

RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE THOUGHT OF JOSEPH RATZINGER

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The 21st century has witnessed the revival of religion's participation in the public sphere. Jose Casanova aptly described the phenomenon as the "deprivatization of religion" which is a digression from the positivist prediction of religion's irrelevance after the metaphysical stage. The increasing engagement of religion in matters of politics and public policy has attracted a number of scholars to take interest in the debate or discussion of the same. This has lead, to borrow Jose Casanova's idea, to an "unexpected public interest derived from the fact that religion leaving its assigned place in the private sphere, had thrust itself into the public arena of moral and political contestation."²

Speaking on the same thematic interest, Jurgen Habermas, though advancing a practically different thesis on the role of religion in the public sphere nonetheless, acknowledges the value and place of religious discourses in the formation of public discourse.³ He draws insights from Rawls' liberal view that religious doctrines may be introduced in public political discussion at any time provided that they are presented properly with sufficient political reasons.⁴ The renowned political philosopher practically suggests therefore that comprehensive religious doctrines may be admitted into public discourse on the condition that they are translated into rational and publicly comprehensible arguments.

Parameters of the Discussion

A. Problem

Among contemporary Catholic scholars, Joseph Ratzinger stands out as one among the prominent few who takes seriously the discussion of religion's role in the public sphere. As a theologian,

Ratzinger provides a distinctive approach to the issue of religion's⁵ participation in politics yet he has not shied from advancing sound philosophical arguments as well as critiques of specific philosophies he deemed subject to criticism.⁶

This paper presents the thought of Ratzinger on the role of religion in the public sphere with specific focus on the Christian faith. Obviously a Catholic thinker, a theologian for that matter, like the former pope cannot but limit his concern to the religious tradition he values highly. "The role of religion in the public sphere" therefore mainly refers to the engagements of the Christian in the public sphere—as it is understood, reflected and analyzed by Ratzinger.

Apparently, we may not be prevented from developing future reflections based on whatever insights or conclusion/s this endeavor may produce. With a great caution though that any analysis of Christianity, specifically Catholicism's participation in the public life carries a number of factual or specific differences from the way non-Christian religions engage with their own issues in their specific political and socio-economic contexts.

B. Sources

It is important, for reasons of systematization, to provide a relatively brief background on the sources we consider for the exposition of Ratzinger's thought. Apparently, his election to the papacy in 2005 impressed on some observers the need to distinguish his works before and after assuming the pontificate. For example, the fact that papal Encyclicals may not necessarily be written by the pope himself—could also bring about second thoughts whether *Deus Caritas Est* should be cited as his work, of equal reliability as the source of his thought—to that of what we may call the pre-pontificate writings.⁷

This work methodologically seeks to qualify the inclusion of the papal encyclicals. First, granting that there may be other writers who were asked to contribute their ideas to the document, in the end Ratzinger possesses authorship as Benedict XVI. Hence the authorship ultimately belongs to him. The distinction between his person as Ratzinger and his title in office as Benedict XVI are more of

formal and juridical distinctions that may not affect his philosophical or discursive consistency.

The second argument however for the inclusion of the encyclicals goes beyond mere invocation of practical authorship. Instead an examination of the encyclicals, their overarching thought and discursive style are identifiably Ratzinger's. Most specifically *DCE*—the encyclical contains evident traces of the former pope's views on politics, man, reason, the state and above all the Christian faith. In some ways, *Spe Salvi* (SS) and *Caritas in Veritate* (CV) also bear some apparent discursive connections to his main thought.

All of these would make sense if they are read in the light of the pre-papacy writings of Ratzinger. Among others we need to cite *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (New Endeavors in Ecclesiology, 1987) which is a collection of his important essays, *A Turning Point for Europe* (1991), his Memoirs in *Milestones* (1998), *Truth and Tolerance* (2003), *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* (2005) and his debate with Jürgen Habermas in *The Dialectics of Secularization* (2005). We cannot miss a few of his important articles in the *International Journal of Theology, Concilium* such as "Communio: a Program" (1992), "Truth and Freedom" (1996), and "Church and Economy: Responsibility for the Future of the World Economy" (1986). These and many other works of the German thinker and theologian allow us to figure out the gestalt of his (pre-papal) thoughts which are ultimately validated and not contradicted by what he says in *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE), *Spe Salvi* (SS) and *Caritas in Veritate* (CV).

