

## Review

# Joseph Ratzinger and Cultural Dynamisms: Insights for the Renewal of the Techno-Scientific Culture

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**Abstract:** From the Christian heartland of Europe emerged the techno-scientific culture borne from the Enlightenment movement. Prior to this cultural outlook that severed culture from its foundational roots in religion, it was the case that religion was not only a crucial agent in the shaping of culture, but in many ways, the heart of culture. With secular rationality and its underscoring of the techno-scientific mindset, a growing privatization of religion has become the acceptable ethos of contemporary Western culture. Secularism, largely understood in terms of a naked public sphere, is increasingly perceived to be the only form of rationality that can guarantee societal cohesion and the democratic spirit. But as Ratzinger pointed out in his 1993 Hong Kong Address to the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops Conferences of Asia, this Western understanding of culture that is governed by a hermeneutic of suspicion towards religion, and which seeks to replace the heart of culture with autonomous reason à la Kant, ends up leaving culture in a winter land of existential frostiness. By depriving culture of its roots in the transcendental dimensions of human experience, much of the wisdom and riches that have been accumulated in the pre-techno-scientific cultures—regarding fundamental questions such as “Who am I?”, “Why am I here?”, “What is the meaning of life?”, “What happens when I die?”, “Does life make sense?”, “Do I have a destiny?” and more—are now left to the manufactured logic of the techno-scientific with its anthropological reductionism that fails to offer the big picture of the cultural outlook that did not construe the scientific and the technological as antithetical to religion. This essay seeks to unpack the arguments Ratzinger made in this Address at Hong Kong, with the hope that this theological exegesis of the Hong Kong lecture could once again offer an invitation to the world of the techno-scientific, the world of secular rationality, to open up to the world of faith, so that together, the breadth and depth of the human culture would once again flourish in its greatness.

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger; culture; religion; science; technology; enlightenment; faith; divine; worship; the human being; meaning of existence; Christianity; crisis; secularism



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## 1. Introduction

Why is understanding culture critical to making sense of the phenomenon of human existence today? Is the dominant Enlightenment culture of the West strictly rational? And is this culture complete and in need of no other cultural positions to complement it? In addition, what insights can we draw from Ratzinger that might enrich our understanding of culture as we navigate the complexities of today's world? Taking Ratzinger's March 1993 Address to the members of the Asian Bishops Doctrinal Commissions, “Christ, Faith and the Challenges of Culture”, as the focus text, this essay seeks to examine the historical

and philosophical presuppositions of the dominant technological and scientific culture that, evolving largely in the West, is now gaining steam on a global scale. The essay examines the strengths and limitations of this techno-scientific culture from the Ratzingerian perspective, hoping that such a dialogical approach to the treatment of this cultural context would aid in the understanding of the human project today in terms of its underlying assumptions of meaning, mission, and destiny.

## 2. Basic Ratzingerian Phenomenological Intuitions of the Physiognomy of Culture

According to Ratzinger,

Culture is the historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterize the life of a community. Culture has to do with knowledge and values. It is an attempt to understand the world and man's existence in the world, but it is not an attempt of a purely theoretical kind. Rather it is ordered to the fundamental interests of human existence. The question of man and the world always contains the prior, and actually foundational, question of God. One can neither understand the world nor live uprightly if the question of the divine goes unanswered. Indeed, it gets to the root of the great cultures to say that they interpret the world so as to order it to the divine. Culture in the classical sense thus includes going beyond the visible and apparent to actual causes, and thus culture at its core means an opening to the divine. (Ratzinger 1993, p. 2)

Engaging with the above claims about culture shows that a Ratzingerian understanding of culture is rooted in the inner dynamisms of history in terms of its evolution in the light of its capacity to form values that sustain a given community. Culture, while at heart is shaped by a transcendental reality, is such that it is destined to unfold within time and space. This historico-communal hermeneutics of culture is grounded in the logic that

Society marches onward, and therefore culture also has to do with history. On its journey through time, culture develops through its encounter with new reality and the arrival of new insights. Not sealed off, culture stands in the dynamic stream of time, which contains a confluence of currents moving toward unity. A culture's historicity means its ability to progress, and this depends on its ability to be open and to allow transformation through encounter. (ibid., p. 2)

This significance of history concurs with the Christian self-understanding of the value of history as a saving reality, as seen in the unfolding of Scripture. History is where God encounters the human being that is God's image, and history in terms of its chronological unfolding takes on a kairological dimension that is crucial to the appearing and apprehension of the intricacies of culture.

A second facet of the Ratzingerian cultural edifice is the communitarian dimension, which is crucial because, as Ratzinger holds, "man can succeed only with others; the question of right knowledge is thus also a question about the right formation of the community. The community, for its part, is the prerequisite for individual fulfillment" (ibid., p. 2). It is by living with and from the community that *praxis* as a cultural element becomes meaningful and fulfilling. Furthermore, a Ratzingerian reading of culture is anthropocentric and theocentric, given the Ratzingerian conviction of the *a priori* inner entelechy between the question of the human being and the question of God. In fact, the question of God and the stance a community takes in relation to it are foundational to the cultural development of any given culture.

