Crossroads New York Cultural Center

Freedom Without Roots

Monday, February 6, 2006 at 7pm, Columbia University

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at The Catholic University of America

Truth, Freedom, and Relativism in Western Democracies:
A Comment on Pope Benedict XVI's Contributions to Without Roots

This presentation consists of three unequal parts: first, a brief (and necessarily presumptuous!) summary of what seems to me the theological center of Pope Benedict XVI; second, an outline of some main points of his two contributions to Without Roots; and, third, a formulation of an important issue for reflection, particularly with respect to North America, that emerges from the Pope's contributions.

I

(1) We belong to the truth before the truth belongs to us. Although both of these statements are true, a reversal in their order changes the meaning and integrity both of the truth and of ourselves.

(2) This truth to which we belong is ultimately a matter of love. Ultimately: that is, what is ultimately true and supremely real–God–is love. Hence Benedict's first encyclical, Deus Caritas Est. God is a trinitarian circle of love.

(3) This divine truth as love has a human face and a human heart in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God assumes flesh and blood, hence the whole of human being, and this assumption takes a Eucharistic form: the total gift of self as the way of communion.

In sum: to belong to the truth is to belong to a love that, especially as seen in the light of the Incarnation, is simultaneously God-centered and humanity-centered.

II

How are we to understand Benedict's contributions to Without Roots in this context? What are the key elements in his assessment of the (spiritual, political, and cultural) situation in the West and especially Europe today, as set forth in these contributions?

President Pera in his Preface says that "The only thing worse than living without roots is struggling to get by without a future" (xiv). Of course the two are related, because absence of memory is itself already a forgetfulness of destiny. Without a living memory of who we are, there can be no hope in the face of what we are to become.

The question, then, is: who are we? The "we" here of course refers primarily to Europe but thereby also to the West and hence also includes America.

Passing over the rich historical reflections of Benedict, I will mention only the key moral elements that he sees as central to European identity. "Is there," he asks, "a European identity that has a future and to which we can commit wholeheartedly?" (72). Though he does not wish to enter into discussion of the matter of the European Constitution, he indicates the three basic elements that he says should not be omitted.

(1) (a) First, there is "the unconditionality with which human rights and human dignity should be presented as values that take precedence over any state jurisdiction" (72). "The value of human dignity . . . refers to the creator: only he can establish values that are grounded in the essence of humankind and

that are inviolable" (73). "The fact that values exist that cannot be modified by anyone is the true guarantee of our freedom and our greatness; in this fact, the Christian faith sees the mystery of the Creator and the condition of man, who was made in God's image" (73). Although today almost no one would deny the primacy of human dignity outright, says Benedict, "in the concrete sphere of the supposed progress of medicine there are very real threats to these values"–for example, cloning, storage of fetuses for research or organ harvesting, the whole field of genetic manipulation, and the like (73f.).

(b) "A second element that characterizes European identity is marriage and family. Monogamous marriage–both as a fundamental structure for the relationship between men and women and as the nucleus for the formation of state community–was forged already in the Biblical faith" (74). "Europe would no longer be Europe if this fundamental nucleus of its social edifice were to vanish or to be changed in an essential way" (74). Benedict cites here the problems of cohabitation and the increasing demand for recognition of marriage between homosexuals.

(c) "The last element of the European identity is religion" (74). The pope stresses that fundamental to all cultures is "respect for that which another group holds sacred, especially respect for the sacred in the highest sense, for God, which one can reasonably expect to find even among those who are not willing to believe in God" (75f.). When this respect–this religious sense that is natural to humankind–"is violated, something essential is lost" (76).

