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David Bentley Hart and Pope Benedict: *Atheist Delusions*, the Regensburg Lecture, and Beyond

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> "Christendom" was only the outward, sometimes majestic, but always defective form of the interaction between the gospel and the intractable stuff of human habit.
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> —David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 213

SUCH IS Hart's probative characterization of the Christian culture that became the stuff of European civilization, whose development is today both honored and bemoaned by various sectors of the Christian community. Of course David Bentley Hart at the end of his intriguing book *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* does not stop there.[1] He goes on to say that the "more vital and essential victory of Christianity lay in . . . the moral intuitions it succeeded in sowing in human consciences" (213). Yet, using the historical record, the book vigorously defends the faith. Hart does not deny the "defective form" of Christianity when it appeared, since he is mindful that the defect is due to the "intractable stuff of human habit," postlapsarian as it is. Yet no ground is given to popular and frequent misconceptions of what is often unjustly attributed to the church as a source of evil, ignorance or oppression. Nor, and perhaps more importantly, can one ignore the formative influence for the good that once constituted Christian Europe which has definitely marked our present secular culture as "post-Christian," with the loss of soul that this implies for the contemporary West and its influence throughout the globe.

[1] New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

It is not my intention to review in detail this refreshing text except to note parenthetically that his description of William Manchester's *A World Lit Only by Fire* as "dreadful, vulgar, and almost systematically erroneous" (35) was a breath of fresh air, as this book was required (and intended to be serious) reading in my son's history class at a Jesuit high school. I mention this because it has become systemic among many Christians to disown their Christian history, or at the very least to deconstruct it with an eye toward the emancipatory praxis that is perceived to be the true embodiment of Christian faith today. My point is that such a posture about Christendom may be as prevalent within the church as outside it and has the consequence of blunting any substantial response to the stereotypical histories fostered by the new atheists and others.

I am not implicating a respectable (although in my judgment flawed) reading of Christian history among anabaptist and free church traditions. They seek to enact a costly witness to the gospel embodied in the purity of Christian discipleship and in face-to face ecclesial fellowship and discipline over against the established churches. That is another narrative and boils down to differences in ecclesiology, which are fruitful issues for ecumenical dialogue. Rather, I have in mind those Christians for whom the weight of Christian history is largely negative, who welcome the post-Christian era as a sign of religious maturation for the church (something like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity"—although rarely with the Christological depths of Bonhoeffer). For these latter Christians, striving for a better world and being on familiar terms with their secular neighbors takes precedence over the proclamation of the gospel and the ecclesial maturation of the church into the fullness and holiness of Christ (Eph 4:13, 5:27). In other words, being relieved of the embarrassments of Christian history, one may proceed to things other than the evangelization (or re-evangelization) of peoples and cultures, the latter of which requires a robust and integral relation between faith and reason—historical reason as well, as Hart so ably demonstrates in this volume.

To be clear, Hart's own prognostications for the future are not particularly hopeful. Despite the "bizarre amalgamation of the banal and the murderous" of the "modern post-Christian order" (238) one does not necessarily expect an "improbable general religious renewal" (239). However, one should not draw easy analogies between the waning of paganism in antiquity and that of Christianity today, at least in terms of popular attitudes. Post-Christian seculars are not burdened by the unhappy uncertainties of fate that permeated the Greco-Roman world. In fact, it is precisely the triumph of Christian virtue (at least the ideas thereof) that distinguishes the post-Christian secular from the antique

pagan—in such things as the concern for compassion and human rights. Therefore, in lieu of the culture returning to its disenchanted Christian roots, Hart's exhortation models the movement of ancient Christian monasticism in its "cultivation of 'perfect charity' " (240) as a harbinger of possible present Christian renewal.

As much as Hart's prognosis portends an authentic strategy of Christian and ecclesial life, one must not exclude the possibility of a more robust engagement of Christianity with the dominant secular culture of the West, provided one caution be observed. Hart's description of the ancient monastic intent is compelling and worth quoting in detail.

> And the guiding logic of the life they lived was that of spiritual warfare: that is to say, now that the empire had "fallen" to Christ and could no longer be regarded as simply belonging to the kingdom of Satan, the desert fathers carried the Christian revolution against the ancient powers with them into the wild, to renew the struggle on the battleground of the heart. And this, I think, might be viewed as the final revolutionary moment within ancient Christianity: its rebellion against its own success, its preservation of its most precious and unadulterated spiritual aspirations against its own temporal power (perhaps in preparation for the day when that power would be no more), and its repudiation of any value born from the fallen world that might displace love from the center of the Christian faith. (240–41)

No doubt we welcome the evacuation (even if compelled) by the church of its temporal power, a process completed for the most part by the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century and coinciding incidentally with the First Vatican Council (1869–70). No longer burdened by its own agency in the exercise of state authority, the church did not cease to engage culture and the body politic in the exercise of its mission, even if initially these appeared to be largely defensive moves vis-à-vis the secularization process. Since the papacy of Leo XIII the church's magisterium has attempted to address the vicissitudes of the church and its mission in the modern world. It is also more than obvious that the Second Vatican Council signified a shift in attitude and posture along the lines of a more positive and hopeful engagement with modern culture, even devoting an entire constitution to the matter in *Gaudium et Spes*. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II continued this legacy, the latter as prolific as Leo XIII over the course of a quarter century—in the abundance of his writings, Blessed John Paul II was similar to this predecessor. On the cusp of postmodernity John Paul II invigorated the ordinary papal magisterium even as Leo had when confronted by the ascendance of modernity. Benedict

XVI has even more directly taken up the challenge, having been prepared by his long tenure in the university and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to venture magisterial overviews on the course of western culture.