Of equal importance, besides the community and what a given community makes of the transcendental foundations of culture, is the place of the individual subject, the acting person, the singular individual, in terms of the inner appropriation of customary norms and their practical applicability to the external ethos of a given society. In the understanding of culture, there is, therefore, a lively mutuality between the individual as individual, on the one hand, and the individual in the midst of the community, on the other. As Ratzinger upholds,

Culture is always bound to a social subject which, on the one hand, takes up the experiences of the individual and, on the other hand, helps shape them. The common subject conserves and develops insights which exceed the capacity of the individual, insights which can be termed pre-rational and super-rational. In so doing, 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 from an original contact with the ground of all things. In other words, cultures appeal to a communication from the divine. (ibid., p. 2)

The insights from the pre-rational and the super-rational place the individual subject in a worldview of interrelationships that transcend the pure subjectivity of the individual. Cultural insights are pre-rational in terms of their antecedent existence to the subjective discernment and particular intellectuality of the singular individual. Cultural intuitions are super-rational in that they can exceed the momentary rationality of particular subjectivity, especially in the light of their origin in the ancients and the divine, which imposes a character of revelation on cultural wisdom. As Ratzinger indicates, “the crisis of a culture ensues then when the culture is no longer able to bring this super-rational heritage into a convincing connection to a new, critical knowledge. In such a case, inherited truth becomes questionable; what was once truth becomes mere habit and loses its vitality” (ibid., p. 2). Certainly for Ratzinger, a culture that consciously seeks to abandon the heritage that has shaped it is indicative of a culture in decline.

Another insight that Ratzinger brings to the hermeneutics of faith is his position that faith itself is culture. Ratzinger declares that

There is no such thing as naked faith or mere religion. Simply stated, insofar as faith tells man who he is and how he should begin being human, faith creates culture; faith is itself culture. Faith’s word is not an abstraction; it is one which has matured through a long history and through intercultural mingling in which it formed an entire structure of life, the interaction of man with himself, his neighbor, the world and God. (ibid., p. 4)

This understanding of faith by Ratzinger definitely grounds faith in the Christian experience of incarnationality. Faith as a culture liberates faith from attempts to make it utopic, docetic and gnostic. And the realism that comes with this understanding of faith likewise reveals its historical character, which is predicated on the consciousness of an ongoing deepening and purification. It is based on this historical character of faith that one can speak of a living, cultural community called the “people of God”. And as Ratzinger explains, “the cultural subject ‘people of God’ differs from the classical cultures which are defined by tribe, people or the boundaries of a common region insofar as the People of God exists in different cultures which for their part, even as far as the Christian is concerned, do not cease to be the first and unmediated culture” (ibid., p. 4). In effect, there is the ethnic culture from which the believer comes into being, in the first instance of consciousness. This is the unmediated culture. Then, there is the consciousness born from the culture of faith, a second consciousness that rises to the level of self-consciousness, as the Christian

becomes the subjectivity of the dynamisms of the unfolding of the God-presence in the world. This double membership, this doubling of cultures, allows the Christian to live in two cultural worlds, the historic culture and the new culture of faith, both of which permeate them.

The Church thus has its own cultural subject for the Christian. As Ratzinger reminds us, “whoever joins the Church must be aware that he is entering a cultural subject with its own historically developed and multi-tiered inter-culturality. One cannot become a Christian apart from a certain exodus, a break from one’s previous life in all its aspects. Faith is not a private way to God; it leads into the People of God and its history. God bound himself to a history which is now also his and one which we cannot cast off” (ibid., p. 5). In a sense, faith has an antecedent substantial reality that reflects its historical development over time, which is empirical and deserving of our profound attention and engagement. And as Ratzinger again realistically observes, “this interaction will never be an entirely accomplished synthesis; it includes the necessity of continuing efforts toward reconciliation and refinement. Again and again man must learn the transcendence toward wholeness and universality which is proper not to a specific people, but precisely to the people of God, which embraces all men” (ibid., p. 4). Faith as a double-culture thus warrants an ongoing discernment that distinguishes the permanent and core elements from those taken up in the historically conditioned contexts which together constitute the subject matter that serves the apprehension of the hermeneutics of faith.

A further noteworthy feature of the Ratzingerian understanding of culture is the robust engagement with the techno-scientific culture that emerged from the Enlightenment. In a globalized world, it appears preposterous to speak of culture in the singular. And while cultural pluralism is certainly a rational given, it is likewise the case that certain trends, in this case, the technological and the scientific, tend to dominate cultural landscapes across the board, so much so that one is capable of harmonizing the differences in culture into categories reflective of the idiosyncrasies of the technico-scientific in a framework that is singular while remaining plural. As Ratzinger points out, this culture of science and technology that emerged in Europe from the Renaissance onwards was marked by “that scientific rationality which led to the geographical unity of the world and to the encounter between the continents and cultures in the age of the great discoveries. This same rationality leaves its imprint on all the world today in a much deeper way, thanks to the technological culture that science has made possible. Indeed, in a certain sense, scientific rationality is imposing uniformity on the world” (Ratzinger 2006a, p. 30). This new world of scientific rationality demonstrates the profound influence being exerted by the Western culture on the global culture.