(2) But here Benedict turns to the problem of multiculturalism, and in this context to the problem of the West's peculiar self-hatred, and of love for its own values (76). He stresses that "multiculturalism cannot survive without common foundations, without the sense of direction offered by our own values"(77). It definitely, he says, "cannot survive without respect for the sacred. Multiculturalism teaches us to approach the sacred things of others with respect, but we can only do this if we, ourselves, are not estranged from the sacred, from God" (77). "With regard to others, it is our duty to cultivate within ourselves respect for the sacred and to show the face of the revealed God, of the God who has compassion for the poor and the weak, for widows and orphans, for the foreigner; the God who is so human that he himself became man, a man who suffered, and who by his suffering with us gave dignity and hope to our pain" (77).

In short, "unless we embrace our own heritage of the sacred, we will not only deny the identity of Europe, we will also fail in providing a service to others to which they are entitled. To the other cultures of the world, there is something deeply alien about the absolute secularism that is developing in the West. They are convinced that a world without God has no future. Multiculturalism itself thus demands that we return once again to ourselves"–that is, to our own roots (77-78).

(3) In his subsequent letter to President Pera, which makes up his second contribution to Without Roots, the theologian Ratzinger (Benedict) takes up clarification of the notion of civil religion–that is, in particular, of the relation between a religion that reaches beyond the limits of denominationalism, on the one hand, and the faith of the Catholic Church, on the other (106). And here he makes reference to the example and distinct contribution of America. "American society was built for the most part by groups that had fled from the system of state churches that reigned in Europe, and they found their religious bearings in free faith communities outside of the state church"(108). Thus American society from its beginning had "an implicit recognition that the religious and moral foundations bequeathed by Christianity is greater than any single denomination" (108). At the same time "you could say that American society was built on the foundations of a separation of church and state" (108). This separation was vastly different from that imposed in Europe by the French Revolution (108-109). In America, "it is in the nature of the state to recognize and permit different religious communities in their particularity and non-membership in the state," and the separation of church and state is thus "conceived positively" in terms of the freedom of religion to be and fulfill itself (109).

Now Benedict points out that the Catholic principle, rightly understood, does not at all involve a state church system; and he notes as well the complications–the strength and the weaknesses–of the Protestant kinship with the Enlightenment (115) and its "profound intertwining with modern culture" (116). Regarding the latter, he notes in particular its "fatal tendency to conform to the times–which led Protestantism to the brink of dissolution during the Enlightenment–and is alive and well today, as the traditional Protestant churches in the United States demonstrate" (117). The point, says Benedict, is that, although Protestantism can help us in the matter of the development of a civil religion, "its current crisis . . . demonstrates that 'de-confessionalization' does not automatically," in and of itself, resolve the problem (117).

(4) Regarding the notion of civil religion, then, the Pope says in summary: "an ambiguous light is . . . cast on the concept of civil religion: if it is no more than a reflection of the majority's convictions, then it means little or nothing. If instead it is a source of spiritual strength, then we have to ask what feeds this source" (118).

Benedict's answer to what can serve as this source of spiritual strength is expressed in a single fundamental principle, which he explains in four corollary theses. The principle is that "Something living cannot be born except from another living thing" (118). "This is why it is so important to have convinced minorities in the Church, for the Church, and above all beyond the Church and for society: human beings who in their encounters with Christ have discovered the precious pearl that gives value to all life (Matthew 13:45)" (119). "There is nothing sectarian about such creative minorities; through their persuasive capacity and their joy, they also offer other people a different way of seeing things and reaching everybody" (119).

The four corollary theses are as follows: (a) first, "a civil religion that truly has the moral force to sustain everybody presupposes the existence of convinced minorities that have 'discovered the pearl' and live it in a manner that is also convincing to others. Without such motivating forces, nothing can be built" (119f.).

(b) Second, "we all need forms of belonging or of reference to these communities, or simply of contact with them" (120).

(c) Third, "these creative communities can clearly neither stand nor live on their own. They live naturally from the fact that the Church remains as a whole, and that it lives in and stands by the faith in its divine origins, which it did not invent but that it recognizes as a gift that it is duty-bound to transmit" (121).

