

Christianity in an Age of Uncertainty: A Catholic Perspective

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Roman Catholicism and the Challenge of Liberal Modernity

“All that is solid melts into air.”¹ This title of a book published nearly a quarter of a century ago describes a prevalent mood, particularly in Western societies. The pace, complexity, and the sheer extent of the changes that have taken place in the past decades and affected all areas of life have created substantive feelings of insecurity. There are several reasons for the growing unease in liberal modernity: the rapid erosion of religious and moral traditions, an increase in pluralism and individualism, the high-risk potential of technical inventions, growing material inequality, and environmental devastation. In Europe, and perhaps also elsewhere, this has been aggravated by the still unforeseeable psychological consequences of the totalitarian regimes — which were the political expression of the other side of modernity.² The fears are enhanced by the interdependence and globalization of these trends. All of this nourishes the suspicion that we are losing control and that in the long run the harmful effects of liberal modernity may outweigh the beneficial ones, thus making the overall balance negative.

This may lead to two responses. One may with a sort of defiant determination continue as before, clinging to the belief that everything will turn

1. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983).

2. Cf. Samuel N. Eisenstadt, *Die Antinomien der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

out well. This attitude is often underpinned by an evolutionist worldview that takes progress as the natural course of things. Or, one may look for certainties elsewhere. The best “candidates” for this, after the “end of [secular] ideologies,” are religions, which may be tempted, therefore, to present themselves as the only viable alternatives to a liberal way of life considered to be in decay. Giving oneself a clear profile and offering firm and definite certainties is, moreover, a rational strategy in a pluralist world, in which trademarks and distinctions draw further attention and lead to public success. Thus black-and-white views are gaining support, in the Roman Catholic Church and elsewhere, with a great potential for polarization.

There are three positions religions can take towards modernity: a fairly unconditional acceptance, a more or less outright rejection, or a middle way that attempts to distinguish between modernity’s positive and negative sides. I will argue in this paper that only the last approach is in agreement with the theological self-understanding of Roman Catholicism. It was a great achievement of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that it formulated theological positions showing a middle way between a downright rejection of modernity and tendencies towards its too-uncritical acceptance. Thus, the Council was able to overcome Catholic anti-modernism, which for a variety of reasons, historic and otherwise, was strong in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.³ Because of this, and since the Council repositioned the Catholic Church with regard to the main issues relevant for this book, I will take its positions as the point of departure for the following reflections.

The date of its announcement, January 25, 1959, symbolically shows its major aims: it was the feast of the conversion of St. Paul, who initiated what may be called the first *aggiornamento* in Christian history — and the last day of the week of prayer for Christian unity. Just as the apostle left behind the Jewish law in order to inculturate Christianity into Hellenistic culture, the Council was to leave behind the Constantinian era with unity of Church and State, the Tridentine epoch with its strong anti-Protestant apologetics, and a period of opposition to modernity on principle. This was to make the

3. According to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, anti-modernism, both religious and secular, has accompanied modernity from its beginnings. Its central features are the priority given to the collective over the individual, skepticism towards freedom, and the replacement of the modern concept of linear progress by one of linear (moral) decay. Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Church fit for the transition into the global era and for facing its public tasks as a world Church. An important step on this way was the redefinition of the relationship of Roman Catholicism to the modern world (particularly its political institutions), to the other churches, and to the other religions. In order to accomplish this, it was to assess “those values which are most highly prized today and to relate them to their divine source” (*Gaudium et spes* 11). Its agenda thus had two focal points, which are interlinked and of equal importance: *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*. The idea was not simply to bring Catholicism *à jour*, but to interpret its theological, spiritual, and ethical traditions, so as to relate them to the aspirations and questions of the present age. The continuous reinterpretation of religious texts is actually a normal process that, however, was artificially interrupted by neo-traditionalism, attempting to immunize traditions against change at the expense of their viability and relevance. This was particularly problematic, as the dynamic character of modernity as well as its social pluralism require more rather than fewer interpretative efforts. In this regard our age resembles that of the church fathers, and will require a similar degree of theological creativity. It was the merit of a number of eminent theologians, mainly of French and German origin, who had worked for decades — frequently under difficult circumstances — to reinterpret the Catholic heritage within the context of liberal modernity.⁴ Incidentally, this refutes the argument of authors of different backgrounds that Vatican II was a capitulation to the overly optimistic *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s. Such a view is far too superficial. The *kairos* of the Council was such that the insights of these theologians accorded with those of Pope John XXIII, who was a pastor deeply anchored in traditional Roman Catholic piety, and by no means a progressive intellectual. His personal experiences during his long life had convinced him of the necessity of theological and ecclesiastical reforms.⁵

4. On the German side it was particularly Karl Rahner whose transcendental theology influenced the Council’s documents. His theology proceeds from the reflection on the everyday experiences of the individual and interprets God’s revelation in the light of these experiences. French theology, represented for instance by the Dominicans Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar, starts with the social and historical reality of time as the place of God’s revelation in history. Although both follow an inductive approach, the theological differences between them led to intense discussions at Vatican II due to their different points of departure.

5. As nuncio in Bulgaria he became acquainted with Orthodox Christianity, his years in Istanbul brought him into contact with the Muslim world, and in Paris he encountered laicist French modernism.

The basis of the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II was the definition of the Church as “a sacrament or a sign and instrument” for unity with God and mankind.⁶ That points to the fact that the Church does not exist for itself: its *raison d’être* is to unite man and God and to serve humankind by contributing to its spiritual and material good. The religious and ethical, that is humane, dimensions are thus inextricably intertwined in its mission.⁷ Therefore the concept of the “signs of the time,” central to Vatican II, is not only of sociological (as is often falsely assumed), but also of ethical and — even more — theological relevance. Sociological analysis, which is necessary in view of the complexity of the modern world, is to help “decipher the authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose” in the present age (*Gaudium et spes* 4:11). The question is: Which of these social trends can serve God’s purpose because they have the potential to make the world a better and more humane place? For this reason they are to be supported by the Church and its faithful. I would like to call this hermeneutical approach *the principle of good eyes*. It has deep roots in Roman Catholic theology with its strong emphasis on creation (and incarnation), affirming its goodness despite human sin and corruption (Gen. 1:31). The promise of faith is that this universe will be completed at the end of time in “a new heaven and a new earth, in which justice reigns” (1 Peter 3:13), thus realizing God’s original aim with his creation. In this historical process, Jesus Christ is the ultimate word of God, his “Yes” to everything that exists in his Son, in whom he renews his creation (2 Cor. 1:19). Acknowledging the positive potential of a time (as of a person), therefore, is a spiritual attitude rooted in faith, which is able to discern the seeds of the world to come in the present reality. In addition to these theological reasons, there are also good ethical and pastoral ones for taking a positive view of present social realities.