This Western cultural world has moved through different phases of revolutions, be they scientific, technological, industrial, political, or sexual. At every stage, it has been presumed that all scientific and technological progress constitutes a step in the right direction in the liberation of the human being. Given this assumption, scientific and technological breakthroughs are accorded the unquestionable status of rights that must be accepted and defended, with no recourse to moral limits, especially those borne from religious considerations. The acceptable form of rationality becomes the techno-scientific. And against this understanding of rationality, no appeal is possible or even acceptable. In all, these different movements and their lingering effects constitute the defining features of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture. In effect, culture is not an abstract idea but a vital product of a tradition that can develop either organically or, at times, ruptured with the past, as it turned out to be the case with secular Enlightenment, which largely predicated itself on severing the link between life and faith, especially in the public sphere.

But this exclusion of God from the techno-scientific culture of the Enlightenment inadvertently results in the exclusion of God from the inner dynamisms and workings of the human being. This creates a cultural anthropology that sets up internal and external antithetical barriers that leave the human being in an existential conflict of meaning and purpose, especially in the light of the needed discernment facing the myriad of questions that mark human existence. The reality is that between the cultural world that includes God and the one that does not, there stands the same individual and society, both of which must live nobly and justly. In the theological and spiritual writings of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, one finds thoughtful insights that can aid the process of reclaiming the lost soul of culture that has been won over by secularism. If the center of secular culture is the privatization of God and the fostering of a naked public sphere, then Ratzinger's theological anthropology in which, following Augustine of Hippo, the extrinsicism of the supernatural is overcome, provides a unique starting point for any meaningful discussion of culture and the Christian faith today, as this article seeks to engage, explore, and present.

In all, understanding culture from a Ratzingerian hermeneutic dynamic entails engaging the singular individual, the community in terms of heritage and present, the divine, and the sense of history, all in the light of a rationality that one could characterize as beyond Kantian. Culture is multiple because of cultural individuality, which is the attachments that cultures have to particular expressions. And given their unfolding over space and time, culture is also historical. The reality of cultural individuality and cultural historicity is what make for the meeting and intermingling of cultures. In this light, it is practically impossible for any given culture to limit itself to a closed existence of God, the world, and the particular subjects of that culture. To the extent that cultures are individual and historical, they are bound to meet, influence, and be influenced in terms of their earlier cultural configurations. In doing so, they allow their values and categories to be challenged, shaped, refined, and transformed, bringing out new forms of culture through this process of reciprocal refinement, combination, complementarity, and interrelatedness.

### 3. Ratzinger and the Techno-Scientific Post-Enlightenment Culture

The continuous rapid technological and consequent social changes affecting the contemporary world is once again compelling the Church to engage the question that Vatican II sought to answer with the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*: How should the Church today engage the contemporary world, driven by the perennial mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ? As Ratzinger points out, the contemporary world, largely driven by the West, is unfolding along the lines of the technological and the scientific culture that prioritizes the dominion over matter (*ibid.*, p. 25). The understanding of dominion in an absolute technological sense has brought about a techno-anthropology, in which the sense of mystery and gift that hitherto underscored the origins of the human person as articulated in the Judeo-Christian tradition is supplanted by the view of a manufactured human being, with obvious consequences for culture. As Ratzinger explains,

This means that man enters the world, no longer as a gift of the Creator, but as the product of our activity—and a product that can be selected according to requirements that we ourselves stipulate. In this way, the splendor of the fact that he is the image of God—the source of his dignity and of his inviolability—no longer shines upon this man; his only splendor is the power of human capabilities. Man is nothing more now than the image of man—but of what man? (*ibid.*, p. 26)

In one sense, this new image of the human person that is profoundly horizontal is reflective of the breakthroughs in science and technology. But it remains to be seen whether this horizontalization that excludes the verticality of the human being as an image of God

is more enriching as an anthro-philosophical position. If anything, it appears to be an abridged and diminished picture of the human being and humanity's place in the world by way of mission, purpose, and destiny.

With the human being made in the image of the human being comes a cultural understanding that must provide the framework for this new techno-scientific person, namely, a culture marked by secularism. If by culture one tends primarily to that which shapes and characterizes a given people in a given time and space, then it is the case that this culture of secular rationality, understood as the outright rejection of the God-possibility, is now the ethos of Western culture, if not Western culture itself. As Ratzinger maintains,

In the wake of this form of rationality, Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner hitherto unknown to mankind, excludes God from public awareness. His existence maybe denied altogether or considered unprovable and uncertain and, hence, as something belonging to the sphere of subjective choices. In either case, God is irrelevant to public life. (ibid., p. 30)

In light of this minimalization of God from the public space, Ratzinger notes that, "accordingly, this new identity, which is defined exclusively by the Enlightenment culture, entails that God has nothing whatever to do with public life and with the foundations of the state" (ibid., p. 37). This is a purely functional rationality that has shaken the moral consciousness in a way completely unknown to the cultures that existed previously, since it maintains that only that which can be demonstrated experimentally is 'rational'" (ibid., p. 30). But this new secular rationality and the culture it has created in Europe and much of the Western world clearly places Europe and the West at odds with other cultural contexts of the world. And as Ratzinger further clarifies, "if then, it is true to say that Christianity has found its most efficacious form in Europe, it is also true to say that a culture has developed in Europe that is the most radical contradiction not only of Christianity, but of all the religious and moral traditions of humanity" (ibid., p. 31). In effect, the culture of Western secular rationality, rather than setting itself up as the norm, is instead an anomaly when viewed through the lenses of the grand scheme of things.