In examining the thought of Benedict XVI, both before and after his ascendancy to the papacy, we glean a picture of a definitive strategy that has been consistent over his transition from prefect to pope. In his concern for the future of Europe, Pope Benedict has written extensively on the nature of politics and on the Christian foundations of European culture. In many respects one suspects he would agree with Hart's thesis and appreciate the *apologia* he offers. In fact, Pope Benedict's understanding of these issues is very much affected by how secularization and ecclesiastical disestablishment have informed other Christian strategies of which he is critical. In order to appreciate his diagnostic and his prescriptions for Christian engagement, we turn first to the cultural foundations without which Western civilization can no longer thrive and then to that now-famous lecture given at the University of Regensburg in 2006.

The public that has not read Pope Benedict's previous writings or his papal encyclicals would be hard pressed to discover in the media flap over the Regensburg lecture his long-standing interest in the relationship between faith and reason along with the distinctive coalescence of the two in the emergence of European civilization wherein the Greek and Christian heritages came together. Benedict XVI lays claim to St. Paul's vision of the Macedonian pleading for help in the Acts of the Apostles (16:9–10) as a providential act that introduces the Christian faith into Europe and thus lays the foundations for the civilization that still requires Christianity as its anchor. For this reason alone we need to consider its importance for the Church's continued missional engagement.

Neither Pope Benedict nor Hart has illusions about the nihilistic ends of post-Christian secular culture. But whereas Hart concentrates on the distortions of stereotypical historical readings and undoes them with his incisive rhetorical gifts of riposte and his insights into matters of cultural conditioning and historical causalities, Pope Benedict examines the metaphysical shifts that precipitated the West's unmooring itself from Christianity. To appreciate the magnitude of this transformation, one must understand the synthesis of classical culture and Christianity attained by the West that produced Europe and from which it has presently fallen.

Hart delineates the transformation of Greco-Roman culture in revolutionary terms. Above all, the Christian praxis of charity ran so against the grain of ancient paganism that it not only undermined paganism, it

also set the foundations for the emergence of a new civilization. Perhaps no more honest confession of the integrity of Christian faith was given than that which came than from the mouth of one of its enemies, the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate: "It is a disgrace that these impious Galilaeans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well" (45). Or, as Hart puts it, for ancient pagans this "law of charity was not only an impossibility but an offense against good taste" (125). Christians were not exempt from hypocrisy and failure; but their presentation and enactment of the faith introduced a new notion of what it means to be human that energized a new community and eventually a new society, all predicated on the Christian dogma of the incarnation. That the savior had "willingly exchanged the 'form of God' for the 'form of a slave' " constituted such a rebellion against antique theological and philosophical norms that nothing less than a "transvaluation of values" (171) occurred in the birth of the new Christian order.

Pope Benedict XVI no less than Hart identifies divine charity as the essence of Christian faith and its kerygma—witness his first encyclical entitled *Deus Caritas Est*. However, in his account of the relationship between Christianity and classical culture he emphasizes the synthesis between biblical revelation and Greek thought. As already indicated, the providential ordering of this encounter ensured that the metaphysical construction of Christian faith delivered first principles for the new order. Two of these principles are of great significance, and the Pope raised them in his Regensburg lecture.

The first resounds as the explicit theme of the lecture, namely, the necessary complementarity between faith and reason. It was no accident that in this university setting Pope Benedict should expound the capacity of reason to grasp reality and undergird faith. Speaking somewhat nostalgically, he recalls the respected place that theology once held in the university.

> Once a semester there was a *dies academicus*, when professors from every faculty appeared before the students of the entire university, making possible a genuine experience of *universitas*—something that you too, Magnificent Rector, just mentioned—the experience, in other words, of the fact that despite our specializations which at times make it difficult to communicate with each other, we made up a whole, working in everything on the basis of a single rationality with its various aspects and sharing responsibility for the right use of reason—this reality became a lived experience. The university was also very proud of its two theological faculties. It was clear that, by inquiring about the reasonableness of faith, they too carried out a work which is necessarily part of the "whole" of the *universitas scientiarum*, even if not everyone could share

> the faith which theologians seek to correlate with reason as a whole. This profound sense of coherence within the universe of reason was not troubled, even when it was once reported that a colleague had said there was something odd about our university: it had two faculties devoted to something that did not exist: God. That even in the face of such radical scepticism it is still necessary and reasonable to raise the question of God through the use of reason, and to do so in the context of the tradition of the Christian faith: this, within the university as a whole, was accepted without question.[2]

One senses that, rather than longing for the past, Pope Benedict is simply witnessing to the possibility—perhaps a modest one—that the correlation of reason's aspirations to wisdom and faith's receptivity to divine revelation are not outside the parameters of the West's legacy, even in its present secular iteration. Such was the achievement of the ancient church. Its (not uncritical) hospitality to Greek thought enabled a *universitas scientiarum*. Benedict had already decisively argued this in *Introduction to Christianity* (1968) and has not departed from it. It is well worth rehearsing.

