality. The world is one and the same for all. In its core and primordial aspect – as autonomous creation, cosmos, nature, Earth, evolution, lapse of time – the world is homogeneous, “democratic,” and the same for all. The “core” world, as opposed to its later aeon (where more and more human artefacts can be found), has no distinct enclaves for the good and the evil, the righteous and the unjust. No doubt the locus of unity of Christianity and the secular world is also human nature: being man, humanity, human existence. At its core, human nature is one and the same although changing culture and events influence it;⁴¹ it does not predestine some to persist in religious belief

⁴⁰ “[T]he question of the approachability of the Absolute, or of his own ability to speak, has become again the question separating Christian faith and the modern world, so that the real defining feature of the Christian claim and at the same time the polytheistic character of modern atheism” (J. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches...*, op. cit., p. 45).

⁴¹ In 1979 Ratzinger wrote (in German) a short foreword to the book *Theologie, Gemeinde, Seelsorger* (eds. W. Friedberger, F. Schnider, München 1979), where he stated that two facts

in God and others to reject or ignore Him. All people are the same in their humanity: in their ups and downs, successes and failures, faithfulness, and unfaithfulness.

Christians and religious people in general find it hard to say whether people living "against God" see any resemblance to themselves in Christians – whether and possibly where they find themselves when they meet Christians. Ratzinger would probably agree that Christians can say with certainty that they find a piece of themselves in the world "without God and against God." They see who they could be and what causes they would support were it not for the grace of Christian faith – the grace of Christianity appearing in the world. Christians know that being Christian is not a protective armour keeping the increasingly secular world at bay; nor does it banish the temptation that biblical Adam and Eve faced. The temptation resulting from hubris to be like God constantly puts all people in harm's way, Christians being no exception here. Ratzinger writes:

He [Jesus] descended also for the sake of us who are not in the last place, descended in order to heal our pride; for pride is the real sickness of man. It was the sin of Adam, who wished he did not need God anymore but wanted to be like a God himself and wanted to vie with God. And that is, after all, the temptation of our time, too, that we would like to vie with God, that we wish we did not need God any more. We can manage by ourselves. But by thinking and living this way, by leaving him out and thinking that we do not need him, we put ourselves in the wrong place, namely, in the place of the lie. In reality we do need him; we cannot exist without him. And precisely this is the greatness of man, that God alone suffices for him. He came as Saviour to heal us.⁴²

To round off this section, we should add that due to today's globalization even the world of the present aeon – despite engendering numerous divisions – also

should always be taken into account: the immutability of human identity (human nature) and the reality of changes occurring in it as a result of changes in the world, caused mainly by secularization. Ratzinger writes: "At first glance, it seems almost impossible that the lives of people in the age of computers and nuclear fission should be determined by the same Gospel in which the fishermen on Lake Gennesaret once found answers to their questions" (J. Ratzinger, *Głosiciele Słowa i studzy Waszej radości. Teologia i duchowość sakramentu święceń*, eds. K. Gózdź, M. Górecka, transl. M. Górecka et al., Series: Opera Omnia 12, Lublin 2012, p. 431); "Changing the world does not change a person's identity, but it changes the ways of experiencing and expressing being human. Likewise, the Christian faith does not change in its essence, but the ways of reaching it and the forms of transmitting it are different" (ibidem, p. 432).

⁴² J. Ratzinger, *Teaching and Learning the Love of God...*, op. cit., pp. 71–72.

brings much unity and equality. Both religious and irreligious people along with militant atheists, live in the same world: they are influenced by the same achievements and problems. Moments that unite everyone, including Christianity and the ever more secular world, are spectacular signs of the times: big crises, threats, slumps, wars, natural disasters, and calamities. This list will no doubt be supplemented by the pandemic triggered by the COVID-19 virus and its mutations. Does this pandemic and other tragic catastrophes in history confirm that there is definitely no God (and that there is no other choice than “life without God and against God”), or does the opposite is true?

Christianity and the tragic catastrophes: The “hand of God”

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which eventually drove many countries into a total lockdown, when churches and other places of religious worship were closed or when a small number of the faithful were allowed to take part in holy services (also during Holy Week and Easter), when everyone was utterly surprised, confused and overwhelmed by the large number of victims, in Poland in March 2020, Fr. Professor Jerzy Szymik drew our attention to Ratzinger’s reflection on the “hand of God,” which comes from the retreat that he – as Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – delivered to priests of the Communion and Liberation movement in 1986 in Collevalenza, Italy.⁴³

This reflection has already been alluded to in this article, more specifically, in its fragment concerning the biblical vision of world history contained in the Book of Revelation. It is necessary to refer to its latter part, quoting verbatim because probably no one could summarize Ratzinger’s highly abundant reflections aptly; all the more so that even today some pastors of the Church and Christian theologians are very much confused about the pandemic, or even “withdrawn”: they either cannot read it as a sign of the times, or they are simply afraid to do so because they would have to speak many truths that are unpopular in today’s world, which is becoming more and more secular.