However, what is more puzzling about the secular mindset is the logic underpinning the push for the exclusion of God, namely, that only secular rationality can meet the expectations of developed societies. As Ratzinger observes regarding the exclusion of God and the reference to Christianity during the debate that surrounded the drafting of the preamble to the European Constitution, the presupposition of the Enlightenment culture is the idea that

Only the radical culture born of the Enlightenment, which has attained its full development in our own age, can be constitutive of European identity. Alongside this culture, various religious cultures with their respective rights can coexist, on condition (and to the degree) that they respect the criteria of the Enlightenment culture and subordinate themselves to it. (ibid., p. 34)

Along with this reasoning, only the framework of the Enlightenment understood as unchecked liberty is capable of providing the space for peaceful coexistence in the public sphere:

Its starting point is that liberty is a fundamental value and the criterion of everything else: the freedom of choice in matters of religion, which includes the religious neutrality of the state; the liberty to express one's own opinion, on condition that it does not call precisely this canon into question; the democratic ordering of the state, that is, the parliamentary control of the organs of state; the freedom to form political parties; the independence of those who administer

the law; and finally, the protection of the rights of man and the prohibition of discrimination. (ibid., p. 34)

Certainly, there is much that can be credited to the Enlightenment project in terms of its fostering of the democratic culture. But it should be equally pointed out, as Ratzinger does, that this “concept of liberty on which this culture is based inevitably leads to contradictions, since it is either badly defined or not defined at all. And it is clear that the very fact of employing this concept entails limitations on freedom that we could not even have imagined a generation ago. A confused ideology of liberty leads to a dogmatism that is proving ever more hostile to real liberty” (ibid., pp. 35–36). Perhaps, paradoxically, in the name of fostering a laicist Enlightenment culture of Europe, the proponents and heirs of the Enlightenment have become the dogmatists they aimed to overthrow.

In the name of liberty and tolerance, other views and positions that contract the Enlightenment ethos are not tolerated and welcomed to public discourse and debate. And as Ratzinger notes, “since it is the culture of a reason that has finally achieved complete self-awareness, it naturally boasts of its claimed universality and imagines that it is complete in itself, without needing any other cultural factors to complement it” (ibid., p. 36). This state of affairs results in a cultural imperialistic mindset in which an ironic situation emerges, namely, that in the name of liberty marked by a sense of cultural superiority, albeit unfounded, a totalitarianism is enshrined and exported to other non-Western cultures by the contemporary heirs of the Enlightenment cultural *Weltanschauung*.

Certainly, the urgency and determination with which activists of Western secular culture seek to export it to non-Western lands, Africa in particular, remains a cause for concern. And as Ratzinger questions, “we must ask whether this Enlightenment laicist culture is truly the culture—finally revealed in all its universality—of a reason that is common to all men, a culture that must be accepted everywhere, even if it is rooted in a soil that is historically and culturally diverse. And one must ask whether this culture is truly complete in itself, so that it does not need any roots outside itself” (ibid., pp. 37–38). One might ask whether Western secularism is now capable of offering a harmony amongst the diversity of cultures, or if there is a need for something outside the postulates of Western secularism that is needed in shaping the needed interactions of cultures. Can the West claim that all cultures can find a home in secularism, especially when the latter is understood in terms of the exclusion of God from public life? Is this form of Enlightenment the only mode thanks to which reason as a universal common denominator can find its expression? Must we concede the ground in an unqualified sense to the modern philosophies that shaped and brought forth the Enlightenment? As Ratzinger rightly detects,

These philosophies are characterized by their positivist—and therefore anti-metaphysical character, so that ultimately there is no place for God in them. They are based on a self-limitation of the positive reason that is adequate in the technological sphere but entails a mutilation of man if it is generalized. The result is that man no longer accepts any moral authority apart from his own calculations. (ibid., p. 40)

As earlier pointed out, even the concept of liberty, great in itself, ends up in a self-contradictory absolutism that only accepts a reason that is anti-metaphysical and wholly immanentist. This is not to deny that positivism, as a scientific method for the mastery of the ever-changing problems plaguing humanity, can make a genuine contribution to the understanding of such problems. Nevertheless, as Ratzinger maintains, and rightly so, “positivism as a philosophy of life is intolerable and the end of humanity” (Ratzinger 2009, p. 81). It denies the possibility of transcending the limits of human consciousness, thereby leaving us only with the technological. By making inquiry about God impossible, positivism ends up making the human being similarly impossible to access and appreciate,



for it makes the techno-scientific the primary category of consciousness. This, at best, is an existential reductionism of the human being that fails to capture the broader picture of human existence and its inner entelechy towards transcendence.

To raise these questions is not to deny the overall value of the Enlightenment project. As Ratzinger himself affirms, there are gains of the Enlightenment that must be acknowledged: “the assurance that religion cannot be imposed by the state but can only be accepted in liberty; the respect of the fundamental rights of man, which are equal for all; the separation of powers and the control of power. These are fundamental values, which we acknowledged to be generally valid” (Ratzinger 2006a, p. 39). But by severing itself from what Ratzinger describes as the “basic memory of mankind” (ibid., p. 41), Enlightenment philosophy ushered in an entirely new way of thinking and actualizing reality that resulted in an understanding of reason that was unbridled in its conception and execution, with not always positive results. The underlying logic appears to be as follows: “If you know how to do something, then you are also permitted to do it; to know how to do something, but not be able to do it, is a state of affairs that no longer exists, since it would run counter to liberty—which is the absolute, supreme value” (ibid., p. 41). But knowledge qua knowledge unfolding outside the criterion of moral norms easily ends up being destructive, as the history of humanity testifies. This realization could very well be indicative of the fact that Enlightenment philosophy and the culture of secularism as the exclusion of God from public life might not be strictly rational and therefore universally valid for all cultures. And if such is the case, then it becomes axiomatic that it is a culture in need of being complemented by the riches from other cultural expressions that do not see the postulates of metaphysics and the transcendentals as problems to be resolved politically, by a radical exclusion of them from the public debate and discourse of the present.