For then–Professor Ratzinger, the *status quaestionis* was whether the "decision of the early Church in favor of philosophy" is sustainable and programmatic for theology.[3] His affirmative answer demonstrated the correlation between Being and the biblical God, between the God of the philosophers and the God of faith. By translating the revelation of God's name in the burning bush as "I am he that is" (Ex 3:14) the church fathers identified the "biblical name for God" and the "philosophical concept of God" and precipitated a theological development that incorporated an ontological rendition of the divine, although not without a certain tension. "The scandal of the name, of the God who names himself, is resolved in the wider context of ontological thinking; belief is wedded to ontology."[4]

As I say, Ratzinger did not envision an uncritical reception of Greek thought in synthesis with Christian faith. While not a partisan of fellow theologians protesting so-called "ontotheology," and by no means being your standard neo-scholastic Thomist, he, nevertheless, affirms the metaphysical aspirations of Greek philosophy—namely, that reason can grasp

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[2] All quotes from the lecture are taken from its posting on the Holy See's website; here, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html, accessed March 26, 2011.

[3] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 137ff.

[4] Ibid., 119.

the whole. This is quite essential if faith is not to be consigned to the merely subjective realm of religious piety, a charge that Ratzinger leveled against both Schleiermacher and (even!) Barth.[5] If so, the divorce between reason and piety, between the God of the philosophers and the God of faith, can only facilitate the collapse of Christianity in the modern world as it once led to the end of classical pagan antiquity through the latter's separation of logos from myth.

But again this was no uncritical assimilation of Greek metaphysics. The biblical naming of God as it came to be announced in the Christian kerygma identified "Being" as a person in Jesus Christ. Absolute transcendence (as in the various iterations of Platonism) yielded to the revelation of the triune God of self-giving love and its immanent relational ontology. Indeed, this is the triumph of the Gospel vis-à-vis Greek metaphysics, not by the dismissal of the same but through transformation of its legitimate truth; in other words, grace perfecting (and purifying) nature. With this brief resume of Pope Benedict's earlier work we can return to the Regensburg lecture and its programmatic intent.

Pope Benedict argues for the correlation between reason and God. Such was the point of the story about Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and his unfortunate comments about Mohammed.[6] In the event the thesis that Pope Benedict argues is that "not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature." He directly confronts whether in some way his position compromises the gospel, and his conclusion is in the negative.

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[5] Ibid., 139.

[6] The Pope characterized the comments of Manuel II—"Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached"—as exhibiting "startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable." Whether the emperor's statement accurately represents the view of Mohammed or the Qur'an is beyond the scope of this article, including the implied thesis that in Islam God is absolutely transcendent and bound neither by rationality nor by "his own word," as the Pope notes in his lecture. This understanding of God, revelation, and reason is unacceptable for Christians, whether or not it accurately represents Islam. Later in a footnote to the lecture posted on the Vatican website Pope Benedict clarified his own view: "In the Muslim world, this quotation has unfortunately been taken as an expression of my personal position, thus arousing understandable indignation. I hope that the reader of my text can see immediately that this sentence does not express my personal view of the Qur'an, for which I have the respect due to the holy book of a great religion. In quoting the text of the Emperor Manuel II, I intended solely to draw out the essential relationship between faith and reason. On this point I am in agreement with Manuel II, but without endorsing his polemic."

> Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God.

The proposal, consistent with his earlier thought and a commonplace among the church fathers, is that the Johannine use of *logos* in the gospel's prologue enhances its meaning as "both reason and word—a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason." This demonstrates the "inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry" and proceeds from "the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith," as Manuel II was quite aware, since he could say that "Not to act 'with *logos*' is contrary to God's nature."

The consequences for the character of Europe were decisive. As Pope Benedict reiterates in this lecture what he had already written elsewhere, contemporary Europe is the fruit of this synthesis between the Greek and Christian heritages along with the Latin heritage of Rome and that of the modern period as well.[7] Without this heritage Europe would not be Europe. To contend for the distinctiveness of Europe is to contend not only for its Christian roots but also for its confidence in reason. Therefore, it is imperative to appreciate the obstacles that present themselves to this dual reappropriation of faith and reason.