Ethically, the main change brought about by Vatican II was that it recognized liberal modernity’s central normative ideas, “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” as *common ground* between Roman Catholicism and the modern world. Because of these humanistic elements, which have Christian roots, secular and Christian humanism are natural allies and may even

6. Cf. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium* 1).

7. Cf. *Gaudium et spes* 11: “The People of God and the human race in whose midst it lives render service to each other. Thus the mission of the Church will show its religious, and by that very fact, its supremely human character.”

learn from each other.⁸ As much as this has been obscured by polarization in the so-called culture wars, one must not be oblivious to the high degree of consensus that exists between Christian and secular ethics in most areas. To mention but one example: any look at history shows that non-violent ways of conflict resolution are the great exception. It is a major achievement that this has become possible in democratic societies to an astonishing degree, and should encourage joint efforts to extend this accomplishment to the international sphere. *Pastorally*, a rejection of liberal modernity may support trends towards resignation and ultimately nihilism, which lurk in the background as negative possibilities and weaken the resources for responsible and far-sighted action. It is precisely in view of haunting questions regarding the future that Roman Catholicism should guard the humanistic impulses of modernity and oppose tendencies to its self-destruction. Moreover, a Catholic hermeneutics of suspicion that debunks the world as evil can easily become ideological. Even if there may be good reasons for cultural pessimism, Abraham's pleading to God for the salvation of the city for the sake of the few just people living there (Gen. 18:20-33) is a better model for Christians than the self-righteous pharisee in the temple (Luke 18:9-14).

It is on this basis that the urgently needed criticism of modernity's life-threatening tendencies gains credibility. The Roman Catholic Church shares this prophetic mission with the other monotheistic religions. What makes for the singularity of Christian faith is the sense of urgency in this prophetic ministry. Violence, injustice, and the disregard for life of any form, as well as the irresponsible use of power, wealth, and natural resources, stand in sharp contrast to God's vision of the world as a place of goodness and justice for all human beings. Trying to steer a middle course through the turbulent waters of late modernity, avoiding the Scylla of relativism that threatens social dissolution, as well as the Charybdis of fundamentalism that breeds rigidity and violence, demands a struggle on two fronts. The first has to be directed against a moral "anything goes" attitude, and the second, against the temptation to isolation or opposition on principle that leaves little room for civil interaction and compromise.

The precondition for intellectual and practical cooperation with others, be they Christians of other denominations, non-believers, or members

8. This position was first developed by the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. Cf. also *Gaudium et spes* 11.

of other religious communities, is their acceptance as equals. I will, therefore, show in the first part why and on which theological grounds the Roman Catholic Church accepts religious liberty and pluralism. In the second part, I will examine the specific nature of religious claims to truth, which is at the heart of the argument against fundamentalism. Finally, in the third part I will discuss some areas in which Roman Catholicism can contribute to civility today by taking moral positions against relativist tendencies, both nationally and globally. The following reflections cover a wide territory, which inevitably makes them fragmentary at best. However, I hope this overview can demonstrate that Roman Catholicism has a considerable potential to help find a middle ground in a situation increasingly characterized by polarizations, the question being whether and in what ways this potential is being brought into play by Catholic Christians and the Church as a whole.

The Roman Catholic Church and Pluralism: The Theological Affirmation of Religious Freedom and the Dignity of Conscience

The main challenge for the Roman Catholic Church in coming to terms with modernity was the acceptance of religious pluralism. Giving up the position of a state Church, which it had held in many European countries since the fourth century, demanded major changes in its self-understanding and outlook. The loss of its social monopoly in faith and morals after one and a half millennia was a trauma, the after-effects of which have not been overcome in Europe even today. The experience of the French Revolution and its violent anti-religious excesses led to the attempt to build a Catholic subculture, an attempt that ultimately was doomed to failure. This shows that an institution even as large and potent as the Roman Catholic Church could not sustain an isolationist course in the long run.⁹ The period of integralism instead left a backlog that Catholicism has not yet been able to overcome completely.¹⁰ But it also had grave consequences for society: al-

9. One actually has to distinguish between two phases: the period of outright rejection of modern ideas in the nineteenth century and the period that began with Pope Leo XIII (1878-1905), who tried to take a more differentiated position towards liberal modern culture.

10. The relationship between integralism and fundamentalism requires further reflection. Both share an anti-modernist approach, albeit of different forms and degrees. The main characteristic of Catholic integralism was the idealization of the Christian state (and

though it is always somewhat unfair to judge past generations by present standards, one may well speculate whether the history of the twentieth century might not have been different had the Roman Catholic Church decided to advocate human rights and democracy after Vatican I (1870).¹¹

The stumbling block in the relationship between Roman Catholicism and modern political culture was the right to religious freedom. The Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae* (1965) of Vatican II marks the final point of this controversy. It was drafted by an American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, who had experienced religious pluralism in a country where Catholics had always been a minority. His theological reconciliation of the right to religious freedom with the Roman Catholic tradition represents a major intellectual achievement as well as the basis for the implementation of the agenda of Vatican II. Without it dialogue with other Christians, as well as with non-believers and adherents of other religions, would not have become possible.

But why had this path not been taken earlier? Apart from the difficulty of accepting the loss of political power, there were fundamental theological questions that needed to be solved. The first one of these was: Can those who do not belong to the Church be saved, or are they condemned forever? If the latter were the case, the toleration of other creeds would not be an act of respect, but one of truly monstrous negligence. As strange as this may seem today (which shows that an immense change of mind has taken place), for most of history this was the central question. I would like to draw the following comparison. Doctors who use methods not in accordance with medical standards and who might therefore harm their patients are not granted permission to practice. Thus, in order for Catholicism to accept religious freedom, it had to be clear that membership in the Catholic Church was no precondition for salvation; in other words, the *extra ecclesia non est salus* principle had to be refuted. Although widely

the homogenous Christian society of the Middle Ages). This was accompanied by an acute sense of cultural and moral crisis, viewing modernity as an age of decay. Cf. Oswald von Nell-Breuning, *Modernismuskrisis: Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Bd. 7 (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), pp. 367ff.