At best, this radical emancipation of the human being from metaphysics and the transcendental dimension of the person, and ultimately, God, brings about a culture in which God is relegated to the subjective sphere because God is a relic of the past. As Ratzinger explains, at this point,

Relativism, which is the starting point of this whole process, becomes a dogmatism that believes itself in possession of the definitive knowledge of human reason, with the right to consider everything else merely as a stage in human history that is basically obsolete and deserves to be relativized. (ibid., p. 45)

Perhaps one might offer a rejoinder that at the heart of the positivistic understanding of liberty stands pluralism, which is what underscores the philosophies of the modernity that created the Enlightenment cultural movement. But the very fact that only a certain understanding of rationality is now acceptable by the Enlightenment culture undercuts the declaration of pluralism that is often argued in the name of liberty by the proponents of the secular Enlightenment culture.

In view of the proliferating individualism and relativism that is much discernable in the secular culture, it becomes all the more urgent to offer a profound rational engagement by way of challenging the underlining presuppositions that are defining this cultural exclusion of God. Nonetheless, faced with entrenched secularism, it has to be said that Christianity is not opposed to the appeal to rationality that is largely the framework of the secular ethos. Christianity is not opposed to the application of reason in seeking out meaning regarding the complexities that mark human existence. Such is the case, because Christianity understands itself to be a religion of reason, of *logos*, which is why it opted for an inculturation with philosophy against pagan religions and myths when it had to choose between the former and the latter. As noted, the Church Fathers were able to communicate biblical monotheism thanks to the language of philosophical monotheism: “The Fathers were aided in this process thanks to their embrace of Greek philosophy, thereby establishing



a rapport between the God of philosophy and the God of faith” (Agbaw-Ebai 2021, p. 110). This assertion does not deny the critique of philosophy that Tertullian burned into our souls, and likewise Luther’s rejection of medieval scholasticism and general suspicion of philosophy.

In Ratzinger’s 1959 Inaugural Lecture at the University of Bonn, “God of Faith, God of the Philosophers”, he advances this dialectical mutuality between Christianity and reason in his interpretation of the Aristotelian–Thomistic framework. Ratzinger writes,

The Christian faith in God absorbs and perfects the philosophical idea of God. To put it bluntly, the God of Aristotle and the God of Jesus Christ are one and the same. Aristotle has recognized the true God, whom we are permitted to grasp more deeply and more purely in faith, just as we will grasp God’s nature more intimately and close in the beatific vision of God. One could perhaps say without violence to the facts: Christian faith relates to the philosophical knowledge of God in the same way as the beatific vision of God relates to faith. (Ratzinger 2005, p. 16)

Philosophical reason and Christian faith are capable of grasping the reality of God, and hence, the exclusion of God as per the logic of secular rationality is an amputation of the breadth and depth of philosophical reason. It is a fragmentation of the potentials and capabilities of reason fostered by a misguided understanding of liberty, understood as the creation and perfection of the autonomous person without transcendental roots. Such a conception of the person ends up eclipsing the grandeur that underscores depth, beauty, and resilience of biblical anthropology, namely, that the human being is made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27).

In effect, secular Enlightenment is right in making reason, liberty and equality of all before the law as pivotal canons of the Enlightenment edifice, but it becomes problematic when it seeks to provide the grounding of these postulates on the exclusive grounds of the Kantian *mere reason*, with reason understood as antithetical and even radically exclusive of faith. On this score,

Christianity must always remember that it is the religion of the *Logos*. Christianity is faith in the Creator Spiritus, from whom comes everything that is real. Precisely this ought to give Christianity its philosophical power today, since the problem is whether the world comes from an irrational source, or whether the world comes from reason, so that its criterion and its goal is reason. The Christian faith opts for this second thesis. A reason that has its origin in the irrational and is itself ultimately irrational does not offer a solution to our problems. Only that creative reason which has manifested itself as love in the crucified God can truly show us what life is. (Ratzinger 2006a, p. 49)

Unmistakably, Ratzinger is not advocating for a retreat from what is truly rational in the postulates of the secular culture on the part of the Christian faith. If anything, he is urging Christians, based on the *logos* character of Christianity, to be open to all that is accurately rational in the secular culture. This, of course, calls for a discerning mind that transcends both sectarian faith and rational sectarianism in a process that is mutually supportive and enriching. We must now go beyond these extremes if we are to rehabilitate post-Enlightenment culture and instill new life into culture, enabling culture to once again become the source of life, joy, peace and happiness.