In regard to faith Pope Benedict warns against those tendencies that resist the rapprochement between Greek metaphysics and Christian faith under the guise of a required dehellenization of the faith, a requirement that has largely proceeded from Protestant theology. Three stages are noted. First, based upon the Reformation *sola scriptura* principle, faith should not be held captive to any metaphysics or "overarching philosophical system." The second stage is associated with Adolf von Harnack and nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. In returning to the man Jesus, Harnack divested the faith not only of any philosophical underpinnings but of Christian dogma as well. By the transition in emphasis from worship to morality in concert with historical-critical exegesis, the dogmas of the divinity of Christ and the Trinity are no longer credible. Divine revelation concerning the incarnation

[7] See his chapter "Europe: A Heritage with Obligations for Christians," in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, trans. Robert Nowell [except chapter 4] (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 221–36, as well as his two books on the subject: *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World—Assessment and Forecast*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994) and *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007).

of the Son of God now yields to the "religious development of humanity" with Jesus as the culminating figure. Within this framework there is a Kantian overlay that even the Reformers did not anticipate. Specifically, Pope Benedict describes the process as "the modern self-limitation of reason, classically expressed in Kant's 'Critiques', but in the meantime further radicalized by the impact of the natural sciences." The reductive effect on reason is considerable: the "scientific" is restricted to the "interplay of mathematical and empirical elements," and thereby faith is confined "to the realm of the subjective" and ethics and religion are deprived of their "power to create a community." When religion becomes a "completely personal matter," not only is it barred from the public square, but also doors are opened to various social pathologies, including religious ones.

Finally, the third stage of dehellenization argues "that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures." This frees the gospel for contemporary inculturations and denies that "the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself." Pope Benedict counters that these ancient "developments [were] consonant with the nature of faith itself." Perhaps this is simply a traditionally Catholic position vis-à-vis Protestantism, that is, the role of Tradition in the transmission of the Word of God, but as we shall see it is important for the issues raised by Hart in reference to a possible Christian response to the state of Western culture as well.

In fact, this response has been one of Pope Benedict's preeminent concerns. He agrees with Hart that Christian renewal was exemplified in Christian monasticism—what Cardinal Ratzinger had once described as the "*utopian* civitas *of the monks*."[8] But this was originally a "*voluntary* flight from the world" into "the charismatic non-world."[9] With the establishment of monastic rules, for instance, the rule of St. Benedict in the West, monastic communities became a fixed component in Christendom. If "Christian monasticism is nothing other than an attempt to find utopia in faith and to transfer it to this world,"[10] the question arises as to the continued possibility of this venture in the post-Christian West. No doubt medieval Christendom's monastic and later mendicant religious orders, especially those devoted to the *vita apostolica*, began to envision the wilderness as the cities and towns of urban Christendom that were destined to be transformed from "wilderness into genuine *civitas*."[11] But how might this be possible in

[8] Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 249 (emphases his).
[9] Ibid., 250.
[10] Ibid., 249.
[11] Ibid., 250.

the present culture? And if Pope Benedict possesses a more robust hope concerning this possibility than Hart, how does he construe the prognosis of the church's mission vis-à-vis this culture? No doubt, as we shall see, Pope Benedict does not soften the diagnosis of the present state of things. However, with certain cautions in mind, we will do well to appreciate how his conception of missional engagement is as robust as it is.

Two considerations are paramount: first, a proper understanding of reason as integral to Christian self-understanding and simultaneously applicable in the culture at large, and second, a self-correction of the effects of the heresy of Christian messianism, especially in regard to its post-Christian secular manifestations. I begin with the former in defense of the Regensburg theses and combine it with his affirmation of John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

Pope Benedict's rejection of the dehellenization trend in Christian theology is not simply an academic matter, a dispute among competing theological schools. Not only is the critique "coarse and lacking in precision" in Pope Benedict's view, it undermines essentials of the faith itself. This goes to the sources of revelation in sacred Scripture, since the "New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed." So for Pope Benedict the integral relation of the "Greek spirit" to Christian faith is not only a matter of the development of tradition. By countering dehellenization, Pope Benedict is arguing that Christian faith embraces a metaphysic of divine self-communication in which the mystery of the incarnation entails an ongoing community of faith whose self-understanding was historically enacted in specific cultures. This does not prohibit its further inculturation, so long as essentials of the apostolic faith already affirmed are not undermined. The latter is not possible without recognizing that the already inculturated mediation of the faith bears metaphysical significance, since the universality of human reason is something that the Greeks aspired to and in part sustained through philosophical inquiry. This account of reason is an anthropological constant that cannot be dismissed as some sort of husk that is secondary to the real kernel of Christian faith. To the extent that the church affirmed some of its core dogmas within the framework of this conceptuality, it carries perennial import for the faith.

Here we turn to an address by Pope Benedict in which he reflected on the importance of Pope John Paul II's 1998 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*. In the face of historical interpretation, which excludes "the question of truth" and even more becomes "an immunization against the truth," Benedict underscores the timeliness of the encyclical. Confronted by the "false humility and . . . false presumption" of the "modern atti-

tude," in which the "issue is not truth, but praxis, the domination of things for our needs,"[12] Pope Benedict identifies the key intention of his predecessor. "*Fides et Ratio* seeks to restore to humanity the courage to seek the truth, that is, to encourage reason once again in the adventure of searching for truth."[13] And, in his own words quite pertinent to the dominance of the hermeneutical enterprise: "Man is not trapped in a hall of mirrors of interpretations; one can and must seek a breakthrough to what is really true."[14] Otherwise, as John Paul II said in his clear warning about the negative aspects of postmodernism (there are positive aspects as well), "the human being must learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral."[15]

Modern/postmodern culture cannot sustain the capacities and aspirations of the human person. This failure inevitably leads to the nihilism that John Paul II diagnoses in the face "the terrible experience of evil that has marked our age." While this process has assured the collapse of "rationalist optimism" with its reductive effects on reason that we have already noted, we are now also faced with the "temptation to despair."[16] Therefore, in order to reengage the culture beyond its own relativistic entrapments, Pope Benedict must plot how universal aspirations are embedded within historical particularism without negating the transcendental foundations of the former. Again he notes how John Paul II addressed this problem.