11. The Political Catholicism since the end of the nineteenth century that led to a rather powerful Catholic presence in the political life of countries such as Austria, Germany, and Belgium thus lacked a theological foundation. Seen in retrospect, this accommodation to the modern pluralist state on pragmatic grounds only was also one of its weaknesses.

spread, this exclusivist position was never undisputed. Eminent theologians like St. Augustine (354-430) — despite his rather pessimistic views on salvation in general — distinguished between the visible and the invisible Church. This position obviously accords better with God's goodness and freedom. The idea that it is not formal faith in Christ and membership in the Church that are decisive for salvation, but personal deeds, is biblically well founded. Central New Testament passages such as that on the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:36-43) and the hymn of love of St. Paul (1 Cor. 13:13) unequivocally state that love is superior to faith.¹²

The second theological question is of a rather different nature: Can the Church accept religious pluralism in the political community on theological grounds? The solution put forward in *Dignitatis humanae* is quite simple: the dignity of the religious choice of the individual must have priority over the realization of ecclesiastical truth claims at the state level. The argument was not really new: already in the early Church some theologians pleaded for religious freedom.¹³ What is more important, it had always been theologically undisputed that nobody may be forced into embracing a specific faith. Besides the obvious fact that theological principles are often disregarded in political practice, the problem was the limitations that arose from the political thinking of the time. In this case, the individual's freedom of conscience was overruled by the right of the state to impose a uniform creed on its citizens. The other limitation imposed was that either a change of religion or deviation from the official faith (e.g., heresy) was prohibited. The Declaration on Religious Freedom changed the perspective by affirming that the freedom to opt for a religion, as well as the right to change it, are to be guaranteed by the state, which "in its legal order has to recognize the right of religious freedom as a civil right," with restrictions being justified only to protect the common good (*Dignitatis humanae* 2, 7).

Giving up its claim to being a state religion freed the Roman Catholic

12. With regard to this question cf. Josef Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969), pp. 339-62. The current Pope states here that this dogmatic tenet — like separate biblical sentences — should be understood within its context and in relationship to other tenets. Cf. also Walter Kern, *Außerhalb der Kirche kein Heil?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979); Medard Kehl, *Die Kirche. Eine katholische Ekklesiologie*, 2. Aufl. (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993).

13. Cf. the Latin church father Tertullian (150-230), *Liber ad scapulam*, *Patrologia Latina* 1, 777.

Church from a heavy historical burden and paved the way for its active participation in the political arena through education and civic as well as political involvement. It enabled it to become a global advocate of religious freedom, a task it has performed ever since on a truly impressive scale. Thanks to the untiring efforts of Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), it contributed decisively to the overthrow of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes worldwide in the 1980s and 90s. The theologically founded position of the Magisterium on human rights, together with the commitment of Catholics ready to defend these truths even when confronted with the threat of persecution, had decisive political impact. This is important today in communist states such as China, as well as in countries under dictatorships, especially in Africa and Latin America. To cite but one example: the Bishops' Conference of Zimbabwe recently issued a pastoral letter to be read in all churches of the country condemning the human rights violations of President Mugabe. The leader of this courageous opposition is Archbishop Pius Ncube, who took his inspiration from the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine — a successful example of political globalization.

Civil rights require citizens to make responsible use of these rights. Religious liberty as a public right thus corresponds with the duty of the person to search for the truth and follow it according to his or her conscience. Since freedom is the core value of liberal modernity, I would say a few words on this concept. Anti-modern skeptics of all stripes tend to confuse the modern notion of freedom with arbitrariness. This is a misinterpretation: at the public level liberty rights require a high ethos not only on the part of the state, but also from citizens, who are called to respect others as equal human beings. At the private level the Enlightenment idea of autonomy does not mean that one may do as one pleases. The *autos*, i.e., the person, must decide which laws (*nomoi*) he is to follow in private life. These norms should be conceived in such a way as to be universally acceptable. The problem of this “categorical imperative” as a modern form of Golden Rule morality is not arbitrariness, but the high demands it makes on the individual as a responsible agent. Moreover, it does not take into account that existential freedom is always limited under earthly conditions. It may increase or diminish according to one's lifestyle and choices. It is in this sense that St. Paul speaks of men without righteousness as being slaves of sin (Rom. 6:6). Thus, inner freedom is obviously different from freedom of choice and, according to Christian belief, will be completed in the final communion with God.

Religious freedom as a civil right is intended to enable the individual to act in accordance with conscience without having to fear grave legal and social consequences. The deference that the state pays to conscience as the ultimate arbiter in religious matters recognizes it as the “inner sanctuary in which man communicates with God” (*Gaudium et spes* 17). Because of its sanctity it may command unconditional obedience, which also takes priority over a person’s duty to obey social and even ecclesiastical norms. “We must obey God more than men” (Acts 5:29). This emphasis on the individual’s conscience, which has been called a Protestant principle, is in fact common to all Christian traditions. Thus, John Henry Newman, one of the most eminent theologians of the nineteenth century, who converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism after a long and painful inner struggle, writes at the end of his treatise on conscience: “I add one remark. Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem quite the thing), I shall drink — to the Pope, if you please, — still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.”¹⁴ The audacity of this “monotheistic revolution” (Peter Berger), which holds that man is responsible only to God, can be fully appreciated only if one is aware of its inherent potential for abuse. In order not to become a license for immorality, freedom of conscience as a legal right requires from the individual and civil society a firm commitment to its education. This shows that the right to religious freedom and human rights in general are not only a precious, but also a precarious invention of modernity, which cannot guarantee social peace by itself. The mere coexistence of different creeds and worldviews would lead to social disintegration without the willingness of their adherents to actively cooperate. The increase in pluralism due to immigration, urbanization, and individualization therefore requires intensive efforts to achieve value consensus through public dia-

14. John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone’s Recent Expostulation on Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 2 (1875), www.newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/index/html, p. 261 (20/07/2007). The whole letter argues against Anglican allegations that the Pope stands above conscience. “Did the Pope speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act” (p. 252). “In the true sense of the word” means the theological proposition that one has to follow one’s conscience must not be confused with a position that considers all judgment of conscience as *objectively* right, which would in essence be a relativist position. Cf. Josef Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs. Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), p. 101.

logue. It also calls for the training of citizens to engage in rational argumentation about their religious and moral beliefs, as well as the common good. Because of its long historical experience and the high value it has always placed on religious and moral rationality, Roman Catholicism could contribute to clarifying issues and even act as a mediator in these processes.