#### 4. Ratzinger and the Rebirth of Culture

From the Ratzingerian corpus on culture and Christianity, one can deduce some insights that might serve the purpose of rebuilding the techno-secular post-Enlightenment

culture that restores culture to its wholistic grandeur. This would allow culture to become, once again, the space for human flourishing in the trinitarian interconnections of the human being, the world and God. With this objective in mind, a few propositions might be in order, from the Ratzingerian worldview.

For a start, Ratzinger holds the conviction that the attempt

To shape human affairs to the total exclusion of God leads us more and more to the brink of the abyss, towards the utter annihilation of man. We must therefore reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment and say: Even the one who does not succeed in finding the path to accepting the existence of God ought nevertheless to try to live and to direct his life *veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God did indeed exist. (Ratzinger 2006a, p. 51)

And to aid non-believers in living as if God did indeed exist, Ratzinger urges that there is need for intellectuals that allow their minds and hearts to be enlightened by God, so that they can in turn enlighten other minds and touch other hearts. God can only become once again present in the techno-scientific world and the culture borne from it thanks to people whose lives allow God to become operational once again in the world (Ratzinger 2006a, p. 52). This Ratzingerian invitation points to the primacy of witnessing on the part of Christians in engaging the techno-scientific culture. As Ratzinger declares, “only someone who is himself a believer can lead others to the faith. Someone who cannot or can no longer believe must in all honesty relinquish this duty” (Ratzinger 2006b, p. 68). While it is true that Christianity must engage the techno-scientific culture on the grounds of its rational presuppositions, it is more true that the witness of spirit-filled Christians in the following of Christ is crucial to the rebuilding of the culture that has diluted the centrality of God, as is the case with secularism today.

The second proposal towards the rehabilitation of culture from the Ratzingerian corpus has to do with the recentering on worship, even as work continues to be a dominant feature of the secular techno-scientific culture. If the sacred is integral to a meaningful understanding of culture, then when the sacred no longer finds much space as is the case with much of the techno-secular culture, in which “culture appears as its own domain distinct from, or even in opposition to religion” (Ratzinger 1993, p. 1). Then, what emerges is a systematic replacement of the profound roots and meaning of culture by entertainment, pleasure, commerce, tourism and work. But as Josef Pieper argues,

The world of ‘work’ and of the ‘worker’ is a poor, impoverished world, be it ever so rich in material goods; for on an exclusively utilitarian basis, on the basis, that is, of the world of ‘work’, genuine wealth, wealth which implies overflowing into superfluities, into unnecessaries, is just not possible. Whenever the superfluous makes its appearance it is immediately subjected to the rationalist, utilitarian principle of the world of work. On the other hand, divine worship, of its very nature, creates a sphere of real wealth and superfluity, even in the midst of the direst material want—because sacrifice is the living heart of worship. (Pieper 1961, p. 74)

Pieper is essentially arguing that severing worship, that is, the turning to God as a fundamental orientation of life from the activity of work, diminishes the material value of the consequences of work. As a consequence, the reality of satisfaction, of leisure and happiness that should characterize material success becomes illusive and existentially dry. Pieper declares that “cut off from the worship of the divine, leisure becomes laziness and work inhuman” (ibid., p. 75). And as a consequence of this laziness, time becomes boredom.

Living for work, we end up living to “kill time”. The horizontalization of work deprives work of the needed verticalization that comes with valuing worship of God, which makes work wholesome, especially given the Judeo-Christian understanding of work as a participation in the ever ongoing creative act of God. With the eschewing of the divine from the world of work, as Pieper maintains, work ends up becoming “naked toil, an effort without hope—it can only be compared to the labors of Sisyphus, that mythical symbol of the ‘worker’ chained to his function, never pausing in his work, and never gathering any fruit from his labors” (ibid., p. 76). And as Pieper further elucidates, this extreme passion for work eventually turns work into a cult. Work becomes a religion, so much so that to work now means to pray (ibid., p. 76). It is no longer to work and pray as understood by the Benedictine monastic tradition, but simply, work is prayer. This is an exaggerated significance of work that pretends to maintain work as capable of constituting the whole of human existence. This view makes work promise more than it can deliver. Eventually, it becomes all too evident that the techno-scientific culture, and the horizontalization of work that follows it, cannot satisfy the longings of the human heart. Only in worship, in which in the sacramental forms, the abyss between the human and the divine is bridged, so much so that in worship and through worship, God is no longer infinite distance but infinite nearness. This nearness of God aids the overcoming existential acedia, the boredom that often marks the routine of work, given that work now becomes a part of the spirit of worship, offered back to God, the Prime Architect of creation.

A third proposal towards the rebuilding of the techno-scientific culture concerns the place of conscience, largely shaped by the Kantian dialectic of autonomy/heteronomy. Starting from its very dramatic articulation with the French revolution, freedom continues to constitute the defining framework of the secular culture of the West. This places the understanding of conscience as an important interlocutor to any meaningful conversation about reshaping the secular culture beyond its attachment to the positivistic reasoning of mere rationality. As Ratzinger fittingly notes, conscience is the bulwark of freedom (Ratzinger 2007, p. 11). But at issue with the techno-secular understanding of conscience, there appears to be the understanding that conscience is now the justification for subjectivity, which does not like to be called into question. This understanding of conscience is also the basis for justifying social conformity, now understood as that which makes living possible (ibid., p. 16). As Ratzinger explains, assuming these subjectivistic and conformist views of conscience,