Obviously, when Ratzinger voiced and wrote down his reflections in 1986, he could not have had in mind the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus; yet,

⁴³ J. Szymik, *Epidemia. Ludzka furia i Boska ręka*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.ekai.pl/ks-gerzy-szymik-epidemia-ludzka-furia-i-boska-reka> [access: 14.10.2021]; see JROO 4, pp. 381–399 [JRGS 4, pp. 431–451].

his thoughts are universal: they elucidate the logic inherent in the coexistence of all dramatic escalations of evil and people's suffering in history alongside God's agency, His fatherly love and Providence. The crucial excerpt from this reflection reads as follows:

Besides this historical factor – the Sisyphean efforts to bring Heaven to Earth – the Apocalypse discerns the other force in history: the hand of God. Above all, it appears as a punishing hand, but God does not create suffering – nor does he want the misery of his creation. He is not an envious God. In fact, this hand is a force resisting the power of action that is grounded in untruth and self-destruction, yet bringing hope to history. This hand of God prevents man from attaining ultimate self-annihilation. God does not allow the destruction of his own creation, which is the sense of his operation when the Tower of Babel is erected and of all interventions referred to in the Apocalypse. What is rendered here as Divine punishment is not an externally inflicted scourge, but a manifestation of the intrinsic legalism of human action, which opposes truth and thus tends towards nothingness, towards death. The "hand of God," which is evident in the intrinsic opposition of being against its own annihilation, makes this drifting towards nothingness impossible; it carries the stray sheep back to the pasture of existence – to the pasture of love. Even when this state of being extricated from the thorn bush we have sought out and being carried back causes pain nonetheless, it is an act of our salvation, a hope-giving event. Who could overlook the hand of God today, which seizes man by the outermost edge of his fury of destruction and perversion, thus keeping him from moving forward? ... The Book of Revelation says, after all, that human history will not sink, despite all atrocities, into the night of self-destruction; God will not have it torn out of his hands. Divine judgements and great hardships in which humanity is immersed are not extinction, but they serve to save man. Also, in the "post-Auschwitz" era, after the tragic catastrophes in history, God remains God; with his indestructible goodness he is still good; he is still the Saviour in whose hands the destructive and horrible work of man is transformed by his love. Man is not the only actor, so death does not have the final say in history. The fact remains that there is an Other acting, that he alone is the robust and solid anchor of hope, which is stronger and more real than all horrors of the world.⁴⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic corroborates Ratzinger's words. It also supports the vision of the world's history depicted in the Book of Revelation and the Book

⁴⁴ JROO 4, pp. 390–391 [JRGS 4, pp. 441–442].

of Genesis. Shepherds of the Church in particular are obliged to assist people in reading the current signs of the times, signs from Heaven (especially those on the most global level, which affect everyone), which in a sense are “born” of the world itself and its progress. Pastoral workers in general cannot limit themselves to organisational activities only during the pandemic, although this is obviously of utmost importance.

Modernity is new and unique indeed, but it also conforms to the biblical formula of history actualized by God and people themselves – as shown by Ratzinger. When the modern world started to quickly accelerate its scientific and technological progress, when the idea emerged that it had almost unlimited possibilities of development, then came... the pandemic. It almost brought the world to a stop (it literally ended many human lives), something that seemed quite impossible in a fast-paced world. In addition, at the initial stage of the pandemic, rumours were widely circulating that it was the result of scientific experiments that got out of hand, knowingly or not. Later on, this issue was no longer raised, or people would speak only of its natural origin. Could it be that in our time it has transpired in dramatic circumstances (and for many, tragically), that the progress of humanity also involves advances in the production of biological weapons, basically, “progress” in the production of death?

Christians can and should ask this question of the modern world, especially when it is evidently denouncing God and the work of Christ. They should point to the increasingly secular world (and to its builders and defenders) facts about the causes of the pandemic and other contemporary pandemic “diseases” of mankind, and no less horrific ones, be it abortion or euthanasia. The secular world should clearly see its own consequences: it has become inhuman and one that almost definitively excludes the uncomfortable and the weak. In parallel to its obvious achievements for the good of humanity it has created a destructive, barbaric and diabolical world. How can this secular world defend itself? How can it be defended by its architects and builders? If one fights for a world “without God and against God,” one must see the truth about the consequences of this world and relate to it.