Finally there is a need to include two of Benedict XVI's speeches: the Regensburg and Bundestag Addresses. Although they are speeches that were delivered during his term as pope, they still bear the deep imprints and insights of Ratzinger's vision of religion's role in the public (political life).

Having presented a survey of our scholar's works both as Joseph Ratzinger and Benedict XVI, we bear in mind that the shift in usage or mention from the former to the latter does not carry any essential difference in the unified thought this essay seeks to expose. Thus, it is categorically argued also that Ratzinger's position on religion's role in the public sphere specifically the Catholic tradition (of the Christian faith) has remained substantively unchanged from his early years as

the young Professor Ratzinger up to the height of his governance as the supreme pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church.

From Religion and Politics to Faith and Reason

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE), Ratzinger as Benedict XVI explains why the Church cannot replace the State in its duty to achieve and establish justice. He points out however that although building a just and civil social order cannot (and should not) be the Church's immediate responsibility, it does have an indirect duty to "purify reason" and "reawaken those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run."⁸

The citation (Church and State) is not without basis as it best expresses Ratzinger's position on how the Church should play its role in the greater scheme of things in secular society. This very canvass of his idea however is framed within his wider perspective of faith and reason. One can discern in Ratzinger's discussions on the relationship of faith and reason what he verily contends as each's proper limitations and functions in relation to the human person. One can comprehend from the former pope's writings that his understanding of the role of religion in society, i.e., of the Church in the world, has in the very dynamics of faith and reason the basic "microcosmic model" of the larger dynamics of the spiritual and secular institutions.

This is where Ratzinger's notion of religion or faith's role in public life differs from that of Rawls, Habermas, or Casanova. For while these thinkers, coming from the perspective of the social and political sciences, view religion as a social fact that basically forms part of the existing structures, Ratzinger understands the role of the Church (and thus by extension religion in general) in the public sphere as something that flows from nature itself, specifically human nature. Human persons are not just social or political animals; they are also "believing" beings. Faith is a part of man's existence. Here we cannot but quote what he said in an essay that commemorates his esteemed friend and theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, that the Church cannot be reduced into a "purely sociological quantity."⁹

In this light we should now understand why Ratzinger although in agreement with Jurgen Habermas on religion's (i.e. Church's) role

in a secular society, diverges from the latter in his conception of the nature and limitation of religious (specifically Christian) discourse. The theologian's description of the Church (i.e. religion/faith) as a purifier of reason suggests that its discourse is not of the same footing with secular reason. Faith is not a rational expression and religion is not another form of rational system. This does not mean that religion is irrational; no it is not. But just because it is not irrational does not mean that the Church's role in the public sphere must be accepted or at least paid attention to merely on the reductionist basis that it can speak of some reasonable arguments. Rather, the Church's faith has a distinctive role to play, one that can critique secular reason outside of its own limitations.

As it is conveyed, Ratzinger's contention is that the Church's role in the public sphere (as a community of faith) may be better understood when we accept that human reason has limitations and politics as a concrete action that flows from reason—also has its limitations.

The Limits of Reason and Politics

A prevailing theme in Ratzinger's writings is his critique of discourses that tend to absolutize the role and value of reason. This does not mean, once again, that he would prefer to advance dogmatism over rationalism but rather rationalism in its blondest form, that is, the claim that reason and reason alone has the final word on all things including the destiny of man—is precisely very problematic.

At this point we may foremost summarize five common points on reason that are identifiable in his basic writings:

1. Man is a being of reason but is at the same time a being of faith
2. Reason grows and is nourished in the soil of tradition, of human civilization that owes its origin in the spiritual and religious traditions
3. Reason plays an important role in the purification of faith just as reason should be purified by faith
4. There is a danger when faith is separated from reason

5. When reason is insulated from faith, spirituality and tradition it becomes merely functional and its fruits are positivism, historicism, relativism and other ideologies that are destructive to the foundations of human society.