The obligation to seek the truth terminates, as do any doubts about the general inclination of society and what it has become accustomed to. Being convinced of oneself, as well as conforming to others, is sufficient. Man is reduced to his superficial conviction, and the less depth he has, the better for him. (ibid., pp. 16–17)

This understanding of conscience is rooted in what might be pragmatic considerations of individual freedom, in which the other does not need to be disturbed by a counter position that is unsettling, while certainly comfortable, deprives conscience of the necessary pursuit of the objectively true and good. There is no denying that that is a workable posture to take. But what is functional does not necessarily translate into what is truthful. Even more, it does not imply what is objectively fulfilling and rewarding, though at this point any talk about objectivity appears talking to the winds, for at the root of the shielding of conscience from the pursuit of the true and the good lies radical subjectivism rooted in convenient relativism. If the techno-secular culture of post-Enlightenment is to come to terms with its limits, an honest conversation on the limits of the justifying power of conscience and its relationship to freedom would constitute a part of this rethinking and rehabilitation. Being firm in one’s convictions and to scrupulously follow such convictions in a spirit of freedom does not explain why such convictions are necessarily justifiable. What

if one was convinced in error? “But who can detect all his errors? From hidden faults acquit me”. (Ps 18:13). Hence, freedom, understood as the highest estimation of the subjective individual, cannot stand in isolation. Freedom must be in a dialogical relationship with other truths of life that are discernable in reason as well as from supernatural revelation. These other aspects of life give freedom a content to live by. But as Ratzinger notices, “in the mind of contemporary man, freedom appears to a large extent as the absolutely highest good, to which all other goods are subordinate” (Schindler and Healy 2013, p. 147). Ratzinger, however, holds that if individual freedom lacks contents, it quickly “dissolves into thin air, since individual freedom can exist only when freedoms are correctly ordered. Individual freedom needs measure, for otherwise it turns into violence directed against others” (Ratzinger 2006c, p. 54). Therefore, freedom requires contents:

We can define it as the safeguarding of human rights, but we can also describe it more broadly as the guarantee that things will go well both with society and with the individual: the one who is ruled, i.e., the one who has handed over power, can be free, when he recognizes himself, that is to say, his own good, in the common good which the rulers endeavor to bring about. (ibid., p. 54)

In a word, Ratzinger affirms the techno-scientific cultures prioritizing of freedom as a defining feature of the cultural ethos. But he proposes that we keep alive the sensitivity to the contents of freedom, namely, the law and the good, ever mindful that freedom is tied to the objectively true good of human beings. And closely related to the intricacies between conscience and freedom, there stands the possibility of knowing and submitting to truth. Ratzinger observes that

Christian faith is also certain that in its core it is the self-disclosure of truth itself and therefore is redemption. For man’s real poverty is the darkness to truth. This darkness falsifies our actions and pits us against one another, precisely because we are tainted, alienated from ourselves, cut off from the ground of our being, which is God. The communication of truth brings deliverance from alienation and division. It illumines the universal standard which does no violence to any culture but leads each to its own center, since each culture is finally the expectation of truth. (Ratzinger 1993, p. 4)

The poverty of the darkness of truth cannot be left unchallenged in the name of freedom. Truth cannot be allowed to be set in opposition to culture, which is what happens when the dogma of relativism serves as the framework in the interpretation of freedom and conscience. The human being suffers great harm and an anthropological and existential poverty that cuts into human greatness and grandeur. If there is an outstanding proposal that Ratzinger makes to the world of the twenty-first century, it is that truth is knowable, truth is loveable, and truth is livable. This remains a very challenging proposal today. As Ratzinger pointedly observes,

Truth is controversial, and the attempt to impose on all persons what one part of the citizenry holds to be true looks like the enslavement of people’s consciences. The concept of ‘truth’ has in fact moved into the zone of antidemocratic intolerance. It is not now a public good, but something private. It may perhaps be the good of specific groups, but it is not the truth of society as a whole. To make this point in other terms: the modern concept of democracy seems indissolubly linked to that of relativism. It is relativism that appears to be the real guarantee of freedom and especially of the very heart of human freedom, namely, freedom of religion and of conscience. (Ratzinger 2006c, p. 55)

But Ratzinger appears unconvinced by the notion that only a relativistic attitude to truth is capable of sustaining today’s secular, techno-scientific culture. Even within the

boundaries of mere secularism, there are inviolable truths, such as truths about human rights and human dignity, that cannot be abandoned to the relativistic mindset. But even more, the redemption of secularism would necessarily entail that we allow ourselves to be touched by a truth that is greater than ourselves (Ratzinger 1993, p. 10), that is, that God exists, and God cares about me. This truth, of God's existence, abiding love and care, is often hidden in the small things of life. This is even more so today, when the larger picture of the Western consciousness appears to be dominated by the secular ethos. If the Bible can offer us a lesson about the truth of God's unchanging love and closeness it is the simultaneous fact of God's hidden closeness. As Ratzinger explains, God's hidden closeness is seen

From the wretched people of Israel to the child at Bethlehem to the man who died on the Cross with the words, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46). This sign of hiddenness points us toward the fact that the reality of truth and love, the actual reality of God, is not to be met within the world of quantities but can be found only if we rise above that into a new order. (Ratzinger 2006d, p. 38)

