

## The Dialogue of Faith and Cultures: From Paul VI to Benedict XVI

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### Abstract

Vatican II's documents *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad gentes* reveal two interrelated dialogues: a dialogue between Church and other religious traditions, and a more general dialogue between faith and particular societies. The theme takes its cue from Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) and, in the last fifty years, has flowered into a rich body of teaching expressed in various documents. It became central to the teaching of John Paul II with his passionate concern for the dignity of the human person. Benedict XVI in a series of speeches delivered both before and after becoming Pope introduced a note of caution to such cultural dialogue. While accepting that he offered an impressive case against the positivism, which he considered to be undermining contemporary culture, we should be hesitant in following his more cautious approach.

### Keywords

Dialogue, faith, culture, *Gaudium et Spes*, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) was the only document of Vatican II which was born of the Council itself. It owed its origin to Cardinal Suenens' speech during the first session calling for a schema examining the Church's relationship with the world (*ad extra*) which would compliment the constitution reflecting on the Church itself (*ad intra*).<sup>1</sup> Initial discussion of the text during the third session of the Council was largely favourable, but many were critical. The text brought before the Fathers in the fourth session was much improved.

After an introductory section, the document is constructed in two parts: a general section consisting of four chapters, and a final section

<sup>1</sup> A/S, 1/4, pp. 222–227.

examining what were considered to be urgent problems. It is here that the question of culture is explored (53–62). The Fathers grounded their understanding of culture in the nature of the human person:

It is a feature of the human person that it can attain to real and full humanity only through culture; that is, by cultivating the goods of nature and values. Wherever human life is concerned, therefore, nature and culture are very intimately connected.

The term ‘culture’ in general refers to everything by which we perfect and develop our many spiritual and physical endowments; applying ourselves through knowledge and effort to bring the earth within our power; developing ways of behaving and institutions, we make life in society more human, whether in the family or in the civil sphere as a whole. (53)

*Gaudium et Spes* develops this classical, Arnoldian, view of culture as self-cultivation, ‘the best that has been thought and known in the world’,<sup>2</sup> linking it with a more empirical sociological or ethnographical descriptive approach, as well as going on to acknowledge a ‘plurality of cultures’ existing side by side in the world (53). The following sections speak positively about cultural developments in the modern world which introduce a new age in human history, the progress of science and technology shaping the creation of mass culture and a new humanism (54–55), yet go on to warn that unchecked development can lead to an ‘undermining of the wisdom of the ancestors and [an] endangering [of] the native characteristics of peoples’, a blunting of our sense of wonder and a narrowing of vision in a purely secular humanism (56).

*Gaudium et Spes* goes on to offer a more theological understanding of culture, reflecting that the human task of building up the world is part of God’s call to human beings (57) but emphasises that ‘the church, which has been sent to all peoples of whatever age and region, is not connected exclusively and inseparably to any race or nation’ (58). Taking up the theme of section 22: ‘Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals the human being to himself and brings to light his high calling’ (*Gaudium et spes*, 22), a text which was to become central to the teaching of John Paul II, and to be quoted in many of his encyclical letters, the document offers an appraisal of the contribution of the church to culture. Here are the first intimations of the need for a profound dialogue between Church and culture which has become central to the task of the Church in the decades following the Council.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, edited and with an introduction by J. Dover Wilson, Cambridge, 1981, p. 70.

A companion document to *Gaudium et Spes* is the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad gentes*). It was first presented to the Council Fathers during the third session of the Council on November 6<sup>th</sup>, rather unusually by Paul VI himself who made history by participating on the floor of the Council as one of the Council Fathers, although no particular significance should be made of this for the document in question. It was, however, an embarrassment for the Pope that after two and a half days of discussion, the Fathers called for a drastic revision of the text, and, as was becoming customary, it was returned to a commission for rewriting. Underlying this unease was a feeling that the Council was not giving sufficient weight to the notion of mission that lay at the heart of the Church, and that the document concentrated too narrowly on an older emphasis on 'mission territories'. A revised version was presented to the Fathers for four days of further discussion, breaking into the debate on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World during the fourth session on October 1965, finally being ratified by the Fathers on the last formal session of the Council on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1965.

