



TRACEY ROWLAND

Ratzinger the romantic

The second in our series on the thought and life of Pope Benedict explores how he focuses as much on the heart and beauty as on truth. And this means that Christianity can never be just another ethic, but remains centred on the person of Christ

In the December 2009 issue of *Modern Theology* was an article by John Milbank, entitled “The new divide: romantic versus classical orthodoxy”. Milbank’s thesis was that liberal theology is now passé (no one under the age of 30 is interested in Hans Küng) and that the new battle is between two different schools of orthodoxy, one offering a neo-neo-scholasticism with appeals to the rationality of the Catholic faith, the other a romantic orthodoxy, interested in the heart as well as the head, love and beauty as much as truth.

The latter is derivative of the nineteenth-century Tübingen school and the mid-twentieth century Ressourcement projects of scholars such as Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou and the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. John Henry Newman is also very much a precursor of “romantic orthodoxy”. His choice of motto, *cor ad cor loquitur* (“heart speaking to heart”) stamped his credentials as romantically orthodox.

Joseph Ratzinger also has strong romantic credentials, indeed, one might say inclinations, but he does not want to jettison the classical heritage. He would argue that it needs to be enriched with some romantic elements and it needs to be purified of some of its baroque-era distortions, especially those brought into the tradition by Francisco Suárez (1548-1617). Nonetheless he strongly retains the classical interest in truth and describes truth and love as “the twin pillars of all reality”. In a Wednesday-audience address, he spoke of St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure as the two great representatives of these pillars.

Much of Ratzinger’s own academic work (especially in the field of theological anthropology), however, has engaged the romantic themes of the importance of the affective dimension in spiritual and moral life, the epistemic importance of tradition, the theological significance of history and the transcendence of beauty (especially the role of beauty in the liturgy).

Another way to put this is to say that Pope Benedict is highly sensitive to the fact that no amount of brilliant intellectual gymnastics, no eloquent presentation of the truth, is likely to convert a person whose heart is already entangled with other gods. Truth needs to be in an alliance with love and beauty to liberate effectively.



Joseph Ratzinger as a young scholar. He was introduced to the works of Newman as a seminarian. Photo: CNS

It has been said that the young Ratzinger once sat through a very dry lecture about how God is the *summum bonum* (“the greatest good”), and as he left the hall he remarked to a colleague that “a *summum bonum* doesn’t need a mother”. He was not denying that God is the highest good, he was simply doubtful whether this proposition would have the capacity to move hearts steeled to stoicism by two traumatic wars. As one of his seminary superiors has written, this kind of scholasticism “wasn’t his beer”. The works of Newman, however, were.

When Ratzinger joined the seminary in Freising in 1946, he was introduced to the thought of Newman by his prefect of studies, Alfred Läßle, who was working on a dissertation on Newman’s idea of conscience. Läßle was later to reminisce that Newman became their passion. The German interest in Newman had earlier been fostered by Erich Przywara SJ (1889-1972), editor of *Stimmen der Zeit*, and by the cultural critic and convert Theodor Haecker. Ratzinger’s teacher in fundamental theology and director of both of his theses, Gottlieb Söhngen (1892-1971), was also into Newman and it was under Söhngen that Ratzinger studied Newman’s *Grammar of Assent*.

Ratzinger has since reflected that for seminarians of his generation “Newman’s teaching on conscience became an important foundation for theological personalism, which was

drawing us all in its sway. Our image of the human being as well as our image of the Church was permeated by this point of departure.”

Newman’s teaching on conscience resonated well with the ideas of Romano Guardini (1885-1968), who was another of the young Ratzinger’s intellectual heroes, and a professor at the University of Munich. Karl Rahner described Guardini as a “Christian humanist who led Germany’s Catholics out of an intellectual and cultural ghetto and into the contemporary world”. Ratzinger was later to write: “We were taught by Guardini that ‘the essence of Christianity is not an idea, not a system of thought, not a plan of action. The essence of Christianity is a person: Jesus Christ himself.”

“According to Guardini: ‘This Logos, which is perfectly simple and yet immeasurably rich, is no order of forms and laws, no world of prototypes and arrangements, but Someone. He is the living son of the eternal Father. We can stand before him, face to face. We can speak to him and he answers, indeed, he himself gives us the power to stand before him and he can grant our request.”