From these five points that are identified to be characteristics of Ratzinger's notion of reason, we can discern that its overarching theme is the objectivity of Truth and the capacity of reason to know and understand this. This point is lucidly expounded in "Culture and Truth: Some Reflection on the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*."¹⁰ Using C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, Ratzinger at the onset of his reflection argues that the problem with us (people of the current age) is that we no longer ask for the truth. The modern attitude is wrapped in "false humility and false presumption" that does not recognize in the human person "the capacity for truth" and of dominating things including truth itself.¹¹

One can understand from our theologian that humanity may be fallen and confused but this does not mean that truth and reality are incomprehensible such that we end up incapable of living as a society bound by reason. To insist on the absence of truth is what he called in his 2005 pre-conclave homily as the dictatorship of relativism. The human person may be lost but this does not mean that there is no path to the truth. Reason has the capacity to seek and find the path to truth but on the condition that it would seek for it by asking the right questions about himself (as a human person) and his ultimate destiny. We are not "trapped in a hall of mirrors of interpretations" and we "can and must see a breakthrough to what is really true."¹²

Here Ratzinger differs from those philosophers and the theologians who claim that there is no truth. He traces the root of historicism, scientism, pragmatism, eclecticism and that kind of postmodernism that is devoid of earnestness in dialogue. These "isms" that have now been enthroned in the halls of academic scholarship are, from the viewpoint of Ratzinger, the sources of relativism which is the brewing crisis of the current age. This view is succinctly highlighted in his response to the lecture of Italian senate president Marcello Pera:

In recent years I find myself noting how the more relativism becomes the generally accepted way of thinking, the more it tends toward intolerance thereby becoming a new dogmatism. Political correctness . . . seeks to establish the domain of a single way of thinking and speaking. Its relativism creates the illusion that it has reached greater heights than the loftiest philosophical achievement of the past. It prescribes itself as the only way to think and speak – if that is, one wishes to stay in fashion.¹³

There is another kind of philosophy however which Ratzinger warns us of, and that is the naïve claim that only scientific rationality is the bearer of truth. He traces this view to the claim of positivism that it alone can offer the freedom the world needs. In his address to the German parliament (members of the Bundestag) he emphatically pointed out that:

[T]he positivist world view in general, is a most important dimension of human knowledge and capacity that we may in no way dispense with. But in and of itself it is not a sufficient culture corresponding to the full breadth of the human condition. Where positivist reason considers itself the only sufficient culture and banishes all other cultural realities to the status of subcultures, it diminishes man, indeed it threatens his humanity.¹⁴

Ratzinger's critique of positivism is a sustained theme in his writings. Already in 1991, he describes positivism as a view that easily unites with relativism.¹⁵ The thing with positivism is that it excludes faith from the reality of man. And anything that does not conform to its so-called "empirical language" is meaningless. Its height in the Enlightenment which sought to free man by way of reason, according to Ratzinger, makes rationality a matter of functionality. Positivism acknowledges the importance of reason but only to the extent that it is usable and tells us further which things and ideas can be exploited. Thus it has shaken humanity's "moral consciousness" and thereby reducing the good to what is calculable.¹⁶

That is why Ratzinger is notably critical of the Enlightenment philosophy and its heirs. His critical stance to the Enlightenment

promise and its vision of the triumph of reason at the expense of faith and religion is the very intellectual context from which his critique of Marxism, scientism, historicism and vulgar postmodernism all spring from. As he pointed out in an earlier work:

From as early as the time of Auguste Comte, all effort has gone into gaining a complete knowledge of man as a being governed by rules, to filling in all the blank spaces in the map of scientific world. The result is the emergence, in all its variations, of the fundamental concept of social science, which appears in the East as Marxist sociology and in the west as positivist sociology. In both cases this sociology proposes the “project of modernity.”¹⁷

For Ratzinger, the reification of these ideas evidence before us that human reason alone, positivist reason in particular, does not have the final word on all things. One can see in the German theologian’s position on positivism, a vehement opposition to its claim for methodological superiority and neutrality. He argues that positivism, undeniably, is a determined cultural situation that grew in the modern West. Thus it has self-limitations; it is not neutral. Given this, it cannot be the voice of a reason with universal validity.¹⁸

In this light, science and technology cannot claim also to have the final word on man. Their contributions are undeniable but humanity, coming from Ratzinger, should be aware with a great deal of caution of the possible destruction that unbridled appeal to scientific authority (alone) may bring. When naively conceived, science ends up in “scientism” and disregards the importance of other questions such as truth, freedom and happiness. In his own words: “Science in the narrower sense of the term refers to the realm of the necessary, which can be reduced to the strict rules and leads in this way to objectively verifiable certainty. But this means that science, so understood, cannot deal with the realm of what is free, that is, with the genuinely human dimension of man and his social bonds.”¹⁹