Building on the insights of *Lumen Gentium*, promulgated the previous year, *Ad gentes* acknowledges the Church to be 'the universal sacrament of salvation',<sup>3</sup> and proclaims the pilgrim Church as 'missionary by nature',<sup>4</sup> but insists that this missionary endeavour must be based on a 'profound interior renewal'.<sup>5</sup> An added emphasis on the role of the laity, already enshrined in chapter 2 of *Lumen gentium*, came to be included in the document at the last minute. The Latin American theologian, Leonardo Boff comments:

the Catholicity of the Church is its power to be incarnated, without losing its identity, in the most diverse cultures. To be catholic is not to simply expand the ecclesiastical system but to live and witness to the same faith in Jesus Christ, saviour and liberator, within a particular culture. 'In order to be able to offer all [men] the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, the Church must become part of all those groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself in virtue of His Incarnation, to the definite social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt' (*Ad Gentes*10).<sup>6</sup>

*Ad gentes*, echoing the discussion of inculturation in *Gaudium et Spes*, relates it specifically to missionary work. *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad gentes* reveal two interrelated dialogues central to the theme, and we need to explore them both: a dialogue between Church and other

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 48; *Ad gentes*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ad gentes*, 2: see also 6, 35–36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ad gentes*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1985, p. 98.

religious traditions, and a more general dialogue between faith and particular societies.

The first and perhaps greatest example of inculturation is to be found in the transition of Christianity from the world of Judaism to the subtle complexities of the Greco-Roman world. Far from being monolithic such inculturation represents an engagement with many cultures, as *Gaudium et Spes* makes clear. Taught by the Greek, Latin and Syriac Fathers the Church 'learned early in its history to express the Christian message in concepts and language of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophies.'<sup>7</sup> It was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all people and the requirements of the learned (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44). In the words of the Congregation for Catholic Education's 1990 document, *Instruction in the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*:

Tradition, therefore, as it was know and lived by the Fathers, is not like a monolithic, immoveable and sclerotic block, but a multiform organism pulsating with life. It is a practice of life and doctrine that experiences, on the one hand, even uncertainties, tensions, research made by trial and hesitancy and, on the other, timely and courageous decisions of great originality and decisive importance. To follow the living tradition of the Fathers does not mean hanging on to the past as such, but adhering to the line of faith with an enthusiastic sense of security and freedom, while maintaining a constant fidelity towards that which is foundational...<sup>8</sup>

Such a transition 'stimulated the fathers to deepen the faith and illustrate it rationally with the aid of the best categories of thought in the philosophies of their times, [a process giving birth] to theological science and defin[ing] some coordinates and norms of procedure'.<sup>9</sup> In the first place, the Fathers recognize the central role of Scripture interpreted by the Church's tradition. This remains a predominate norm 'for judging human wisdom and distinguishing truth from error'.<sup>10</sup> This allows Christianity to acknowledge the genuine truth to be found in its interlocutor. As Augustine says in his *De Doctrina Christiana*:

If they who are called philosophers have said true things in harmony with our faith... not only should they not cause to fear, but... they

<sup>7</sup> For a fine study of the Christian engagement with Syriac culture see Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1989, (*Origins*, January 25<sup>th</sup> 1990, vol. 19, no., 4, pp. 549–561), p. 554.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 554.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 555–6.

should be claimed for our use... Is this not precisely what many of our good faithful have done?<sup>11</sup>

This, in turn, allows Christianity to deepen its own understanding and to find new ways of articulating the faith ‘with an appropriate openness of spirit towards new needs and new cultural circumstances’.<sup>12</sup> A final theme is the necessary acknowledgement of a appropriate agnosticism, which allows the recognition and honouring of mystery. Theologians were above all prayerful people ‘making use not only of the resources of reason, but, also, more properly, of the religious resources gained through their affective existential knowledge, anchored in intimate union with Christ, nourished by prayer and sustained by grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit’.<sup>13</sup> These norms, fired in the crucible of the early Church, become the fundamental principles underlying and guiding the whole process of inculturation. Witness is more effective than mere words in so far as it gives flesh and blood to words, and grounds them in the heart.