(d) Fourth, "both lay people and Catholics, seekers and believers . . . must move toward each other with a new openness. Believers must never stop seeking, while seekers are touched by the truth and thus cannot be classified as people with [no] faith or no Christian-inspired moral principles. There are ways of partaking of the truth by which seekers and believers give to and learn from each other" (121).

(5) In light of the foregoing reflections, Benedict asks why it is that the Christian faith is struggling so much today to convey its great message to people in Europe. His answer is twofold: (a) the first reason is expressed by Nietzsche, who says that, "as long as one does not perceive Christian morality as a capital crime against life, its defenders will always have an easy game" (123). The decisive issue, in other words, is that of whether Christianity provides a convincing model for life: "the decisive reason for the abandonment of Christianity, says Benedict, is that "its model for life [has] clearly [been] unconvincing. It seems to place too many restraints on humankind that stifle its joie de vivre, that limit its precious freedom [and so on]" (123).

(b) The second reason for the crumbling of Christianity is "that it seems to have been surpassed by "science" and to be out-of-step with the rationalism," or the conception of reason, of the modern era (124-125).

The principles of Benedict's response to these two failings of, or objections to, Christianity, have already been indicated: "the Christian model of life must be manifested as a life in all its fullness and freedom, a life that does not experience the bonds of love as . . . limitation but rather as a opening to the greatness of life" (124). Thus the importance again of the creative minorities already referred to. But, further, these minorities need to enter into dialogue with "lay" people (the broader secular culture), engaging them in the basic questions of our time such as: "Does matter create reason? Does pure chance produce meaning? Or do intellect, logos, and reason come first, so reason, freedom, and the good are already part of the principles that construct reality?" (125). "A valid civil religion," he says, "will not conceive of God as a mythical entity but as a possibility of reason" (126).

(6) Benedict then introduces the problem of relativism, of the intolerance and dogmatism spawned by an increasingly widespread relativism in Western democracies (126f.). Recalling an earlier comment of the

Pope, we see that this growing relativism is bound up with the “tendency on the part of modern conscience to treat the entire realm of faith and morals as ‘subjective’” (114). Which is to say, this dogmatism is expressed in the tendency to treat all claims to truth as equal–to reduce all such claims equally to matters of merely subjective preference. This increasing dogmatic tendency to reduce all claims of truth to expressions of subjective preference includes the essential truths that Benedict says lie at the roots and hence identity of European society: the inviolable dignity of each human being from the natural beginning to the natural end of life; monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, and respect for the natural religious sense of humankind. I will return to this problem of dogmatic relativism below.

(7) First we turn to a final observation by Benedict, which bears on a fundamental problematic that runs through all the foregoing reflections. Our modern cultural situation is characterized by the presence of many different faiths–different forms of theism and indeed of atheism. In such a situation, Christians, says Benedict, “can only reclaim that which belongs to the human foundations that are accessible to reason and which is therefore essential to the construction of a sound legal order” (128). (Recall the three essential truths just mentioned.) It is just here, he says, that “the dilemma of human life emerges fully. . . . The Christian is convinced that his or her faith opens up new dimensions of understanding, and above all that it helps reason to be itself. There is the true heritage of the faith (the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the sacraments, etc.), but there is also knowledge for which faith provides evidence, knowledge that is later recognized as rational and pertaining to reason as such, and thus also implying a responsibility toward others. The person of faith, who has received help in reason, must work in favor of reason and of that which is rational: this, in the face of dormant or diseased reason, is a duty he or she has toward the entire human community” (128-129).

Benedict then cites again areas where this issue has especially important significance today, such as genetic manipulation and the institution of marriage (129-132). He stresses the importance of exhibiting a “rationality of argument” in such cases that will lead to an “ethics of reason” that somehow bridges the gap between a strictly secular ethics on the one hand and a strictly religious ethics on the other, or again between the empirical and the philosophical. As an example of where development of such an ethics of reason might be expected is in the area of when human life begins. In this case, says Benedict, an ethics of reason entails “a deduction for the legislator: if this is the way things are, then the authorization to kill an embryo means ‘the state is denying the equality of all before the law’”(emphasis added) (131).