Theological Reflection as a Resource: The Affirmation of Religious Truth and Its Limits

Both relativists and fundamentalists have difficulties, to say the least, with theological and ethical rationality. If truth does not exist, it is futile to search for it, and extreme relativists may even reject rational argumentation altogether, opting for irrationalism.¹⁵ Fundamentalists, for their part, regard reasoning in theological and moral matters as superfluous and even harmful, as something that fosters ambiguity and sows doubt in matters that are clear for all those of good will and firm faith. In his controversial speech at the University of Regensburg in September 2006, Pope Benedict stressed this need for rational argumentation in matters of faith and morals, and warned against loosening the link between faith and reason.¹⁶ This would do grave damage, since faith without reason is blind and easily leads to irrational violence, whereas reason without faith becomes shallow and can degenerate into a worldview void of sense and moral firmness. Both reduce the chances for universal discourse on religious and ethical questions at a time when it is particularly needed. Christian theology, for which God is *logos* — which means *word* as well as *reason* — can be a corrective in this situation by taking up the argument against epistemological reductions that exclude religious and moral truth claims from rational dis-

15. Surrealism after World War I represented the negative climax of modern irrationalism, glorifying even destruction and violence. Similar tendencies can be observed today, even if they have not yet gained prominence.

16. Cf. www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/html. For critical reactions cf. Knut Wenzel (Hg.), *Die Religionen und die Vernunft. Die Debatte um die Regensburger Vorlesung des Papstes* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007). The criticism was mainly directed against the Pope's insinuating that primarily the Catholic tradition has the resources for bridging the gap between faith and reason, whereas Islam and Protestantism tend to separate them.

course.¹⁷ This happens when truth is limited to the rationality typical of natural science, i.e., to quantifiable facts discovered by experiment and open to falsification. The predominance of this type of rationality over all other forms of knowledge leads to religious and ethical matters being confined to the realm of emotion and subjective preference, thus paving the way for moral relativism and religious skepticism.¹⁸ It weakens the capacity to consider moral alternatives, weigh different positions, and creatively interpret one's own traditions. In short, it consigns the entire area of discourse on human and social matters to oblivion.

There are, however, not only those who, like Pontius Pilate, skeptically ask "What is truth?" There are also those who use it as a weapon or means of coercion. Monotheistic religions in particular have gravitated towards asserting absolute truth claims, which has often been accompanied by intolerance and violence in the name of God. The flip side of Greek rationality, which lies at the foundation of Western theology, was its overzealous belief in the capacity of human reason with regard to the divine, i.e., in theological matters. The fights over dogmatic truth that resulted from this (and were carried into politics) represent the barbarian backside of Christian history. Theological reasoning therefore has to include the commitment to a non-violent proclamation of truth. Moreover, it requires intense reflection on its specific nature. As Aristotle remarked, it would be senseless to demand the same type of certainty from ethics as one does from mathematics.¹⁹ The same holds true for theology, and to an even greater extent. Its certainties are of a nature completely different from those of the empirical world. I would, therefore, like to suggest three characteristics of theological truth that are interrelated: its historical and anamnestic character, its dialogical and communicative character, and its transcendental character.²⁰

17. Max Weber has called this the "disenchantment" of the world, which he describes as follows: "The final and most sublime values step back from public life, either into the realm of a mystic *Hinterwelt* or into the brotherliness of direct human relations." Max Weber, *Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988), p. 612 (translation IG).

18. A far-reaching consequence of the limitation of rationality to the objects of the natural world has been a serious impoverishment in the realm of culture. Since facts do not convey meaning, they are of no value for making sense of the world and the universe, and they teach nothing about social values and norms for human interaction.

19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (I 1: 1094b-1095a11).

20. The following sequence does not denote an order of precedence.

First, theological rationality is historical and anamnestic.²¹ An existential characteristic of human life is its temporality. All our activities and thinking take place within a specific time and place, and are bound by the limitations this entails. Historicism concluded that since there can be no *absolute* truth in history, there is no truth at all. As a reaction to this, Catholic theology tended to assert religious truth as being ahistorical. Another way to cope with the insecurity resulting from a heightened sense of historical relativity was the neo-traditionalist invention of an idealized past. By overemphasizing the value of tradition for the Christian faith, it became overly fixed on the past. If anything, however, Christian hopes are directed towards the future, as suggested by the intense expectations of the early Christians of the *parousia*, the advent of the Lord at the end of time. This already indicates that temporality in Christian theology (as in Judaism) acquires a new poignancy: the belief that the transcendent God reveals himself in history makes it the place of his deeds and self-communication.²² What is most incredible about this revelation in history is that Jesus was a fairly unimportant preacher in Judea — a distant corner of the Roman empire — who was crucified by the political and religious authorities of the time. If anything, this story should inspire a good degree of modesty and guard against religious hubris and the glorification of power and wealth. The centrality of history for the Christian faith is reflected in the importance it gives to memory. Thus, in the celebration of the mass, the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ until his Second Coming are commemorated. This shows the Church as being embedded in history and in fundamental solidarity with all human beings who are on the same pilgrimage.²³

21. Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Memoria passionis. Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*, 2. Aufl. (Freiburg: Herder, 2006).

22. The historical dimension was rediscovered by the French *Nouvelle Théologie* in the first half of the twentieth century. From there it found its way into the documents of Vatican II, especially the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, with its notion of the Church as being on a pilgrimage through time. Its main proponent was the Dominican theologian and expert on medieval theology Marie-Dominique Chenu, who first expounded his ideas against ahistorical neo-Thomist theology in his book *Le Saulchoir. Une école de théologie* (Paris: Étiolles, 1937).

23. Cf. the first passage of *Gaudium et spes* 1: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the human beings of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” — and finishes this first article “That is why this community [e.g., the church] realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”

Man is *homo viator*, and his perception of truth therefore necessarily remains fragmentary: “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present, I know partially, then I shall know fully, as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Absolute comprehension is impossible under the conditions of contingency. Although this fact may seem trivial, it should engender existential and intellectual humility. Moreover, it has strong anti-ideological and anti-fundamentalist consequences. The German theologian Johann B. Metz speaks of an “eschatological reservation” (*eschatologischer Vorbehalt*), which means that all absolute claims to truth, be they political or religious, become ideological in character because the full truth will only be revealed in the *eschaton*.