Reason grows and is nourished in the soil of tradition, of human civilization that owes its origin in the spiritual and religious traditions. Reason, therefore, whether philosophical or scientific, cannot be the

only basis for the humanization of man. While reason is important for man's enlightenment but only and insofar as it is open to the profound and fundamental questions in life. The moment reason excludes fundamental philosophical questions merely because they are not measurable or because they do not carry any utilitarian value, then it would end tyrannizing those who cannot speak in its terms. Thus, while the statement "the sleep of reason produces nightmares" is valid but then this goes with a caution that reason, though it may not be asleep, but when devoid of compassion and sensitivity to the subjective areas of human life may create real horrors and monsters that can obliterate the treasured values of a civilization.²⁰

Thus, in relation to religion especially the Christian faith, the bottom line of Ratzinger's argument is that although reason plays an important role in the purification of faith nevertheless reason too should be purified by faith. When reason is insulated from faith, spirituality, and tradition it becomes merely functional and its fruits are positivism, historicism, relativism, scientism and other ideologies that are destructive to the foundations of human society.

The Dialogic of Faith and Reason

In his discussion with Jurgen Habermas, then as the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Ratzinger admitted that reason has a significant role to play in the formulation of law. The highlight of the reply, however, found in the conclusion of his essay, is the reminder that reason must be warned of its proper limits otherwise it would become destructive.²¹ Precisely, man is a being of reason but is at the same time a being of faith. Perhaps this is the premise of all premises in Ratzinger's discussion on reason. These two characteristics of man are united in the reality that he is a being who seeks Truth.

In his controversial Regensburg Address, then (as) Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger spoke of faith as "born of the soul, not the body." He continued that "[w]hoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats. To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death."²² Setting aside the controversial

reactions to his message as well as its unfavorable reception, the former pope actually would like to convey that genuine reason goes with compassion. And that the reason why violence is employed even by God-believing people is largely because of convictions that have become blinded thus ending up in unreasonableness.

So that while it is explained above that the naïve conception of reason as positivism and vulgar relativism are dangerous, yet equally dangerous is a faith turned mere conviction that ends up as an ideology. The trademark of genuine reason is in its capacity to be open to faith but at the same time faith here is not really understood as anything irrational but in fact as humanizing expression. The believer of God is not unreasonable because God himself allows us to live a life that is reasonably just. To rephrase the words of Ratzinger himself, not to act with reason is contrary to God's nature because God himself is "logos."²³

Church and State: Faith and Reason Writ Large

One can now understand why Ratzinger, working within the framework of faith and reason, believes in the indispensable role of religion in society and in its concrete political structure, the State. Just as man cannot live merely on the basis of reason, humanity too cannot just continue thriving if it is to form or create a truly just society without a community of faith. A social-political and even economic system that seeks to deliberately exclude religion would end up watering down its own foundations.

The fundamental objection to this of course is the very fact that democracies have become increasingly emphatic on the secularization of society. Inspired by the influences of the Enlightenment and positivism, politics has been envisioned as one that should be free from the control albeit the contributions of religion. But precisely Ratzinger's point is: has there been any moment in human history wherein society truly and absolutely became "secular"? Absolutely – in the very sense that it has completely succeeded in expunging its religious roots?

The immediate answer to the last question is obviously no. We shall elaborate the matter in the next section however (i.e. Purifier of Reason). At this point let us turn our attention to the implication of

the foregoing discussion to the question concerning religion's role in the public sphere.

In the specific case of the State as a political entity, Ratzinger does acknowledge its role and irreplaceable function to build a just and humane society. Coming from his Augustinian orientation the former pope has in fact defended the State's *raison d'être*.²⁴ Citing Augustine, he argues that "the just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics."²⁵ Those who are familiar with Augustine know very well what the Church father said in his *The City of God*, a State which is not governed according to justice is not different from robbery.²⁶ Created ultimately for the said purpose, justice is "both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics."²⁷ On the basis of the State's fundamental criterion of achievement, we can say further that such a *locus politicos* has the proper function not just of building structures and creating systems merely on the pretext of human advancement. "Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life."²⁸