The topic had already come to the fore as a central theme in Paul VI’s first encyclical letter, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) in which the Pope calls for a dialogue with the world: ‘all things human are our concern. We share with the whole of the human race a common nature, a common life, with all its gifts and problems’ (97).<sup>14</sup> While recognizing the Church is not immune from the tidal wave of change transforming the world for good and ill, he stresses the fact that the Church cannot escape from the world for it ‘is deeply rooted in the world. [The Church] exists in the world and draws its members from the world. It derives from it a wealth of human culture’ (26). Dialogue calls first, however, for a striving ‘for clearer and deeper sense of self-awareness, of its mission in the world remaining demands that they be extended to others and shared with others (64). This is also a process of ‘careful and attentive listening’: merely to remain true to the faith is not enough... [for] we believe that it is a duty of the Church at the present moment to strive toward a clearer and deeper awareness of itself and its mission in the world, and of the treasury of truth to which it is heir and custodian’ (18). Paul insists that:

However divergent these ways may be, they can often serve to complete each other. They encourage us to think on different lines. They force us to go more deeply into the subject of our investigations and to find better ways of expressing ourselves. It will be a slow process of

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2, 40, 60–61, cited *ibid.*, p. 556.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 557.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 557.

<sup>14</sup> Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html) (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012).

thought, but will result in the discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others and make us want to express our teaching with great fairness. It will be set to our credit that we expound our doctrine in such a way that others can respond to it, if they will, and assimilate it gradually. It will make us wise; it will make us teachers. (83)

Paul returned to the theme in what was possibly one of the best texts of his pontificate, the Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975).<sup>15</sup> While delicately expressing his esteem for non-Christian religions as

the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people... carry[ing] within them the echo of of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart... posses[sing] an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts... hav[ing] taught people how to pray... [and] are impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true 'preparation for the gospel'... (53)

he insists 'the respectful presentation of Christ and his Kingdom is more than the evangelizer's right; it is his duty' (80). Respect 'for the religious and spiritual situation for those being evangelized', 'for consciences and convictions which must not be treated in a harsh manner'; 'a concern not to wound' remains the keynote (79). We must 'transform culture from within' (18).

A document from the Secretariat for non-Christians, 'The Attitude of the Church towards Followers of Other Religions' (May 10<sup>th</sup> 1984) develops the theme.<sup>16</sup> It collects together a series of positive references to other religions from the Council documents: in other religions, it finds 'elements which are true and good' (*Optatum Totius*, 16); 'precious things both religious and human' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 92); 'seeds of contemplation' (*Ad Gentes*, 18); 'elements of truth and grace' (*Ad Gentes*, 9); 'seeds of the Word' (*Ad Gentes*, 11, 15); 'rays of the truth which illuminate all humankind' (*Nostra Aetate*, 2).<sup>17</sup>

This document goes on to outline seven different forms dialogue might take: 'dialogue of life' being 'a manner of acting', a courteous living side by side with others, 'leaving room for the other person's identity, modes of expression and values' (29) – one thinks particularly of the Cistercian monks at Tibhirine, Algeria, who

<sup>15</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii\\_nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii_nuntiandi_en.html) (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Secretariat for non-Christians, 'The Attitude of the Church towards Followers of Other Religions', May 10<sup>th</sup> 1984, available online at <http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/DialogueandMission1984.pdf> (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, § 26.

were murdered in 1996; ‘dialogue in daily life’ represented by the Christian living out of gospel values in the ‘environment in which one lives and works’ (30); ‘dialogue of works’ in which we work together with others for humanitarian, social, economic or political goals (31); ‘collaboration’, working together for social justice (32); a theological ‘dialogue of experts’ (33); a deepening of such dialogue to the level of ‘comprehension’ leading to a mutual ‘understanding and appreciation of each other’s spiritual values and cultural categories’ (34); and, in conclusion, ‘the dialogue of religious experience’ ‘a sharing of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute’ (35).

This document has been taken up in and given further focus and depth in a later text from the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, ‘Dialogue and Proclamation’ (May 19<sup>th</sup> 1991).<sup>18</sup> Here we see how inter-religious dialogue and culture might be understood to complement each other:

Culture is broader than religion. According to one concept religion can be said to represent the transcendent dimension of culture and in a certain way its soul. Religions have certainly contributed to the progress of culture and the construction of a more human society. Yet religious practices have sometimes had an alienating influence on cultures. Today, an autonomous secular culture can play a critical role with regard to negative elements in particular religions. The question is complex, for several religious traditions may coexist within one and the same cultural framework, while, conversely, the same religion may find expression in different cultural contexts...<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the Church does not stand outside this circle, and must be grateful for the necessarily abrasive criticisms of secular culture, as we have seen in recent years in, for example, the child abuse scandal. As the document continues: ‘through dialogue [Christians] may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of faith to be purified... their faith will gain new dimensions as they discover the active presence of the mystery of Jesus Christ beyond the visible boundaries of the Church and of the Christian fold’ (49–50).