On the other hand, there are areas where it may not be possible today to reach a consensus on the basis of such an ethics of reason. For example, though the Church rejects both homologous and heterologous artificial insemination, it may not be possible, given today’s society, to achieve a consensus regarding prohibition of the former.

Affirming, then, that Christians cannot “simply impose all aspects of their morality on the political order,” Benedict says that there will be times when it will be necessary for them to claim from legislators the right to conscientious objection (133). Failing recognition of even this right, Christians should claim “the right to passive resistance and thereby offer the testimony of conscience that . . . could make people reflect and lead to the formation of a new conscience” (133). In all of this, the creative minorities to which Benedict referred earlier will play a central role. Indeed, following the road to conscientious objection and passive resistance “will become less necessary the more we succeed in developing a civil Christian religion that gives shape once again to our conscience as Europeans and–going beyond the separation between lay people and Catholics–manifests the reasonable and binding value of the great principles that have [built] Europe and must and can rebuild it” (133).

III

Let us return now in conclusion to the problem of relativism, and frame the issue with particular attention to the separation of Church and state that has been a distinct contribution of America to the problematic of Europe’s heritage and identity. The issue is that of a growing intolerance and dogmatism: that is, the increasingly widespread public imposition of the idea that claims of truths–such as those regarding the inviolable dignity of the human being, monogamous marriage, and respect for the natural religious sense of humankind–are expressions of merely “subjective” preferences rather than genuinely "objective" truths, indeed truths indicative of the "human foundations that are accessible to reason and . . . essential to the construction of a sound legal order" (128).

On December 4, 2005 (Angelus, St. Peter's Square), commemorating the 40th anniversary of Dignitatis Humanae, Benedict stated that "religious liberty derives from the special dignity of the human person"; that it "is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are . . . endowed with reason and free will . . . , are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth" (DH, n. 2). In light of this, he goes on to say that "the Second Vatican Council reaffirms the traditional Catholic doctrine which holds that men and women, as spiritual creatures, can know the truth and therefore have the duty and the right to seek it" (referring to DH, n. 3). "Having laid this foundation, the Council places a broad emphasis on religious liberty, which must be guaranteed both to individuals and to communities with respect for the legitimate demands of the public order. . . ." "Religious liberty is indeed very far from being effectively guaranteed everywhere: [sometimes . . . ,] although it may be recognizable on paper, it is hindered in effect by political power or, more cunningly, by the cultural predomination of agnosticism and relativism."

Note how Benedict approaches here the problem of religious liberty–and indeed, by implication, of pluralism and multiculturalism. In the face of the problem of multiple claims to truth, especially religious truth, his response is to defend freedom and rights and respect for difference–by way of appeal to . . . truth itself. According to Benedict, genuine respect for others in society, for "secular" people and people of other religious faiths or of no religious faith at all, is safeguarded most properly and profoundly, not by detaching the right to freedom, especially religious freedom, from the truth but on the contrary by situating that right to freedom within the truth that alone can in the end really liberate: the truth of freedom as love. Benedict anchors the problem of respect for cultural and religious and moral differences in our society, not in a rationality or freedom conceived neutrally, but rather in a definite notion (content) of the truth itself.

Benedict, in the text cited, says that Dignitatis Humanae, in tying the right to religious liberty to the duty and the right to seek the truth, thereby affirms the traditional Catholic doctrine. This of course is true–though we should recognize with Benedict how this Gospel- and Creed- founded understanding of truth as love has been developed in the pontificate of John Paul II (in the latter's emphasis, for example, on Gaudium et Spes, par. 22, as the key to the teaching of the Council, on a communio ecclesiology and the "communion of persons," and on the "nuptial" meaning of the body), a development now carried further in Benedict's first encyclical, Deus Caritas Est.