Anamnestic theology is, however, also confronted with the remembrance of the atrocities committed by religious communities in history. Faith traditions that take history seriously must therefore be mindful of the need for repentance. The persistence with which Pope John Paul II insisted on the “cleansing of memories” demonstrates the practical consequences of this not only for the individual, but also for the Church as a whole. One of the most innovative and courageous acts of his pontificate was to solemnly ask forgiveness for the sins committed by the Church, in the mass on Ash Wednesday in 2000. This was a concrete manifestation of its “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). The idea was not to pass judgment on former generations, who may have lacked the insights we have today, but to make it clear that all violent and inhumane acts committed or condoned by the Church in the past, by the hierarchy as well as the laypeople, were against the moral standards of the Christian faith. Even if historical injustices can never be undone, asking for forgiveness as a symbolic act acknowledges the wrong done and opens new ways for cooperation in the future. These considerations do not exhaust the relevance that “religion as memory” (D. Hervieu-Léger) has for the present situation. If one should have to indicate one single reason that furthers both relativist and fundamentalist tendencies, it would have to be modernity’s deeply ingrained prejudice against all tradition, which views the past mainly as a dark background against which the grandeur of modern achievements shines even brighter. This *amnesiac* character of modernity cuts it off from the resources it indispensably needs for understanding itself, and particularly from those of its Christian heritage.²⁴

24. This point has been made frequently in recent years by the German philosopher

Second, the old dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of faith) indicates that theological rationality is rooted in prayer, both private or liturgical. Man's ability to address God, to praise him and complain to him, to thank him and plead before him, and even to doubt him, distinguishes him from all other creatures.²⁵ The fact that the Christian faith acknowledges man as *capax Dei* (capable of perceiving God), and not only as an *animal rationale*, shows it to be deeply rooted in personal communication. It would be impossible to speak *about* God if we were not able to speak *to* him. Addressing God as a personal *Thou* and as *Our Father* — as in the main Christian prayer — is the basis for all theological reflection. Personal communication, however, creates existential certainties that are fundamentally different from that of the natural world of objects. It is founded in the experience of the trustworthiness, goodness, and loyalty of the Other. Since personal truth needs time to unfold, faith and the reflection on it are a lifelong learning process that normally begins in the family and the local church community, and is fostered by reading the scriptures and participating in the liturgy. These elements complement each other in the light of one's personal experience.

Third, probably the most important characteristic of faith reflection is that its "object" — God — is a supreme mystery that by far transcends human comprehension. Our theological language, therefore, is always far more inadequate in divine matters than it is adequate. Acknowledging this simple and self-evident fact could immunize theology against all forms of religious positivism. There would have been fewer conflicts over religious differences if people had kept in mind the fact that our ignorance in divine matters by far exceeds our knowledge of them.²⁶ A famous story in the history of theology shows St. Augustine walking along the seashore, reflecting

Jürgen Habermas, who is himself an agnostic. Cf. his widely discussed speech "Glaube und Wissen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 15, 2001, p. 9; English version: "Faith and Knowledge," in *Equalvoices* no. 7 (November 2001), www.eumc.eu.int/publications/equalvoices/ev07/ev07-4_en.htm (accessed July 20, 2007).

25. This intense doubt in God's existence, and especially in his goodness in view of the evil in the world, is found in many biblical books, most profoundly in the Lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah and in the prayer of Jesus on the cross (Matt. 27:46). The difference between this existential doubt and the methodological doubt applied in natural science is obvious.

26. This strong statement against positivism in matters of religion was made at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). Cf. Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 37th edition (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), no. 806, p. 361.

on the mystery of the Holy Trinity. When he saw a child trying to bail out the sea with a nutshell, he understood that his intellectual endeavors were much of the same kind as the attempts of this child. The theological pursuit of religious truth must be accompanied by the humble insight that the truth of God is unfathomable and infinitely greater than human reason.

Since the Bible is the basis of all theology, these questions about the nature of theological rationality are also part of the debate over its interpretation. Modern rationality confronted biblical exegesis with two main questions: Did the events related in the Bible happen *exactly* as described? And: How can past events acquire existential relevance for the reader? The first question echoes the modern, matter-of-fact approach to reality. The second mirrors a view of history for which the past is simply *passé*.²⁷ Gottfried E. Lessing, the poet of the German Enlightenment, spoke about the “ugly moat” separating the time of Jesus Christ from ours. Since neither facts nor past events can convey religious meaning, they cannot give answers to the question of faith as such. Fundamentalists who insist that the biblical stories are factual reports thus miss the point. Even if we happened to have reliable documentary films on the life of Jesus and his apostles, this would be of little avail for our faith.

In the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965), the Roman Catholic Church recognized the validity of historical-critical exegesis and the hermeneutical approach to the scriptures as important tools for understanding the texts and for interpreting them in their historical context. However, there remains a dialectical tension between the central truths of faith and the stories in which they are clad. The “middle of the scriptures,” i.e., their central message, is that God revealed himself in history in order to save each and every human being, and that Jesus Christ is his ultimate word. The recognition of this intention, central to the texts, is the key to any meaningful interpretation of the events described and the parables related. In this sense there is a “hierarchy of truths,” as the Decree on Ecumenism states (*Unitatis redintegratio* 11). The gist of the Christian faith is then expressed in an amazing variety of personally colored stories written by different authors. The differences between them can and must not be har-

27. Historical science today no longer views history as an objective sequence of facts, but as their interpretation, which depends on a certain *Vorverständnis* (Hans-Georg Gadamer) that depends on the individual and the community in which this interpretation takes place.

monized, neither with regard to the facts nor to the different perceptions of the life and teaching of Christ.²⁸ This makes the theory of verbal inspiration obsolete. The authors of the books of the New Testament were not, so to speak, divine secretaries taking dictation from God word by word. They wrote the texts according to their own religious experience and personal abilities, and their work reflects the knowledge of the times and its literary culture.

Summing up: the importance of rational argumentation in matters of faith is increasing at a time when different religions and faith traditions are interacting on a daily basis, both nationally and globally. To regard religious convictions and moral issues as matters of subjective preference is not helpful in this situation. It rather leads to the isolation of communities of faith and furthers distrust and possibly conflict. It is therefore vital to find ways and means to rationally argue about religious and moral matters. This is not an easy task. It requires respect for the other as well as sensitivity to the specific character of religious truth, particularly its historical and therefore fragmentary quality. This realistic modesty, indispensable in matters of the divine, is the only attitude that does justice to God's transcendence. It is also the only way to avoid a hardening of religious positions. The service of theology should, after all, be to teach men to marvel at the greatness of God and proclaim him as the source of love and peace, thus furthering unity and not conflict.

Roman Catholicism: Public Religion in a Global Age

The preceding sections demonstrated the acceptance of religious pluralism as one of the preconditions for the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the political life of democratic societies. They also showed that its traditions of theological and moral reasoning may help prevent fundamentalist oversimplifications at a time of religious resurgence. The final part of this paper poses the question of how Roman Catholicism may contribute to civility, nationally and internationally, in a more concrete manner. Since this is an extremely broad subject I will focus on three issues: the

28. The well-meaning attempt of a Greek monk in the second century to harmonize the biblical writings in the so-called *Diatessaron* was rejected because the plurality of the scriptures is essential to the faith.

rational affirmation of moral truth in the private and public spheres, the Church's commitment to issues of global justice, and the practice of dialogue as a contribution to non-violent conflict resolution in civil societies.