In order to demonstrate that the Gospel's first inculturation and its subsequent taking up in the faith is not the "canonization of Eurocentrism," especially one that precludes further inculturations, Pope Benedict argues that cultures are "the expression of man's one essence, [and] are characterized by the human dynamic, which is to transcend all boundaries."[17] This applies to Israel as well as Greece. In regard to the former

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[12] Benedict writes: "[A] false humility that does not recognize in the human person the capacity for the truth, and a false presumption by which one places oneself above things, above truth itself, while making the extension of one's power, one's domination over things, the objective of one's thought." Quoted from "Culture and Truth: Some Reflections on the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*," in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 368.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Fides et Ratio*, 91.

[16] Ibid.

[17] *Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, 370. See also *Fides et Ratio*, 70: "When they are deeply rooted in experience, cultures show forth the human being's characteristic openness to the universal and the transcendent."

the Bible is not simply the expression of ancient Israel's culture but expresses the dynamics of divine revelation within the culture as Israel is called to worship the God not of its own making, the One who is "completely other."[18] So too, as Pope Benedict points out, the church was able "to take up the dialogue with Greek philosophy and use it as an instrument for the gospel, because in the Greek world a form of auto-criticism of their own culture, which had arisen through the search for God, was already underway." In other words, the move toward "self-transcendence" in Greek culture contributed to the inculturation of the gospel.[19] The same applies to other cultures—John Paul II makes explicit reference to the great metaphysical systems of India.[20]

On the crucial question of the specific case of the initial and subsequent inculturations Pope Benedict and John Paul II are in agreement, and so we see a consistent development in the thought of the two popes. John Paul II both affirms the past and anticipates the future:

> [I]n engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church of the future, who will judge herself enriched by all that comes from today's engagement with Eastern cultures and will find in this inheritance fresh cues for fruitful dialogue with the cultures which will emerge as humanity moves into the future.[21]

Thus for John Paul II and Benedict XVI the anthropological constant is the basis for culture. Openness to transcendence characterizes human being and the cultural mediation of this dynamic enables the inculturation of the faith. Such was the case when Christian faith encountered Greek philosophy wherein the aspiration to the divine was much clearer than in the pagan religions of the day. As Ratzinger once remarked: "Early Christianity boldly and resolutely made its choice and carried out its

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[18] Ibid., 372.

[19] Ibid., 372–73.

[20] The full quote is in *Fides et Ratio*, 72: "My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems."

[21] Ibid.

purification by deciding *for* the God of the philosophers and *against* the gods of the various religions."[22]

There is no denial of the need for purification in the philosophical realm. The confession and definitions of Trinitarian and Christological dogmas entailed a process of weaning out heterodox influences of certain Greek metaphysical positions over against the gospel. However, this did not negate the legitimacy of the turn to philosophy or of the distinctly Christian metaphysical vision that emerged from the church fathers. This particular inculturation maintained and enhanced the philosophical aspiration for wisdom that was consistent with the human orientation to the transcendent. As such, it bore fruit in the theological developments of the ancient church. This primary reception was ruled by the gospel and was formative for the tradition of the church. It also did not exclude but rather encouraged further receptions of human culture under the light of the faith. Reenter David Bentley Hart.

Hart is no stranger to cultural analysis. His book *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* is a tour de force in Christian theological analysis and a critique of the sources and direction of our present postmodern culture.[23] No doubt Hart's exposé of postmodern pretensions only confirms that the light of faith is necessary for any salutary illumination and transformation of the human condition; reason alone cannot accomplish the tasks. No disagreement here. The vision of John Paul II and of Benedict XVI, which would redirect contemporary inquiry to embrace the sapiential dimensions of reason, is predicated on the openness of reason to faith and on the illumination of reason by faith as well as on the unity of truth.[24] However, in his radical critique of postmodernism, Hart does not hold out much hope for any engagement of the culture other than the church's fidelity to the kerygma and the conversion of the world to the church. His concern is that postmodernism's habitation of the public square—and that square's presumed

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[22] Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 137.

[23] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[24] On this latter point see *Fides et Ratio*, 34: "This truth, which God reveals to us in Jesus Christ, is not opposed to the truths which philosophy perceives. On the contrary, the two modes of knowledge lead to truth in all its fullness. The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning, as the principle of non-contradiction makes clear. Revelation renders this unity certain, showing that the God of creation is also the God of salvation history. It is the one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend, and who reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

neutrality—reduces "cultural and narrative particularity to something fundamentally indifferent . . . merely cultural residues . . . beholden to an 'obligation' whose claim is both absolute and indeterminate." In other words, Christianity must sacrifice its essential identity to an absolutism that prohibits any absolute commitments, to a cultural violence that undermines the very being of the church (which is beholden to its kerygma of the crucified and risen Lord). In this regard Christian thought should be "suspicious of every claim to neutrality," even those proffered by postmodernity as "an extranarrative site or a postnarrative peace."[25] (Recall that postmodernity has deconstructed all metanarratives.) Here the choice between Athens and Jerusalem (or, more accurately, between Athens gone awry and the gospel's enactment of God's self-giving revelatory act) is clear. "What accord has Christ with Beliar (2 Cor 6:15a)?"