From the perspective of the Christian faith, as Ratzinger almost prophetically reminded us, however long and dramatic the coronavirus pandemic may be, and whatever pandemics and misfortunes will befall humanity, “Man is not the only actor, so death does not have the final say in history.”⁴⁵ God is in control.

⁴⁵ JROO 4, p. 391 [JRGS 4, p. 443].

Conclusion

Ratzinger's theology of the world in many ways resembles the theological thought of the past: the ambivalent attitude to the world in Johannine tradition, the thought of Tertullian and Saint Augustine.⁴⁶ Perhaps it is closest to Leibniz's thought. Ratzinger would disagree with Leibniz, who said that we live in the best of all possible worlds because the world is what humanity chooses it to be (man and the world are autonomous!), since it is people who, on numerous occasions, have made it a traumatic and infernal place to be: recall world wars, the Holocaust, and recent Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, like Leibniz, Ratzinger certainly sees the world as a basic structure based on freedom and real autonomy, which exist, in a sense, in the world of inanimate matter. To both Leibniz and Ratzinger, this freedom-based arrangement is an ontological perfection of the world: we live in a truly perfect world which points to its perfect Creator – God.

However, trying to find similarities between the past thought and Ratzinger's theology can be misleading or even inappropriate. Tertullian, Augustine and Leibniz did not live in times of intense secularization. This is why Ratzinger's understanding of secularization is so important – he is a man of our times by all accounts. Many Christians and theologians believe that secularization began just a few decades ago.⁴⁷ Ratzinger holds that increased secularization in the West began several centuries ago. Right now, we are witnessing another wave of secularization which – from a strictly theological perspective – started in Paradise; the construction of the Tower of Babel was its next stage. In Ratzinger's eyes, the world of today differs radically from the world of the past because it is increasingly filled with products of humanity; this propels secularization. The more secularized the world, the more dissociated it becomes from Christianity, and vice versa. If Ratzinger often speaks and thinks of the clearly divergent paths that religions have taken in history, the same applies to the increasingly secularized world and Christianity: their paths have essentially diverged and continue to remain discrepant.

Ratzinger recalls that on numerous occasions Christianity has been able to demythologize the world, falsify myths, illusions, errors, ideologies, propaganda, and lies. It has been able to demythologize false notions of the world and

⁴⁶ T. Rowland, *The World in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI*, op. cit., pp. 109–115, 132.

⁴⁷ For example: D. Lipiec, *Pastoral Care...*, op. cit., p. 95.

liberate people from them in the Truth because this is where liberation lies.⁴⁸ Ratzinger believes that not only has Christianity frequently demythologized the world, but it has been the best antidote to mythical thinking about the world. The question of whether Christianity will be able to also demythologize the world remains open to him, for the power of creating modern myths (secularization as the only option for the world, as the “salvation” of the world is a modern myth) and reviving those of the past is so tremendous that it can be hardly assumed with complete certainty that Christianity will succeed yet again. Ratzinger argues that although the contemporary world sometimes resists the work of Christ very firmly, it does not and will not cease to be the receiver of God’s love. Christianity believes that the world is autonomous but at the same time – whether the world wants it or not – that its history involves the saving love of God and His fatherly “hand.” Although at first this may seem like a paradox, the COVID-19 pandemic confirms it.

And one more thing. Ratzinger’s thinking suggests questioning the common understanding of the terms “liberal” and “conservative” and even inverting them. In the Western mainstream language and thinking of today, “liberals” are good and “conservatives” are bad; while “liberals” fight for freedom, liberation and progress, “conservatives” hinder freedom, liberation and progress. Reading Ratzinger, it seems to be quite the opposite. If “liberals” fight for freedom from all constraints – such as God, religion, faith, morality and even natural sex – they are “conservatives”: they belong to the past and cling to the past. They perpetuate the old pattern of human self-soteriology, which is in comparison to Christianity only an irrational and childish myth. They have not left the realm of original sin yet; they represent the axiological stubborn conservatism. If “conservatives” are genuinely conservative and their belief in God is conscious, they are liberals and true progressivists. Liberation and true progress are about staying faithful to constant truth about man, that man is not and cannot be a saviour: only God can save man. “Life without God and against God” – Ratzinger insisted – is not a positive revolution, but a “mutilation of human existence.” In his eyes Christianity deserves to be called a positive revolution. Christianity radically refutes the myth of self-salvation and happiness without God. Therefore, it has the power to move forward and lead the whole world forward.

*Translated by Tomasz Pałkowski
Proofread by Monika Szela*

⁴⁸ “Faith ‘demythologizes’ the world, discloses the fallacy of racism and social dogmas as lies, turns people away from them in order to guide them to the truth that liberates (see John 8:32)” (JROO 1, p. 594 [JRGS 1, p. 637]).

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