The state's instrument of justice is none other than Law as it is the expression of man's reason. Here Ratzinger thinks along the line St. Thomas Aquinas who, also coming from Aristotle, understands law as an ordinance of reason. But then and again he is not referring to the naïve conception of reason in the form of positivism. Neither is this reason merely the product of consensus (as Habermas would claim). Apparently, he comes from the Christian theological orientation that "law is the harmony of subjective and objective reason" which presupposes "the creative reason of God."²⁹

At this junction it is important to emphasize once more Ratzinger's respect for the State's proper task of establishing justice through law. A fair reading of his works would reveal that he has not proposed the reinstatement (of any sort) of the Church's political power. He believes however even with this important and irreplaceable task of the State it cannot claim nonetheless to be the terminal of humanity's hopes and longings, so that even if justice should be humanity's achievement in the temporal sphere, it cannot be a matter of human effort alone. The State is not (and cannot be) the end-all and be-all of humanity because justice alone is not enough in any aspect of human reality. The State therefore is not justified

merely on its own basis. Ratzinger's conception of the authority of the State, i.e., of its sovereignty is different from that of Carl Schmitt who believes that the sovereignty of the State is the secularization of God's sovereignty.³⁰

This does not mean that justice is not important; it is just that justice is not only "not enough" but also unachievable without the other necessary virtues. According to one commentator of Ratzinger, "[j]ustice cannot be achieved in a society simply by changing the structures of society... It is, rather, the temporary result of continued imperfect efforts by society's members."³¹ The view that the political sphere has the propensity to fall short of its task is not new to our thinker. In 1988 he wrote in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* what he believed to be the limitation of the State's proper function. The context of his statement is that there must be a separation of the Church and State and one can reasonably understand it in the light of the limitation of each institution's task, thus:

At the same time it must be said that it is precisely this separation of the authority of the state and sacral authority, the new dualism that this contains, that represents the origin and the permanent foundation of the western idea of freedom. From now on there were two societies related to each other but not identical with each other, neither of which had this character of totality. The state is no longer itself the bearer of a religious authority that reaches into the ultimate depths of conscience, but for its moral basis refers beyond itself to another community. This community in its turn, the Church, understands itself as a final moral authority which however depends on voluntary adherence and is entitled only to spiritual but not to civil penalties, precisely because it does not have the status the state has of being accepted by all as something given in advance.³²

What Ratzinger essentially contends is much deeper and that is the temporal sphere, and the political dimension in particular, is finite and cannot in any way offer the most profound longings of man such as justice and peace. This contention is further articulated in his

second encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*—on Christian hope wherein he reminds his reader of the distinctiveness of the Christian paradigm particularly its eschatological vision of a life hereafter. Yet he does not merely argue in the same writing for a sheer belief that borders fanaticism. Instead, he points out that human society, for all its promises and attempts, has never and can never offer the hope which only the creator can give. Practically, as Ratzinger suggests, modernity needs self-critique and this means “dialogue with Christianity and its concept of hope.”³³ He further added (in the same paragraph) that we must ask ourselves “what does ‘progress’ really mean; what does it promise and what does it not promise?”³⁴

As he points out in *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* it is not just the State or the political sphere which the pope describes as wanting but secular society as a whole. Speaking about the condition of Europe in contemporary time, he believes that the gravest danger of the present moment is the imbalance between technological possibilities and moral energy.³⁵ To speak about justice only as a matter of new moralism [or secular moralism if I may call it] is not only lacking but dangerous. The danger comes from the fact that it could be lost in the mazes of partisanship and individualism. “For what does justice mean? Who defines it? What promotes peace?”³⁶ These are questions Ratzinger asks—basically pushing the issue that the State–Society–the Secular sphere cannot do away with the Church–Religion–Faith.

We thus understand at this junction why Ratzinger believes that the vision for an absolutely secular State that does not just prohibit but antagonizes the participation of religion (the Christian faith or the Church for that matter) may be attractive to those who wish for a life that is free from constraint but is nonetheless threatening and eventually destructive. This stand, he has consistently repeated, is better articulated in his 1991 book *A Turning Point for Europe*, which we may quote in brief at this juncture:

Only this do we call the ‘justice’ that constitutes the state. It includes the Creator and the creation as its points of orientation. This means that a state that is in principle agnostic vis-à-vis God and constructs justice

only on the basis of majority opinions inherently sinks down to the level of the robber band.³⁷

Purifier of Reason: More than Just a Public Religion

As pointed out earlier on, Ratzinger is not the only one who sees the importance or value of religion in the public sphere. Thinkers such as Casanova, Habermas and Taylor are only a few among some others who do not agree that a secular state should shun or antagonize faith-based discourse. The German theologian however understands the role of Christian faith, the Church in particular, as something more than just [a] sociological [quantity]. Accordingly, it is a purifier of reason; a community whose main task is to renew the moral energies of human communities.