This esteem for those with whom we are in dialogue is already clear in John Paul II’s first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979). Grounding his thought firmly on the text of *Gaudium et Spes*, and quoting it frequently, he reveals his passionate concern for human dignity (12). While acknowledging progress, he identifies the

<sup>18</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interrelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamation_en.html) (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012)

<sup>19</sup> Dialogue and Proclamation, § 45.

dangers of modern society, standing forcefully against anything which diminishes what it means to be truly human: moral, economic, social, militaristic – ‘the “materialisms” of our age’. For John Paul, inculturation,<sup>20</sup> the call to be ‘ever more human’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 38), is rooted in the Incarnation and cannot be understood without it:

The human being as ‘willed’ by God, as ‘chosen’ by him from eternity and called, destined for grace and glory – this is ‘each’ human being, ‘the most concrete’ human being, ‘the most real’; this is the human being in all the fullness of the mystery in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment s/he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother. (13)

In his 1980 address to UNESCO in Paris John Paul develops a theme touched on only in passing in *Redemptor Hominis*, that of the relationship between being and having, familiar in the work of Gabriel Marcel.<sup>21</sup> This is central understanding of the role culture plays: ‘culture is the specific way of human existence... the human being lives a really human life thanks to culture... culture is that through which the human being as human, becomes more human, “is” more, has more access to being’ (6–7). What a human being has is subservient, merely relative, to who he or she is, important only in so far as such having contributes to a deeper awareness of being more fully human.

The Pope suggests that we can understand the meaning of culture only ‘through the complete human being, through the whole reality of his subjectivity. Culture is that point at which matter and spirit interpenetrate:

on the one hand, the works of material culture always show a *spiritualization of matter*, a submission of the material element to the human being’s spiritual forces, that is, intelligence and will – and that, on the other hand, the works of spiritual culture manifest a *materialization of the spirit*, an incarnation of what is spiritual. (8)

Without this constant play between the dialectic of spirit and matter we cannot adequately express or live out the true meaning of culture. For John Paul, there is a fundamental link between the message of Christ, which the Church lives out and proclaims, and the human being in his/her very humanity (10). The Pope is concerned at the

<sup>20</sup> A ‘neologism’ first used by John Paul II addressing Biblical Commission in 1979 (See Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, *Address to UNESCO*, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1980, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/2005/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_20050427\\_follo-unesco\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2005/documents/rc_seg-st_20050427_follo-unesco_en.html) (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012); *Redemptor Hominis*, CTS, London, 1979, § 16; See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, Dacre Press, Westminster, 1949.



apparent de-humanization of human beings in an education which privileges the sphere of ‘having’ above that of ‘being’ seemingly inherent in ‘developing technological civilizations’ driven primarily by economic interests and which contribute ‘to a growing lack of confidence with regard to [our] own humanity’ (13).

It is the Church’s mission to promote the search for truth which lies at the heart of the human quest: ‘the human being who “is more”, thanks to what s/he “has”, and to what s/he “possesses”, must *know how to possess*, that is, *to order and administer* the means s/he possesses, for his/her own good and for the common good’ (17). The Pope praises those who strive towards a disinterested pursuit of truth and the rich developments of modern science, a ‘historical process [which] has reached in our age *possibilities* previously unknown; it has opened to human intelligence horizons hitherto unsuspected’ (19). This remarkable scientific achievement, however, is not without its dangers when it can be manipulated to provide tools for inappropriate manipulation and destruction.

This is something developed a little more fully in John Paul II’s reflection on the Church in Africa after the special Synod held about situation of African Christianity in 1995. The incarnation of the Word must be understood as: ‘a mystery which took place in *history*, in clearly defined circumstances of time and place, amidst a people with its own culture . . . [and that because the incarnation] was complete and concrete [it] was also an incarnation in a particular culture’.<sup>22</sup> Such a position involves both ‘insertion’ and ‘transformation’ (59). Following the logic appropriate to the mystery of redemption, the Pope claims that every culture ‘needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the Paschal Mystery. It is by looking at the Mystery of the Incarnation and of the Redemption that the values and counter-values of cultures are to be discerned’ and he goes on to say that ‘the Spirit, who on the natural level is the true source of wisdom of the peoples, leads the Church with a supernatural light into knowledge of the whole truth (61).’<sup>23</sup> This is a theme which reverberates throughout the writings of John Paul II. In his encyclical celebrating Cyril and Methodius he pointed out that these apostles of the Slavic nations wanted the one word of God ‘to be made accessible in each civilization’s own form of expression’,<sup>24</sup> just as in his address to the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia he emphasized that ‘Jesus calls you to accept his words and his values into your