The point, then, is that Benedict does not speak of freedom here first or most properly in terms of "immunity from coercion," which is to say, he does not adopt the primarily juridical interpretation of freedom in DH that has prevailed–among Catholics–in Western democracies, certainly in the United States. In a word, the legitimate separation of state and Church affirmed by Benedict in the name of a rightly understood Catholic principle–and indeed to the understanding of which the United States has made a special contribution–does not entail for him a separation of the state from the question of truth: does not, in a word, entail embrace of a primarily-purely juridical state. This does not mean, of course, that the sense of freedom as an immunity from coercion does not remain an essential dimension of freedom in the (primary) sense as truth. Indeed, the point is to make explicit the non-relativistic truth that alone can ground, and provide the proper inner form and condition of, freedom as entailing immunity from coercion.

The importance of the issue raised here becomes clear when we recall the reference by Benedict to the growing tendency of democratic societies to impose the view that truths such as those he cites as essential for the construction of a sound legal order are matters merely of subjective preference. The question I thus mean to press, in light of Benedict's concerns and his comments regarding Dignitatis Humanae, is whether this dogmatic imposition of relativism is not bound up in a fundamental way with the adoption by Western states–for example, by Americans in their interpretation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution–of the juridical notion of freedom as primarily an "immunity from coercion." By definition such a notion of freedom protects freedom as an act of choice conceived first and most properly in abstraction from the truth–or order–(yet to be) chosen. The order chosen in the exercise of that act, in other words, becomes now, eo ipso, private: a matter of the preference of this or that individual subject or group in society. To be sure, an individual subject (or group) might well insist that the truths it defends make reasonable and objective demands on others–indeed, make a universal demand on the community. The relevant point, however, is that, for all of this insistence, these truths, for purposes of public (legal-constitutional) order–again, given the juridical reading of that order–will and can only be treated as private preferences among which the state is to referee but the substantial content of which the state can in no way judge and toward which it must remain officially indifferent.

In a word, we can see the peculiar if paradoxical way in which, given a primarily juridical notion of freedom, democracy tends to invert into totalitarianism–in which democratic relativism tends to become dogmatic. Insofar as they adopt the juridical notion of freedom as first and properly an immunity from coercion, or, again, insofar as they confuse the necessary and legitimate separation of state and Church with an embrace of the purely juridical state, Western democracies thereby–however unwittingly and paradoxically–cannot but affirm as their sole “truth” that all claims to truth are merely the expressions of private or individual or “subjective” preferences. It is this sole “truth” of relativism that the juridical democratic state now increasingly-officially imposes on society.

The simple summary proposal I wish to make, then, in light of Benedict’s argument, is twofold: first, any adequately conceived civil religion–at whose heart lies the energy of what Benedict calls “creative minorities”–will need to witness to, and thus also to give a reasonable account of, freedom as the truth of love–the truth of which love is expressed most basically in the inviolable dignity of the human being, in monogamous marriage, and in respect for the native-natural religious sense of humankind. Creative minorities, perhaps especially in North America, will need to witness to the distinction between freedom qua the truth of love and freedom qua a primitively empty, primarily juridical, exercise of choice.

Second, insofar as “creative minorities” fail in their efforts to convince the broader culture of this substantive truth of freedom as love–which is to say, insofar as Western civilization continues its drift in the direction of a purely juridical order–the witness of these minorities to the true roots of our civilization will increasingly need to take the form indicated by Benedict: first conscientious objection, then if necessary passive resistance.

In light of the above considerations, many readers may recall Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous suggestion that what our age needs is a new St. Benedict. Perhaps we have this man in Benedict XVI. Benedict’s reflections in this book in any case surely move us to ponder in all its depth and breadth the question regarding the truthful ordering of freedom, a question that goes to roots of the identity of Western democracies in the face of the problem of relativism.

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