Concerning the first issue: some time ago, the German legal scholar Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde formulated what has been discussed since then as the "Böckenförde Paradox": Liberal institutions rest on moral foundations they cannot create or re-create by themselves, but must assume as given.²⁹ The implications of this are clear: the moral resources indispensable for social life both nationally and globally must be generated outside the political and economic spheres. The public square needs individuals who not only have the capacity to argue rationally about the good and just but are willing to do so and thus bring their vision of the common good into the political process. This dependency on moral agents is the weak side of liberal societies. Seen in this context, the call for firm values in private and public life, which is high on the agenda of all fundamentalist movements, be they nationalist or religious, reveals its fundamental vulnerability. The erosion of moral rationality and practice, therefore, engenders feelings of uncertainty in large parts of the population, even if this is celebrated as liberation by a few postmodern intellectuals.

The largest institutions that create the moral capital needed in liberal societies are the churches. This is indeed their first and foremost contribution to civil life. To act decently in private, professional, and public life is neither simple nor trivial. It requires that one be educated to exercise right judgment as well as the willingness to act accordingly. Even if Christian religious instruction in its varied forms may not always produce the expected results, it would be cynical to think that Christians — who are taught at each service to love their neighbors, forgive those who harm them, and practice non-violence and justice — would go home and do the opposite. Moreover, a rationally acting *homo Christianus* will take into account the great benefits promised for right behavior and the serious sanctions threatened for their violation. The biblical writings make it clear that Christian practice and the efforts to further true humanity and love in private and social life are not a supplement to the creed, but the confirmation of its authenticity.

29. Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation*; Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit. Studien zur Staatstheorie und zum Verfassungsrecht* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 42-64, p. 60.

This is the practical side, but there is also theory. An epistemological position is needed for which both the good and the just are discernible with reasonable certainty. If moral values are but the expression of subjective preferences, emotions, or interests, arguments about justice simply veil power struggles and morality becomes a matter of personal lifestyle. Theories that deny the rational status of ethics are currently gaining ground, weakening the consensus on social norms. This is the case with meta-ethical and postmodern theories, which hold that ethical questions cannot be discussed rationally at all, as well as with biological ethics, which considers moral norms to be nothing more than an illusion since human behavior is determined so as to further the fitness and progress of the human race. However, there has also been a substantive revival in secular ethical theory since the 1970s. The main difference between it and Christian ethics is that the latter considers the morals of the individual to be the basis of social norms and institutions.³⁰ As C. S. Lewis once remarked comparing Christian to secular ethics, the former focuses on the condition of each ship, while the latter is primarily concerned with the formation of the fleet. But obviously, good ships are needed to make a good fleet.³¹ This shows that private and public morals are intimately linked, with the latter being based on the former. Catholic moral theology has always strongly emphasized individual ethics because of its conviction that “the imbalances under which the world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man” (*Gaudium et spes* 10). This requires that people be educated to reflect on moral issues — an ability that, according to Hannah Arendt, is the basis of all civility.³² Perhaps the most serious deficiency of modern anthropology is that it underestimates this

30. To illustrate this position further: the first sentence of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (originally published in 1971), which decisively contributed to the ethical renaissance, defines justice as “the first virtue of *institutions*.” This shows the preeminent position accorded to the political and institutional order, the task of which is to guarantee justice independently of the ever-unreliable moral behavior of human beings. Or, as Immanuel Kant wrote, “a good state can also be created by a group of devils, if only they have (practical) reason” (*Zum ewigen Frieden*, BA 59f., translation IG). Although one might justifiably doubt the validity of this statement, who would want to live in such a state?

31. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), p. 71.

32. Hannah Arendt regards the loss of the ability of self-reflection as a sign of the twentieth century and a reason for its political catastrophes. Cf. her *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2003).

need for moral education, and, moreover, largely ignores human fallibility. It thereby reduces our understanding of ourselves. Christian ethics, which takes the life-destroying consequences of sin seriously, is much more realistic in this respect.

But besides the exclusion or underestimation of individual ethics in the secular ethical discourse, there is another pitfall Christian and secular ethics need to avoid, which is to reduce them to a system of norms to be followed. This way its true focus, which is the moral development of the person, gets lost from sight. The aim of morality, and ethics as the reflection on it, is to make men and women more human by ordering and deepening their relationship to each other. This ultimately — according to Christian faith — also leads to a more profound relationship with God, the love of the other and of God being inseparable. Christian ethics is there to help people find and maintain a Christian lifestyle that encompasses all areas of social interaction. This aim was realized in the moral philosophy of Thomas Aquinas in a way that is still exemplary. The importance it assigns to ethics is shown in the fact that he dedicates the largest part of his *Summa theologica* to moral issues. His writings contain a wealth of moral discernment that reveals the impoverishment of present ethical discourse in which the replacement of virtues by norms is accompanied by the tendency to reduce morality to a few central issues. Such a shift in emphasis away from the person as a moral agent to norms lies at the heart of present culture wars. One way to overcome these polarizations would be to realize that Catholic moral traditions are much richer and also more balanced. To take but one example: sexual ethics — which are at the center of current public discussions on morals — are treated in Thomist ethics in the chapters on moderation and temperance.³³ In this way its aim is made clear: Christians are to observe certain norms in this area so that they may grow in justice and love, i.e., in the respect of the integrity and feelings of others as well as of themselves. Thomas precisely formulates the relationship between justice and love in the following way: “Justice without love is cruelty; love without justice leads to dissolu-

33. Thomas structures his system of ethics around the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love), the practice of which requires grace to a particular extent; and around the four so-called cardinal virtues (wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation), which he takes from classical Greek ethics. The best study in German on the subject is still that of Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Bonum hominis. Die anthropologischen und theologischen Grundlagen der Tugendethik von Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald-Verlag, 1987).

tion.”³⁴ Norms by themselves formulate minimum standards.³⁵ If they are made the essence of moral discourse, the dimension of love as the highest Christian virtue and the culmination of Christian ethics tends to be excluded or relegated to the domain of purely personal interaction. But love should surpass justice without being oblivious to it. One of its main aims is to overcome evil through an active and — if necessary — one-sided commitment to the good: “Do not be conquered by evil. But conquer evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). The mass as the “source and culmination” of Roman Catholic spirituality shows this intimate relationship between the love of God and the love of the Other, a relationship that also embraces the whole of creation, which is to be transformed together with all of humanity.³⁶ For this reason there is no clear line between Christian ethics and spirituality. Christian mysticism is always inner-worldly in the Weberian sense. It has nothing to do with esoteric insights or spiritual states sought for their own sake. The criteria of its authenticity are the fruits of love that it bears. Detaching ethics from this spiritual basis ultimately causes the former to become legalistic and the latter to acquire a dualistic and pallid quality. Both spirituality and the practiced morality of Christians are essential for the credibility of the Church’s arguments on moral and social issues in the public square. Nothing, after all, can do greater damage to morality than hypocrisy — the divergence between words and action.