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp\\_ii\\_exh\\_14091995\\_ecclesia-in-africa\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp_ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa_en.html) (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012), 60.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997, pp. 107–108.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, (1986), § 11.

own culture'.<sup>25</sup> The Pope sums up his position in his celebrated encyclical on Ecumenism; 'by its nature the content of faith . . . must be translated into all cultures'.<sup>26</sup>

Cardinal Ratzinger, as he then was, considerably reinterpretes this theme in a series of papers which together must be regarded as something of a *tour de force* and represent his developing critique of what he later call 'the dictatorship of relativism'.<sup>27</sup> In a speech delivered in Hong Kong in March 1993,<sup>28</sup> the Cardinal reveals his profound unease about such dialogue between cultures. He ponders the fundamental question, 'Is there truth for man, truth which is accessible and belongs to everyone, or are we destined, through various symbols, ever just to catch a glimpse of a mystery which is never really unveiled to us?' exploring how this might work out in language reminiscent of Romano Guardini:

cultures appeal to the wisdom of the "ancients", who stood nearer to the gods; they appeal to primordial traditions which have the character of revelation, that is to say, they do not stem from men's probing and deliberating but form original contact with the ground of things.<sup>29</sup>

Excepting only 'the modern European concept of a culture in which culture appears as its own domain distinct from, or even in opposition to, religion' he argues that religion provides 'the determining core' of culture. Thus it might seem that the attempt to implant Christian values into another cultural context will by removing from a culture the religion which begets it and replacing it with Christianity both are irreparably damaged. But the Cardinal also argues that all cultures are orientated to a 'universal human disposition towards the truth',<sup>30</sup> and so:

in all cultures the same human nature is at work. It presumes that seeking union is a common truth of the human condition abiding in cultures . . . The sign of a high culture is its openness, its capacity to give and receive, its power to develop, to allow itself to be purified and become more conformed to truth and to the human being.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, Address to the Aboriginal Peoples (1986), § 12.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, (1995), § 19.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Homily in Mass Before the Conclave, April 19<sup>th</sup> 2005, available online at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/cardinal-ratzinger-s-homily-in-mass-before-the-conclave> (accessed May 27<sup>th</sup> 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, 'Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures', available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/curia/ratzhong.htm> (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012).

<sup>29</sup> See Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Henri de Lubac makes the same point: 'all true culture, despite the "sociological dynamisms" which it was necessary for us to recall, has an open and universalizing character' (*The Motherhood of the Church*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1982, p. 226).

This ‘common truth’ cannot be discovered by the individual in isolation; it belongs to a rich vein found only in the heart of community as it meets other cultures in the continuum of history:

A successful transformation is explained by the potential universality of all cultures made concrete in a given culture’s assimilation of the other and its own internal transformation. Such a procedure can even lead to the resolution of the latent alienation of humanity from truth and from themselves which a culture may harbour. It can mean the healing pass-over of a culture. Only appearing to die, the culture actually rises, coming fully into its own form for the first time.

Far from arguing that Christian faith lives parasitically, always taking its shape from the cultural milieu it inhabits, the Cardinal argues that is no such thing as ‘naked faith’, faith unclothed in culture for ‘God [has] bound himself to a history which is now also his and one which we cannot cast off’. Faith cannot exist in the abstract but creates a culture around itself, ‘a living and cultural community which we call “the people of God”’ existing in history and having a history of its own.

‘The people of God’ is unique in so far as it is a community which also exists in different cultures allowing Christians ‘to live in two cultural worlds, his historic culture and the new one of faith, both of which permeate him’. Neither assimilates the one to the other; they exist in a state of creative and fruitful tension. For this reason, the Cardinal prefers to speak of ‘the meeting of cultures’ or ‘inter-culturality’ rather than ‘interculturalisation’ for he argues that the concept of ‘a faith stripped of culture... transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture whereby two subjects, formally unknown to each other, meet and fuse’ is false. Christianity always meets the other as a fully shaped culture, purifying and being purified by the culture it encounters. Such a process is possible because ‘despite all the differences of his history and social constructs... human beings are themselves touched in the depth of his existence by truth’. As we journey through history, truth calls the human family to acknowledge and celebrate its essential unity. Cardinal Ratzinger does not underestimate the difficulty of the task. As he insists this cannot be something pursued merely as a scholarly endeavour, important as this remains, but ‘a process of lived faith is necessary which creates the capacity for encounter in truth’.