All in all, Hart's analysis of modernity/postmodernity unveils a more insidious intent than even Benedict XVI has identified. One example can suffice. For the Pope (as we have seen) the contemporary investment in hermeneutics requires that we emerge out of a hall of mirrors of interpretations into truth. The attempt here is to embolden reason in regard to both its scope and its capacities. For Hart, on the other hand, radical hermeneutics "dissembles itself as a kind of principled powerlessness" when, in fact, it is a "discourse of power" and a violent one at that.[26] Situated within the "Optics of the Market"—"that ubiquitous realm of endlessly proliferating images of the real"[27]—it becomes a serious question whether the gospel can be heard within this postmetaphysical world of "the immateriality and lightness of the market's bloodless, dispirited desires."[28] Hart is a realist on this score.

> Theology must ask, though, whether the rhetoric of the form of Christ, this distinct beauty that inaugurates its own order of supplementation and extension, can enter into a world enclosed within this cycle of delirious fixation and distracted disenchantment.[29]

Confronted by this cultural situation Christians must remain faithful to the divine gratuity at the heart of their faith and bear witness to it as disciples even if it be "by way of martyrdom, by surrendering their gift to others even in the moment of rejection."[30]

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[25] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 428.
[26] Ibid., 424.
[27] Ibid., 431.
[28] Ibid., 438.
[29] Ibid., 437–38.
[30] Ibid., 442.

Benedict XVI is certainly not shy about the need for authentic and radical Christian witness. However, his efforts to retrieve reason out of modernity's reductive hold—he concentrates more on Enlightenment reason than on the postmodernisms in the crosshairs of Hart—are part and parcel of a larger strategy to reclaim reason and faith for European culture. Since this culture "imprints itself on the whole world, and even more than that, in a certain sense gives it uniformity," Pope Benedict realizes the implications of Europe's present "purely functional rationality."

> And in the wake of this form of rationality, Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner unknown before now, excludes God from the public conscience, either by denying him altogether or by judging that his existence is not demonstrable, uncertain, and therefore belongs to the realm of subjective choices—something, in any case, irrelevant to public life.[31]

How then is the church capable of entering pubic life in the wake of this diagnosis—admittedly more a critique of the modernist framework than a critique of the postmodernist one proffered by Hart? Pope Benedict acknowledges the provenance of Enlightenment thinking from within Christianity and, although gone wrong, it still holds out the prospect that reductionist reason is not the last word. Reason can regain its full scope if Christians "live a faith that comes from the Logos, from creative reason, which, because of this, is also open to all that is truly rational."[32] Indeed, this is the aspiration and legacy of the Second Vatican Council.

Pope Benedict (unlike Hart) extends an olive branch to the secularists but then ends up (like Hart) invoking the authenticity of Christian witness as the most credible sign of the faith. In the meantime, instead of burying the secularists as Hart seems to advocate, Benedict tries to reverse the Enlightenment axiom—to act morally even if God does not exist—by proposing that the only moral credibility that can be gained is to live as if God does exist. In the end, however, it is only through those touched by God such as Benedict of Nursia (notice again the monastic witness) that God comes near.

In the meantime, the appeal to reason works with a proper politics, a project presaged in earlier writings and come to fruition in his papal encyclicals—Pope Benedict's second point. The themes are familiar. In an essay entitled "A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy?" the

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[31] "Europe's Crisis in Culture," in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, 327.
[32] Ibid., 334

then-Cardinal's views are succinctly given. "Today we know that man needs transcendence so that he may shape his world that will always be imperfect in such a way that people can live in it in a manner in keeping with human dignity.[33]

Several steps are required for the maintenance of this position. First, Christianity must not misdirect its messianic dynamism to a utopian, this-worldly fulfillment. Such misdirection displaces its true fulfillment in the kingdom of God and likewise undermines the necessary ethics for the non-messianic state. The kingdom of God cannot become a political program; we engage in political ethics, not political theology.[34] Similar themes were echoed in the 1984 and 1986 companion documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* and *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, promulgated while he was prefect. As is well known, his critique of liberation theology is intended to restrain the excesses of secularized utopian politics of both the left and the right as well as prevent the politicization of Christian witness. Hence, his modest claim for Christian engagement in the public square.

Ratzinger's prescription for Europe reflects the same sort of caution and modesty. In his essay "Europe: A Heritage with Obligations for Christians," four theses are proposed. In each, restraint is exercised toward the state and, as in the area of theology's relationship with philosophy, each reflects the synthesis of the Greek and Christian heritages. First, there is an "internal relationship between democracy and *eunomia* . . . that is the dependence of the law on moral criteria."[35] Second, if *eunomia* is the precondition for democracy, then a precondition for *eunomia* is a shared respect "for moral values and for God."[36] Third, respect for God and for ethics, which provides the foundation of law, translates into "the rejection both of the nation and of world revolution as the supreme good."[37] Finally (and this reflects the commendable achievements of the modern age), "the recognition and safeguarding of freedom of conscience, human rights, freedom of science and scholarship" are necessarily constitutive of a "society based on freedom."[38] Of course, these historical developments in Europe would not have taken place without the foundations that Christianity once provided.