Regarding the second issue, Roman Catholicism can make decisive contributions to a civil future through its commitment to justice, both nationally and globally. Political and economic liberalism depend on each other but are also difficult to reconcile, since liberal political institutions for their stability need a reasonable degree of social equality and the satis-

34. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium Sanctae Matthaei. Lectura*, cura P. Raphaelis Cai OP, ed. V (Turin: Marietti, 1951), p. 69.

35. Such standards are, for instance, formulated in *Gaudium et spes*: “whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children . . . all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed” (*Gaudium et spes* 27).

36. This is beautifully expressed in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *La Messe sur le Monde: Hymne de l’Univers* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961), pp. 15-55.

faction of basic material needs of all. Although it would be naïve to attribute the rise of fundamentalist movements to material causes alone, growing disparities in income and living conditions worldwide do play a major role in their gaining political support. Destitution, poverty, unemployment, and unfulfilled hopes for prosperity breed religious radicalism. The return to one's religious roots and the rejection of liberal Western values in this situation become ways to assert one's own dignity and protest against economic and political marginalization. Regardless of how one measures justice, the present global distribution of goods cannot be called just. The existing differences in income — and consequently in life chances — are scandalous, and moreover, create an explosive political situation. If peace, according to the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 32:17), is the work of justice, the lack of it is also a great threat to global peace.

This has been the message of Catholic Social Teaching ever since its beginnings in the nineteenth century.³⁷ Its main aims are “a preferential option for the poor” (a term originally coined by liberation theology and then adopted by pastoral documents) as a struggle against poverty and for human dignity, and the criticism of secular ideologies, Marxism as well as liberalism. The market — and with it the market economy — are thus accepted as facts of life. At the same time, however, Catholic Social Teaching insists on the duty of the state to further the common good, i.e., to help create dignified living conditions for those who are not able to sustain themselves materially. It asserts the right to private property, but also makes it clear that material goods exist to serve all and not only a few. Catholic Christians therefore have not only the duty to be charitable, but also to support the establishment of institutions that are to contribute to a more equitable distribution. These positions represent a middle way between the above-mentioned ideologies. Marxism having lost its relevance, it remains important to point towards the limitations of liberal market economies. Though they have proven to be the best mechanism for the allocation of resources, in order to further social justice and preserve the environment, political institutions are needed that effectively pursue these

37. The best English introduction remains that of Donald Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992). Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, *Grundzüge und Positionen katholischer Sozialethik*; Ingeborg Gabriel/Alexandros Papaderos/Ulrich Körtner, *Perspektiven ökumenischer Sozialethik*, 2. Aufl. (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald-Verlag, 2006). The book intends to introduce readers to Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant social ethics. An English translation is forthcoming.

aims. At a time when the nation-state is growing weaker (and along with it, its ability to exercise a corrective function), the question is: Which institutions can replace it in a globalized world and work towards a global common good? The rhetorical question of St. Augustine — “What are states without justice but big bands of robbers?”³⁸ — thus has to be asked anew in a world situation in which states are no longer the only or even the most important actors. The already-difficult task of ensuring that solidarity is incorporated into national institutions must in the present age be undertaken at the global level. For this, global institutions are needed that help to further justice worldwide. Through its caritative and social ministry the Church can contribute to more justice and peace — if it is outspoken enough and willing to take up these global issues. It thereby asserts the universality of social and political norms against culturalist currents that insist on their particularity. It also holds that the political and social involvement of Christians must take into account the “autonomy of earthly affairs” (*Gaudium et spes* 36). This is directed against integralist and fundamentalist ideas, which negate the complexity of social issues in modern societies and tend to disregard the way in which social, political, and economic institutions function.

A third area of particular relevance is the Catholic commitment to dialogue and non-violent conflict resolution. If pluralism — both nationally and globally — is to be more than the mere coexistence of different religious creeds and worldviews, it requires dialogue at different levels, particularly on ethical and political questions. The Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II made a key contribution to these. The essence of its commitment has been formulated in the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate*: “Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, she [i.e., the Church] reflects at the outset on what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them” (*Nostra aetate* 1). The aim is to find common ground by proceeding from what different groups already agree on. This requires respect for the other’s convictions as well as competence in articulating one’s positions in ways intelligible for others. What distinguishes dialogue from propaganda is the knowledge that the partner has something to contribute. To speak to each other makes sense only if one recognizes that one’s knowledge and capacity to find solutions are limited and, therefore, may

38. Aurelius Augustinus, *Civitas Dei*, book 4, chapter 4.

be enriched by what others have to say. Dialogue thus depends on the insight of both sides that we do not own the truth, but are always striving for it and therefore need to talk to each other. It goes without saying that dialogue also presupposes reflected positions and identities. As Albert Camus wrote: "Dialogue is only possible between people who remain who they are and who speak the truth." But one's identity and convictions can be sustained and deepened only in communication — a fact that makes for the dynamism and fruitfulness of dialogue.

The three main areas in which the Catholic Church has been particularly active in theory and practice during the past decades were the dialogue with secular modernity, with other Christian churches, and with members of other religious communities. The common ground shared by secular and Christian ethics is the recognition of the supreme value of human life, its integrity and welfare, and the equality of all human beings irrespective of race, color, gender, or religion.³⁹ To quote Vatican II once again: "According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown" (*Gaudium et spes* 12). As much as liberal secular and Christian positions may differ on concrete issues, there is a high degree of consensus to be found between them, the essence of which is their humanistic approach. If God's becoming man, i.e., his incarnation, is the basic tenet of Christianity, then Christianity is humanism *par excellence*. One may therefore criticize secular humanism for not being humanistic enough, but not for being too humanistic. On this common basis the differences between Christian and secular humanism can and must be discussed.⁴⁰

Although it is of great importance, ecumenical dialogue — another main area of Catholic involvement — can only be mentioned here in brief. For the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* (1965), the ecumenical movement is the work of the Holy Spirit, progress towards unity resulting from a conversion of hearts, a better knowledge of the other's theology and traditions, and cooperation in the social area. Particularly in Europe, where confessional conflicts were one of the reasons for banishing religion

39. Charles Taylor has shown this in the first part of *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

40. Thus, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church takes integral humanism — i.e., a humanism that includes the religious dimension — as its point of departure. Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, ed., *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).

from the political sphere, peaceful cooperation between different churches is a precondition for their credibility.