Cardinal Ratzinger brings to the fore a theme which is not absent from the previous documents I have examined: the central role played by conversion:

Whoever joins the Church must be aware that he is entering a cultural subject with its own historically developed and multi-tiered interculturality. One cannot become a Christian apart from a certain exodus, a break from one’s previous life in all its aspects.

It would be simplistic to overlook the ‘negative factor in human existence’, the alienation which cuts human beings from the truth and divides them from one another. Joseph Ratzinger introduces a note of caution and further develops this in an address given to the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America in Guadalajara in 1996.<sup>31</sup> He rightly warns of the serious danger in a world challenged by relativism of misconstruing the meaning of dialogue: ‘in the relativist meaning, ‘to dialogue’ means to put one’s own position, i.e. one’s faith, on the same level as the convictions of others without recognizing in principle more truth in it than that which is attributed to the opinion of others’.<sup>32</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger argues, the post-Enlightenment world fails to acknowledge the call to unity which belongs to the heart of each culture but instead accepts different cultures as discrete, complementary, or even contradictory, expressions of what it means to be human, but remaining equal in value. Christian values, in turn, are no longer lived out in the warp and weft of history and are reduced to personal idiosyncrasies belonging merely to the private sphere.

Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, completes his reflections on the relationship between faith and cultures by focussing particularly on the situation of Europe in four short but magisterial addresses: at the University of Regensburg;<sup>33</sup> at the Collège des Bernardins,<sup>34</sup> Paris; at Westminster Hall, London;<sup>35</sup> and finally, at the Reichstag, Berlin.<sup>36</sup>

It is something of a shame that so many listeners to Benedict’s reflection on faith and reason on his visit to Regensburg allowed themselves to be distracted by his most unfortunate remarks associating Islam with violence. The Pope might have done better to restrict his critique to his later attack on late mediaeval nominalist

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Relativism: the Central Problem for Faith Today*, available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/ratzrela.htm> (accessed May 28<sup>th</sup> 2012).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Benedict XVI, ‘Faith, Reason and the University, Memories and Reflections’, Regensburg, September 12<sup>th</sup> 2006, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html) (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture, Collège des Bernardins, Paris, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080912\\_parigi\\_cultura\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080912_parigi_cultura_en.html) (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, Westminster Hall, Westminster, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100917\\_societa-civile\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile_en.html) (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Benedict XVI, Visit to the Bundestag, Reichstag Building, Berlin, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110922\\_reichstag-berlin\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html) (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013).

philosophy which discusses the irrationalism of a voluntarist position within Christianity in which we can know only God's will, a view which could be regarded as echoing Ibn Hazm's claim that 'God is not bound even by his own word'. Benedict's point is that because we can acknowledge an appropriate dialogue between faith and reason, we can claim that 'not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature' and thus 'violence is [to be considered] incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul'.

For Benedict, 'the encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance'; it is something integral to the gospel message itself, revealing 'an intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry'. He prioritizes in particular the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint as 'an independent textual witness and a distinct and important step in the history of revelation' which binds Greek and Hebrew thought with an unbreakable bond, 'an encounter of faith and reason'. Thus he can argue that:

True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.

While accepting willingly Benedict's criticism of, for example, von Harnack's call for the dehellenization of Christianity, and a return to the unadulterated 'simplicity of the gospel', and admiring his claim that we must challenge the claims of positivistic reason for 'listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding, again', I hazard the opinion that such a position surely does not need to be as tightly tied into the specific world of Greek inquiry as the Pope suggests. Benedict appears to elide, and thus to over-simplify, the two stages of this complex intercultural dialogue: the re-envisioning of the Hebrew in terms of Greek culture, and a further transition from Greek into Latin. The English patristics scholar, G.L Prestige, makes an important point:

The wisest of the Latins were fully conscious that the Greek doctrine of the Trinity was essentially different from their own... This recognition enabled them to grasp that any doctrine of God is only a human allegory, true enough as it presents a faithful picture of the revelation disclosed by God for man's practical apprehension, but quite inadequate to convey a complete account of what God is in his own particular nature. On this understanding they were ready to allow that

two different definitions of the being of God might well be equally true to fundamental divine fact.<sup>37</sup>

It remains legitimate to challenge Benedict's vision of the unity of all cultures. For both the Pope and for Newman religious truth must be approached in a spirit of homage:<sup>38</sup> it is received. Yet even though adherents of a religious faith have the certitude (to use Newman's word) that they live in the truth, it is appropriate that such truth remains open to a constant process of testing, purification and re-interpretation. Benedict seems to ignore the necessary element of the apophatic in any discourse about God. Dialogue with other cultures, and the possibility of expressing belief in other terms, hard though this might be, cannot be altogether ruled out.

In Paris (2009), the Pope, reflecting on the origins of western monasticism and its close relationship with the roots of European culture, sees the search for God as laid down in a path formed by 'the shared word', a word which makes us attentive to the mystery of God in God's very depths and attentive to one another. The culture of Monasticism was the 'seeking [of] the definitive behind the provisional'.

Two further speeches complete this body of work: Benedict's address in Westminster Hall (2010), and his address to the Reichstag the following year. Both of these speeches invoke the claims of natural law as reflecting 'the Catholic tradition [which] maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation'. In Westminster the Pope shows his esteem for the British tradition of common law and points out that the Church's task then is not to propose concrete solutions, acts as a 'corrective', 'to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles'. This demands a constant and ongoing dialogue between faith and reason at every level of national life. Benedict takes up the theme again in Berlin by addressing the question: 'how do we recognize what is right?'. He points out that 'the question of how to recognize what is truly right and thus to serve justice when framing laws has never been simple, and today in view of the vast extent of our knowledge and our capacity, it has become still harder' and argues that the Christianity has never proposed a revealed law to the state, but has followed those philosophers who find the true sources of law in human nature and in reason. He reasserts the claims of natural law arguing that the human being is 'not merely self-creating freedom',

<sup>37</sup> G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, SPCK, London, 1964, pp. 236–237; see, also, pp. 237–241.

<sup>38</sup> John Henry Newman, *University Sermons*, (London: Longman, Green & Co, 1871), XIV, p. 198.

but ‘his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself’. Benedict takes his stand on the fact that the idea of human rights, the idea of the equality of all people before the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity rest on the conviction that there is a creator God, and that our ‘cultural memory is shaped by these rational insights’.

Pope Benedict offers an impressive case against the positivism which he considers to be undermining contemporary culture, but again his argument leave me hesitant. If we follow John Paul II in taking *Gaudium et Spes* 22 as our starting point, it is not simply in a rational code of ethics, however exalted, but it is in Christ that we discover our true humanity: ‘the risen Christ is the principle of Christian morality’.<sup>39</sup> This morality is certainly consonant with, and far from contradicting, the natural law but remains always subject to the mystery of Christ. Benedict rather surprisingly reasserts that ‘ought’ follows from ‘is’ (*agere sequitur esse*), a thesis often dismissed in a post-Kantian world as the naturalistic fallacy.<sup>40</sup> Benedict’s understanding of natural law appears to incline towards a somewhat dated and static rationality, an essentialism which disassociates it from the continuum of history and the tradition of Christian living. As James Keenan comments, even on the natural level:

the normative meaning of nature is not found in nature itself. Nature, instead, is an evolving and an open source of normativity. Not only is our knowledge of nature and all its complex structures partial, relative, and open to revision, but because the human knowledge process is interactive, as we learn more about nature we gain new perspectives from which to interact with it. The better we understand ourselves, the better we understand nature.<sup>41</sup>

Here we have a strong plea, in spite of Pope Benedict’s reservations, to continue to engage in a profound dialogue between faith and culture shaped both by religion and by society, a dialogue about which the Church has reflected so creatively in the decades following Vatican II.

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<sup>39</sup> F. X. Durwell, *The Resurrection*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1964, p. 244; see pp. 242–249.

<sup>40</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, ‘Natural Knowledge of God’, *A Second Collection*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1996, pp. 117–133, where he insists that “‘ought’ cannot occur in a conclusion, when “‘ought’ does not appear in the premisses’ (p. 121).

<sup>41</sup> James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Continuum, London and New York, 2010, p. 175.