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[33] Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 211.
[34] Ibid., 216.
[35] Also, in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 233.
[36] Ibid., 234.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 235.

Is this a hopeless cause? Will Europe and the West respond to the Pope's diagnosis, and the cure as well? One can only speculate. What is true is that he has continued this engagement as pontiff, and one can trace in his encyclicals a pattern of thought that continues the developments of his earlier writings. It is a more constructive engagement than we see in Hart's work, as prescient as it is. Gifts, after all, do differ from one another in the life of the church. But he is with Hart on this score. European civilization has not just deracinated itself but is experiencing the "failure of its circulatory system."[39] And this has to do with the distinctly Christian gift in the synthesis that has become the West, namely, charity. Hence, Pope Benedict's first encyclical: *Deus Caritas Est*.

Throughout, Pope Benedict continues to affirm the synthesis of his earlier writings. The philosophical dimension and the biblical vision are correlated: "God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being; but this universal principle of creation—the *Logos*, primordial reason—is at the same time a lover with all the passion of a true love" (*DCE* 10). Christ himself as the *Logos*, eternal wisdom, invites us into his own self-giving through his act of self-oblation (*DCE* 13). The Church thus becomes "an expression of love" through evangelization and the "*service of charity*" (*DCE* 19). More to the point is how Pope Benedict negotiates this in regard to the church vis-à-vis society.

Pope Benedict conservatively (in the best sense of that word) preserves the distinction of spheres between faith and politics—appealing to Jesus' saying about Caesar (Mt 22:21). Justice is the origin and goal of politics and lies within the proper activity of the state. Here the church respects the autonomy of both reason and the state while reserving to itself in the exercise of faith and charity the task of "the purification of reason and . . . the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run" (*DCE* 29). Indeed, the laity work in the world (as their "direct duty") for a "just ordering of society" and for the common good, leavening their political activity (as it were) with "social charity"—which is related to but distinct from ecclesial charity, which constitutes the church's "*opus proprium*" (*DCE* 29). The latter entails a "charitable activity" as a "communitarian initiative" in which "the heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly" (*DCE* 31).

In Pope Benedict's second encyclical, *Spe Salvi* of 2007, an exposition of the Christian virtue of hope, he compares this virtue with the emptiness of the antique worldview and then (in more detail) with hope's desiccation in

[39] From his essay "The Spiritual Roots of Europe: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," in Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Islam*, trans. Michael F. Moore (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 66.

its post-Christian iterations. In fact, Greco-Roman antiquity knew nothing more than "the elemental spirits of the universe," that is, "the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind." The gospel and its personal God overturned this worldview (SS 5). Christian hope then is a performative act both individually and socially,[40] and embraces an eschatological dimension with salutary effects in the present.

> While this community-oriented vision of the "blessed life" is certainly directed beyond the present world, as such it also has to do with the building up of this world—in very different ways, according to the historical context and the possibilities offered or excluded thereby. (SS 15)

The secularization of hope follows two basic trajectories in modernity; first, hope in progress through the marriage of science and praxis, and then a Marxist variation of this hope through a critique of earth and the turn to politics. Both operate under the kingdom of reason, a regime, of course, narrowed in scope and (in a Christian perspective) requiring purification, for without God, there is no hope. In fact, justice, the purported aspiration of science and politics, becomes the best argument "in favor of faith in eternal life" since "only in connection with the impossibility that the injustice of history should be the final word does the necessity for Christ's return and for new life become fully convincing" (SS 43).

In his most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict explicitly links his new theme of charity in truth with the theme of his earlier encyclical.

> As I said in my Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, history is thereby deprived of *Christian hope*, deprived of a powerful social resource at the service of integral human development, sought in freedom and in justice. Hope encourages reason and gives it the strength to direct the will. It is already present in faith, indeed it is called forth by faith. Charity in truth feeds on hope and, at the same time, manifests it. (CV 34)

Whether or not this olive branch to secularists will be successful is yet to be determined. However, there is no question that (unlike Hart) he intends it since, consistent with *Gaudium et Spes*, the ongoing dialogue

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[40] *Spe Salvi*, 14: "This real life, towards which we try to reach out again and again, is linked to a lived union with a 'people', and for each individual it can only be attained within this 'we'. It presupposes that we escape from the prison of our 'I', because only in the openness of this universal subject does our gaze open out to the source of joy, to love itself—to God."

between faith and reason "constitutes the most appropriate framework for promoting *fraternal collaboration between believers and non-believers* in their shared commitment to working for justice and the peace of the human family" (*CV* 57). But there is also a development in this encyclical that signifies an important specification of the basis for this collaboration, one already outlined in *Deus Caritas Est*: "The Church's social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being" (*DCE* 28).