Faith must purify reason because reason too has the tendency of falling short in its role to clarify for humanity the truths it is looking for. And it is faith that must purify reason because reason cannot mirror by itself. If we go by Habermas' proposal, for example, and apply communicative action, we need an ideal speech situation. But in the real world, if one would argue with Ratzinger, where is this ideal speech situation? On the contrary, religious traditions, despite their numerous differences, are one in telling us that our faith in someone, a force greater than us, allows us to see our limitations. In the end we cannot but come to a conclusion that for reason to be truly at the service of humanity it must, above all, allow itself to be informed and be guided by faith. A State, no matter how secular it would like to become, cannot absolutely expunge its religious origins that are found in its tradition.

This is where Ratzinger differs from Habermas and Casanova. He sees religion beyond its reduction to public engagement. If the Church for example is merely a public religion, then it is nothing different from a Non-government Organization (NGO) or a globally competitive Non-state Actor (NSA). Apparently, however, many see and insist that this is how religions must be viewed and in particular the Catholic Church and other Christian churches. And this is where Ratzinger's distinctive view comes in. If the Church is like any of the generic types of entities mentioned, then it betrays its own identity and history and thereby loses its reason to purify politics. From

Ratzinger's point of view, the reason why faith can purify reason is because it is not reason. If faith is reason, then it directs us to seek those things which reason would find impossible to find and understand even if it could find them.

Faith's purification of reason thus presupposes not only the distinctiveness of the former from the latter but also in the latter's limitations. Reason is a means to know the truth but it is not the truth. Faith too allows us to find the truth not in terms of correspondence or adequation but the truth about ourselves as finite beings-in-the-world. And for this reason, religion, specifically the Christian faith, should purify the reason of the State because left alone by itself justice would end up confused with majoritarian interest and economic advantage. That is why although the State should be the primary actor in the attainment of justice, this does not mean that it may just be allowed and tolerated to pursue its political agenda when policies are crafted on the bases of selfish motives.

We may now understand what DCE 28a means when it says:

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.

Coming from Augustine, Ratzinger does not consider the Church as a mere human institution, i.e., a social construction or a political organization standing on the basis of nationalist loyalties or juridical obligations. Secondly, the Church's role in political life must be understood in the light of its being a community of believers. To interpret the matter further, the pope's notion of State and Church dynamics is not a matter of State and Civil Society dynamics. His understanding in no way reduces the Church to a civil society or a pressure group as it is a community that is ontologically distinct from the world, any State for that matter.

Limitation of the Church's role in the achievement of Justice

In 28b of DCE Ratzinger points out that “no ordering of the State [can be] so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love . . . There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help.” Then, he underscores the role of lay people who as citizens of the State have the direct duty to take part in public life in their personal capacity.³⁸

Practically, the first statement (28b) is another way of saying that the temporal world is not all that it “can be”. Societies can always struggle for justice (and so are States) but “if ever” they can achieve one, it is not absolute enough so as to eliminate all the wanting and longings of humanity. Genuine justice where charity is no longer needed is, from human viewpoint, a utopia. Whatever is this-worldly can never be the end-in-itself, it could only be the approximation or the best “possible” human achievement.

This is where the purification of the State's reason by faith becomes relevant. Precisely because humanity's longing for justice and peace, States and societies can resort to ideologies that may instead cause or create social pathologies. This is a position he articulated earlier in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, wherein he gave a stern caution on those who want to reduce all forms of human relations to mere political function: “the state is not the totality.”³⁹

In *Spe Salvi*, the pope specifically underscores Marxism as a kind of modern ideology that seeks to offer hope which nevertheless eventually failed:

Together with the victory of the revolution, though, Marx's fundamental error also became evident. He showed precisely how to overthrow the existing order, but he did not say how matters should proceed thereafter.⁴⁰