Last but not least, interreligious dialogue has acquired great significance in the past decades. Its goal is not unity, i.e., it does not aim at syncretism, but the recognition of the religious and moral truths contained in other religions. The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* (1965) opened the way for a great number of interreligious initiatives in the Catholic Church. An unprecedented event in its history was the World Prayer Meeting in Assisi (the first was held in 1986; others have followed), to which Pope John Paul II invited representatives from all world religions to pray together for global peace and justice. The main areas for interreligious dialogue are ethical (and maybe spiritual) questions where the basic consensus is by far greater and the scope for argumentation therefore larger, than in proper religious questions. This is good news. In a globalized world peace does not depend on having the same concept of God, but on having common ethical standards acceptable to all.⁴¹ The Greek expression *dia-logou* — “through words” — connotes a form of action that is diametrically opposed to force. Therefore, as utopian as dialogue may seem at times in view of political realities, it is the only alternative to violence in a world where different faith traditions have to reach basic agreement, globally and nationally, about what is to be considered civil and humane.

The Roman Catholic Church is a huge institution. It is the only one with global administrative structures and a global government. Its sheer size, with over one billion members, makes it an important actor in world affairs; in other words, it is a “global player.” But it must not be forgotten that its central structures, which have gained even greater visibility through the global media, constitute but the external representation of the world Church. Its essence is the myriad of different initiatives and institutions worldwide, be it parishes, religious, or lay congregations, each of which has its own profile as well as spiritual and social priorities. There are great regional differences between them, which also indicate that in different regional contexts different forms of action are needed to live up to the challenges of the age. Therefore, I would like to add at this point that the

41. This is the conclusion I have drawn from twelve years of participation in the Vienna Christian-Muslim dialogues, the proceedings of which have been published, most of them also in English and Arabic. Cf. www.univie.ac.at/ktf/sozialethik.

reflections in this paper represent a European point of view. The emphasis made by an Asian or an African Catholic would most certainly be different. As important as the positions taken by the global and local churches may be, however, what matters in the end are the (inner and outer) actions taken by Catholic Christians who practice their faith and are willing to take responsibility for it. Theological positions and magisterial guidelines can both foster or hinder this faith practice; they cannot bring it about. The importance of Vatican II lies exactly in the fact that it laid the foundations for this active involvement of Catholics in areas of particular relevance in today's world. It is a sound basis and an ongoing advantage for the Roman Catholic Church as well as of society. Despite all oscillations in ecclesiastical policy and the typical "anti-resources," such as laziness and indifference, self-sufficiency and self-righteousness, resignation and traditionalism that hinder the practical and intellectual commitment needed, it has prevented the Roman Catholic Church as a whole from falling into extremes. An idealization of the past as an era of clear Catholic identity does not do justice to the present situation. The Church — which means its faithful as well as the hierarchy — has to find solutions under the present conditions of uncertainty and risk. As the biblical metaphor goes: putting new wine in old wineskins spoils both.

One of the main challenges of the age is to sustain and spread liberal political institutions, particularly human rights and democracy. But for this it must be acknowledged that the expansion of rights only creates spaces of freedom. True respect of others cannot be guaranteed by a constitution. It requires the everyday efforts of citizens who are willing to fill these institutions with life. The motivation has to come from their own convictions: Why, after all, should I respect my neighbor as a fellow human being? The question "Can this respect of the dignity of the person be upheld without faith?" cannot be answered in the abstract. But Christian faith in the sanctity of the life of the other, whatever his personal qualities may be, is a strong foundation for this respect, on which our political system is built. It is ultimately rooted in our being created in the image of the triune God. Throughout history, this belief has stimulated the willingness to defend the dignity of the other even under difficult circumstances. This focus on the concrete person could, moreover, help debunk both idols and ideologies, which are not liberating and life-giving, but alienate human beings from themselves and their fellows.

At the intellectual level the Church can and must defend the role of

reason in matters of faith and morals. This is a difficult task for a variety of reasons. These include the erosion of intellectual culture through social fragmentation, the replacement of argumentation by the often-trivial images of the media, as well as the lack of time, sheer ignorance, and confusion due to the many opinions we are confronted with in a pluralistic society. Since we live in a world that has largely been constructed by human inventions, we also have the responsibility to cope with them, asking ourselves which actions and ideas can promote further progress in civility — which is, after all, the only kind of progress that ultimately counts. The answer to modern rationalism thus must not be anti-rationalism, religious or otherwise. The warning of the present Pope should be taken seriously in this respect. It is of utmost importance for the future whether the religions will be able to bring their rational resources into play so as to find viable solutions instead of clashing with each other. This requires a creative reinterpretation of their traditions in cooperation with others, which makes dialogue so important. The belligerent relativism that proclaims the liberation from morals on the one hand, and the hardening of religious positions on the other, call for prudent reflection and moderation that is based on love.

At the same time, one must resist the temptation to become fixated on the negative sides of new developments that are taking place all over the world. There are also powerful trends towards communion between human beings, religions, and ideas. One may observe not only fragmentation, but also encouraging signs of its being overcome. To acknowledge and strengthen these, seeing them as harbingers of the world to come and signs of God's grace, is one of the noblest tasks of the Church as a sacrament of unity for mankind. This precludes any hasty opposition between humanism and Christianity. The main characteristic of the Christian God as shown by revelation is, after all, his *philanthropy*, i.e., his love for mankind. A God who does not desire the good would be nothing but an idol, and his proclamation a type of inflexible and inhumane ideology.

Catholic theology sees oneness, truth, and the good (and sometimes also the beautiful) as the transcendental qualities of life. They are its essence, and even if they are never perfectly realized in this world, they are to be furthered by Catholic Christians in every way possible. Because of its size, public visibility, and intellectual heritage, the Roman Catholic Church has a particular responsibility in this respect. The positions it takes can influence the course of events for the better. The promise of the king-

dom of God, of “a new heaven and a new earth, in which justice reigns” (1 Peter 3:13), should be a strong incentive to take the action needed for a more humane future, despite the fact that the course of history is uncertain and the final outcome of present developments cannot be foreseen.