“We can love him and he is able to give us a communion which reflects the intimacy in which he lies upon the bosom of the Father, and which St John experienced when his master permitted him to lay his head upon his heart. This fact established a contrast to everything which natural philosophy and piety can experience or invent. This Logos, this one and all, steps into history and becomes man.”

In his *Habilitation* thesis, Ratzinger argued that this approach to revelation could be found in St Bonaventure, but it got lost in the period of baroque scholasticism and completely capsize in the thought of Francisco Suárez, who begins the tradition of thinking of revelation as a series of dogmatic propositions.

Such was the dominance of the Suárezian approach to revelation in pre-conciliar academies that Ratzinger had to extricate the anti-Suárezian sections of his thesis to appease one of his examiners. Nonetheless, this principle, which Ratzinger had learned from Guardini and for which he found corroborating evidence in Bonaventure, became enshrined in the conciliar document *Dei Verbum* (1965), which he and Rahner helped to draft. It was also central to paragraph 22 of *Gaudium et Spes*, the most commonly cited

paragraph in all the documents of Vatican II during the pontificate of John Paul II, and it formed the central theme of *Deus Caritas Est* (2005).

Ratzinger was also influenced by Guardini's approach to the interpretation of Scripture, which he has summarised in the following terms: "For Guardini the first step is always attentive listening to the message of the scriptural text. In this way the real contribution of exegesis to an understanding of Jesus is fully acknowledged. But in this attentiveness to the text, the listener, according to Guardini's understanding, does not make himself to be the Master of the Word. Rather, the listener makes himself the believing disciple who allows himself to be led and enlightened by the Word.

"It is precisely by repudiating a closed merely human logic that the greatness and uniqueness of his Person becomes apparent to us. It is precisely in this way that the prison of our prejudice is broken open; it is in this way that our eyes are slowly opened, and that we come to recognise what is truly human, since we have been touched by the very humanity of God himself."

Thus, for Ratzinger revelation is about the person of Christ, understood in the context of the Holy Trinity; Scripture at its deepest level is about a personal enlightenment by this Word of the Father, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and ethics is about acting in such a way that one shares in the virtues of Christ.

The contrary approach to treat the faith primarily as a series of theoretical propositions and to teach ethics as a stand-alone discipline has been a dominant fashion in religious education for several generations. Indeed, Catholics have often prided themselves on being able to defend Christian ethics without any reference to Christ. Peter Henrici SJ summed up the tendency in his statement that "Kant has become a secret father of the Church".

As a consequence Christianity begins to appear on the menu of world views as just another ethical framework. Ratzinger pejoratively calls this "moralism" and he has been campaigning against it since at least the time of the Second Vatican Council. In 1964, he preached a sermon at the Cathedral of Münster, which began with the question: "What actually is the real substance of Christianity that goes beyond mere moralism?"

Much of the first half of *Deus Caritas Est*



Karl Rahner with Joseph Ratzinger at the time of the Second Vatican Council. The two were involved in the drafting of *Dei Verbum*. Photo: 30 Giorni

from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing worthy of honour and desire."

can be read as a plea not to think of Christianity as a moralism – Guardini's point about Christianity not being the result of an ethical choice but rather an encounter with the Person of Christ appears in the very first paragraph. This encyclical also reiterates many themes in von Balthasar's *Love Alone is Credible* in which Kant is found at the scene of almost every tragic accident in Western culture for the next two centuries.

This book also incorporates elements of the nuptial mystery theology of leading *Communio* scholars such as Cardinal James Stafford, Cardinal Angelo Scola and Cardinal Marc Ouellet. Both Stafford and Scola emphasise that the Christian experience of faith in

Christianity is thus about nothing less than the divinisation of the person, meaning an elevation of the person to a participation in the life and love of the Trinity. Human dignity and nobility flows from this, not from any eighteenth-century German conception of the autonomy of the human will.

The place where one finds the most extensive treatment of human dignity by Ratzinger is in a commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* published in 1969. It was in this essay that he famously described the language used to discuss human freedom as "downright Pelagian" ("eingeradezu Pelagianische Terminologie"). Moreover, he explicitly rejected the idea that it is possible to construct "a rational philosophical picture of man intelligible to all and on which all men of goodwill can agree, to which can be added the Christian doctrines as a sort of crowning conclusion". He described this idea as a "fiction".