It is certainly the case that the techno-scientific culture has made it difficult to discern the closeness of God hidden in the daily realities of life: "As a result of spiritual and social developments, it is said, we have reached the stage where a kind of person has developed in whom there is no longer any starting point for the knowledge of God" (Ratzinger 2006d, p. 25). But this should not lead to a denial of the reality of divine epiphanies, sometimes unexpected and unanticipated, thanks to which the truth of God's existence, love, closeness and wanting emerge in all their brilliance and attractiveness. For the believer, this hiddenness of God that must be sought and that emerges unplanned, can be a process of real trial of patience that demands perseverance. But in the midst of the secular techno-scientific world, it becomes the case that the believer has to bear this burden of patient waiting for the breaking-in and breaking-out of God, for the sake of the unbeliever, trusting that as testified to by Scripture, God will eventually come forth, revealing himself as the meaning and happiness that we have been searching for, a meaning and a happiness and longing that has a name and a face, Jesus of Nazareth. And as Benedict XVI reminds us in *Deus Caritas Est*, "in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the 'stray sheep', a suffering and lost humanity" (Benedict 2013, p. 12). Such a primacy of Christ as God's presence in the world affirms a Christocentric center to Ratzinger's understanding of culture. As De Gaál notes about Ratzinger, "all renewal is measured against Christ, to whom scripture is witness" (de Gaál 2010, p. 107). In this light, cultural extrinsicism is avoided, in which Christ appears as an after-thought intrusion into what truly matters to culture. Thus, "the mystery of the Incarnation is not a superfluous addition to the secular description of an otherwise perfectly self-sufficient humanity" (de Gaál 2010, p. 108). Reading Ratzinger correctly implies that, in Christ, a rigid separation of earthly and divine realms in the unfolding of culture is overcome.

Finally, the new evangelization should be discussed. Although not much in ecclesial language today, the invitation for a new evangelization of the culture of the old continent was a signature feature of the pontificates of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. John Paul II certainly believed that the third millennium was one of casting the net of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the salty waters of the world, for a catch. This invitation pervades the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, of 6 January 2001. In Part III of his Letter, the Pope writes the following lines:

It is not a question, then, of inventing a "new program". The program already exists: it is the same as always, gathered from the Gospel and from the living Tradition. It is centered, in the final analysis, in Christ himself, to be known, loved, imitated, to live in him the Trinitarian life, and to transform history with



him until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. It is a program that does not change with the changing times and cultures, even if it takes time and culture into account for true dialogue and effective communication. This program for all times is our program for the third millennium. (Paul 2001, p. 29)

But to realize this vision of the new evangelization as realistically articulated by John Paul II and certainly shared by Benedict XVI, Christians themselves, even when they find themselves as minorities in the large expanses of secular culture, must reflect a hopeful and joyful Christianity. Those who preach about the news of great joy must themselves reflect on some of that joy, just as those who preach about the Redeemer must themselves be a little bit more redeemed. It is certainly the case, as Ratzinger notes, that “the one who sees the faith as a heavy burden or as a moral imposition is unable to invite others to believe. Rather, he lets them be, in the putative freedom of their good consciences” (Ratzinger 2007, p. 15). In effect, the reality of God, the reality that culture is primarily the space where the Incarnate God has pitched His tent with His entry into history (Jn 1:14 & Gal 4:4) cannot leave the believer living in a culture pervaded by the secular ethos indifferent. The life of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is a testament to that joy of the faith, the joy of knowing Jesus surpasses all other joys. And that is why, even today, even with all that is thrown at Christianity, the Christian cannot be deprived of true joy. Offering this joy borne from faith to the secular culture is no small offer for the rehabilitation of culture.

## 5. Conclusions

In the final analysis, can one hold out the hope that the techno-scientific secular culture of the West would once again be animated by the Christian understanding of faith, so much so that the material gains of this post-Enlightenment culture could once again offer a wholesome alternative to the rationalistic, scientific, media secular culture that believes it can offer the world progress, only on the premise of the marginalization and exclusion of God? Can we entertain a hope for a techno-scientific culture that sees religion as antithetical to science and technology? Can we hope for a re-opening, specifically, of the European mind to truths beyond the techno-scientific? As is deducible from Ratzinger’s treatment of culture, the primary contribution that Christianity made to the historical evolution of Western culture was to provide the metaphysical and theological setting that enabled Western culture to transcend the sphere of rational, techno-scientific relativity. And this is a task that must be shouldered by the creative believing Christian minorities in today’s dominant secular culture. Renewing and opening up the techno-secular culture would include many concrete steps. Some have been suggested in this essay. Were he to be asked what should culminate this essay which has sought to offer some propositions on the Church’s engagement and transformation of the techno-scientific culture borne from the Enlightenment, the spiritual Father of the Church of the Third Millennium, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, would certainly have concluded by pointing to the person of Jesus Christ. Hence, in the spirit of Ratzinger, it is important to conclude with the reminder that the renewal of the secular culture transcends the programmatic articulations that we have identified above from Ratzinger’s theological reflections on Christianity and culture. Consequently, it is a person, and friendship with that person, that enables the Christian to become a presence of renewal in the midst of the secular culture. Seeking for the Face of Jesus of Nazareth, even if we realistically only see Jesus’ Back, oftentimes from the midst of daily sufferings and persecutions, is what is required for cultural renewal today, irrespective of the cultural context in which Christians find themselves.

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