In order to underscore the development in Catholic social teaching that the encyclical represents—and it is significant—Pope Benedict elaborates the fundamental anthropology that is required. First, he briefly summarizes the innovations introduced by Pope Paul VI; his summary is intended as a "fresh reading of *Populorum Progressio*," Paul VI's 1967 social encyclical, and its theme of human development.[41]

Pope Benedict builds on the basic requirements of justice but also on the Catholic notion that "*[c]harity goes beyond justice*" (*CV* 6).[42] Although charity incorporates justice and works through it—"*Testimony to Christ's charity, through works of justice, peace and development, is part and parcel of evangelization* because Jesus Christ who loves us, is concerned with the whole person" (*CV* 15)—it also expands to include the "logic of gift" and "the *principle of gratuitousness* as an expression of fraternity" (*CV* 34). In this

[41] Pope Benedict summarizes the theme in *Caritas in Veritate* 13: "*In the notion of development, understood in human and Christian terms, he identified the heart of the Christian social message*, and he proposed Christian charity as the principal force at the service of development."

[42] The full quote reveals the manner in which charity exceeds justice. It clearly does not dispense with justice. "*Charity goes beyond justice*, because to love is to give, to offer what is 'mine' to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is 'his', what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting. I cannot 'give' what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice. If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them. Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI's words, 'the minimum measure' of it, an integral part of the love 'in deed and in truth' (1 Jn 3:18), to which Saint John exhorts us. On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God's love in human relationships as well; it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world."

manner the economy can be civilized if two conditions are met. First, a "sustained commitment is needed . . . to *promote a person-based and community-oriented culture of persons of worldwide integration that is open to transcendence*" (*CV* 42). Second, the goal is "to *steer the globalization of humanity in relational terms, in terms of communion and the sharing of goods*" (*CV* 42).

Clearly, the Pope has moved beyond justice in these prescriptions. These developments in *Caritas in Veritiate* do not diminish Christianity's public interface with the culture—quite the opposite. The boldness of proclamation remains. Things can proceed "*only if God has a place in the public realm*" (*CV* 56). The reciprocal relationship between faith and reason also remains intact. "*Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith*" but, so too, "*religion always need to be purified by reason in order to show its authentically human face*" (*CV* 56). The humanism proposed transcends "*a materialistic vision of human events*" by accounting for the "*the spiritual dimension*," authentic human development (*CV* 77). In sum, a "*humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism*" (*CV* 78). But the key is at the fundamental level: "*the social question has become a radically anthropological question*" (*CV* 75). In the next section he further develops the theme: "*There cannot be holistic development and universal common good unless people's spiritual and moral welfare is taken into account*, considered in their totality as body and soul" (*CV* 76).

Pope Benedict invokes the disciplines of metaphysics and theology (not just the social sciences) in order to understand and preserve "man's transcendent dignity," which also "requires a *deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation* (*CV* 53)." He appeals to the principle of analogy in which "common human experiences of love and truth" are compared to "*the revealed mystery of the Trinity*"—"the three divine Persons are pure relationality"—and to sacramental marriage—"the two are a real and relational unity" (*CV* 54). As a new iteration of that which is natural to all human beings and consonant with the gospel, Pope Benedict proffers the following: "The Christian revelation of the unity of the human race presupposes a *metaphysical interpretation of the 'humanum' in which relationality is an essential element*" (*CV* 55).

Here we have arrived at a maximal level of engagement with secular culture, not just a critique and dismissal. In *Caritas in Veritate* he urges that economy and politics be governed not only by justice but also by gratuity and communion. He appeals to reason (without its rationalist reductions) but to a reason open to transcendence, even to God. Human nature is not only that which aspires to the good and the true, but also that which is embedded in relationality and desires communion. Pope Benedict takes on the challenges of modernity along with the relativisms of its

postmodern offspring. Although he does not so much engage the intellectual progeny of the latter as does Hart, still, by appealing to the better angels of their nature—the Enlightenment at its best—he holds out hope for some response.

One wonders whether, if his dialogue partner had been Jacques Derrida rather than Jürgen Habermas, things would have turned out differently.[43] Perhaps this is simply a generational difference between Pope Benedict and Hart, the former engaging the Enlightenment and critical theory, and the latter sparring with postmodernists. In fact, Pope Benedict is quite aware of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, accusing it of stifling humankind's *joie de vivre* and freedom. Hart takes on Nietzsche as Christianity's most formidable opponent in *The Beauty of the Infinite*.[44] In response, argued Pope Benedict, Christians can be a creative minority (borrowing from Arnold Toynbee) who can "demonstrate persuasively . . . how sublime the gift of faith in the God who suffers with us [is] . . . [and] a life that does not experience the bonds of love as dependence and limitation but rather an opening to the greatness of life."[45] In any event, both appeal to divine charity at the heart of the gospel, and with the heart of a pastor (as well as a teacher) Pope Benedict knows that if there is to be human development, then the world "*needs Christians with their arms raised in prayer.*"[46] Surely Hart would agree. NV

[43] See *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, edited by Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006). Note that, in addition to dialoguing with Habermas, Pope Benedict engaged the Frankfurt School in *Spe Salvi* (42), mentioning specifically Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (perhaps the first mention by a Pope!).

[44] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 93.

[45] Ratzinger and Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, 125–26.

[46] *Caritas in Veritate*, 79.