This "fiction" rested upon a construction of the relationship between nature and grace that was dominant in the pre-conciliar era but heavily criticised by Przywara, Guardini, de Lubac, Rahner and von Balthasar as a baroque distortion of patristic and scholastic thought. Rahner actually described it as the "original and mortal sin of Jesuit theology" since (like other ideas Ratzinger doesn't like) it came to the fore of the tradition in the work of Suárez.

Ratzinger believes that *Gaudium et Spes* offers a "daring new theological anthropology", which he applauds, but he locates this in paragraph 22, the most Christo-centric of all the paragraphs. This paragraph appears to have been a paraphrase of a statement in de Lubac's Catholicism. It leaves secular humanism with no ground on which to stand. One might say that John Paul II amplified it in the first sentence of *Redemptor Hominis* – that Jesus Christ, the redeemer of man, is the centre and purpose of human history.

Indeed there is a dramatic symmetry between the first lines of the first encyclicals of the two pontiffs. One says that Christianity is not an ethical framework, but an encounter with a person who is the truth, and the other says that this person is nothing less than the centre and purpose (alpha and omega) of all human history.

Cardinal Walter Kasper has written that the manner in which *Gaudium et Spes* was

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time is nuptial. Revelation is about a love story between God and man. Similarly, Ouellet has written that the foundation of ethical thought is nothing less than the Trinitarian horizon of human existence.

Therefore, to understand Ratzinger one must first understand that he thinks that Christianity is about a personal relationship with the Trinity and that all the dogmatic propositions and all the moral precepts, though important in themselves, make no sense outside of this relationship.

This emphasis on the very personal nature of the Christian faith may be found in a reflection of Ratzinger on the spirituality of Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, who was one of his early patrons. Ratzinger suggested that Frings and Newman shared a similar spirituality, encapsulated in the following quotation from St Gregory of Nyssa: "This is true perfection, not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards ...

"On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been received by promise, we regard falling

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drafted gave rise to the ambivalent character of the document. There is not one consistent presentation of theological anthropology within it. Rather there are two presentations. One offers a merely “theistically coloured account of the human person”, the other an explicitly Trinitarian account. Thus one can read the document differently depending on whether one’s anthropology merely has the whiff of theism about it or whether it is explicitly Trinitarian. Ratzinger favours the Trinitarian horizon.

Ratzinger’s deeply Trinitarian anthropology emphasises the importance of relationality – that dimension of the person which makes him or her unique and unrepeatable. He has written that the era of defining the person solely in terms of substantiality (those elements human persons share in common) is over.

Another way of expressing this is to say that Ratzinger acknowledges the Heideggerian insight that the human person is always a being in time. He is therefore interested in the way in which elements of contemporary culture lower a person’s cultural and intellectual horizons or diminish their opportunities for a genuine experience of self-transcendence. Rock concerts, for example, he opposes, not primarily because of lurid lyrics (although of course they are a problem) but because he thinks they are pseudo-liturgical events that offer the youth of the world a fake experience of self-transcendence and human solidarity.

Like Augustine and Guardini, Ratzinger is interested in man as God intended him to be – a participant in the Trinitarian life. Like Bonaventure and Guardini he emphasises that revelation is primarily a personal event that touches the human heart at its depths. Like Aquinas he emphasises that this person who we encounter in revelation is the truth, the Logos of the gospel of St John. And like Newman he thinks that our understanding of revelation can deepen, especially through the spiritual insights and personal witness of the saints.

Ratzinger is particularly interested in the romantic themes of affectivity, love, beauty, spiritual development and individuality. However, he does not jettison the classical heritage so much as seek to bring it to a richer synthesis with the incorporation of romantic elements.

Cardinal Joachim Meisner described him as the “Mozart of theology”, but perhaps a better description might be the Carl Maria von Weber of theology. He incorporates romantic elements without jettisoning the classical (although it is extremely significant that for Ratzinger, “classical” in theological parlance does not mean “baroque” as it does for many of the neo-neo-scholastics).

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