So while the Church does not have the ordinary function of arranging institutions let alone running them all for an assured social justice and peace, She does have the competence to teach and correct the ideologies of the State that may lend to the formation and emergence of totalitarianism in different forms. Purification of reason then means teaching the truth, as he says in *Caritas in Veritate*: [t]ruth needs to be sought, found and expressed within the “economy” of

charity, but charity in turn needs to be understood, confirmed and practiced in the light of truth.⁴¹

The foregoing points unavoidably bring us to Ratzinger's notion of the Church as a community of "charity". Charity for him however is not understood in minimalist or philanthropic terms. In DCE, he makes a careful distinction between love as "agape" and "eros" and cautions his readers of possible distorted interpretations (of charity).⁴² As he says in CV, "I am aware of the ways in which charity has been and continues to be misconstrued and emptied of meaning, which the consequent risk of being misinterpreted, detached from ethical living and, in any event, undervalued. In the social, juridical, cultural, political and economic fields—the contexts, in other words, that are most exposed to this danger—it is easily dismissed as irrelevant for interpreting and giving direction to moral responsibility."⁴³

Charity which is not just any "emotionalism" serves the purpose of balancing justice. One can understand Ratzinger in this regard as a matter of parallelism his notion of the complementarity of "charity and justice" with that of the "Church and State." The Church purifies the reason of the State just as in the level of virtues Charity tempers justice. In the greater scheme of things, therefore, religion or communities of faith play an indispensable role in the public sphere as sources of moral energies or as the shapers of social conscience.

For the above reason, Ratzinger does not subscribe to the conviction that the Church's role (any religion at that) is to emancipate societies by way of revolution or violence. He is very clear on this in his reflections on the biblical aspects of faith and politics. In this reflection the former pope notably highlights the early Christians' respect for the (Roman) State despite its evil political policies. He said, reflecting further, that the persecuted Christians built rather than destroyed the state. In his own words:

The Christian always supports the state, in this sense: he does the positive, the good things that hold the states together. He has no fear that he will thereby favor the power of the wicked, but he is convinced that evil can be dismantled and the power of evil and of evil men can be diminished only by strengthening what is good.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The problem of religion's role in society is one that has captured the attention not only of philosophers and theologians but also of sociologists, political scientists, jurists and economists among other scholars. Most recently, in the Philippines, the Reproductive Health Law (which seeks to provide an expanded policy-based assistance to maternal health needs) has just been declared "not unconstitutional" by the country's Supreme Court. Prior to this, the Philippine bishops and pro-life Catholics have rallied strong enough their antagonism against the law. In the process, opinions have been made against (what some journalists or observers call) "religious interference" in politics or policymaking. For some of these people, religious ideas do not have any place in the discussion of a legislative measure and any matter of politics related to law or policy. On the other hand, however, the other extreme, are those anti-RH actors or ideologues who resort to tactics that almost seek to question the legitimacy of state power.

Ratzinger's view on how religion should compose itself in the public sphere, in this case the Church, provides the middle-ground. His view fairly reminds us of the States irreplaceable role, which must ultimately be respected. Nonetheless he also cautions all those who argue for a religion-less or an anti-religious public sphere, with a sterner warning of its possible consequences to society's moral foundations. Apparently, we don't hear or read from the former pope any concrete blueprint for social action on how Church and State relations may be arranged in the actual institutional terms. This of course is outside the scope of his concern. At the end of the day, it is really prudence that stands in between a Church that is always tempted to regain its political influence or power vis-à-vis a State that is also tempted to wield absolute power that is free from any moral conscientization.

More importantly, however, Ratzinger's thought on the role of religion in the public sphere poses a challenge, one which has been consistently presented in his writings. On what foundation does society stand, its political institutions, laws and above all its future?

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² Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

³ Jurgen Habermas, "The Political: the Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology" in Judith Butler, Jurgen Habermas and others, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia, 2011), 26.

⁴ John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" *University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (Summer 1997): 783.

⁵ The terms religion, Church, and faith may be used interchangeably in this work. Unless specified, however, the three terms may be used in this essay with reference to the Christian faith (i.e., Christianity as a religion) particularly Catholicism. As is the case of our author who, sometimes, uses the term religion but actually with reference to Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. E.g. in his essay "That which Holds the World Together: the Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State" (2005) he puts forward the questions about "religion as a healing or saving force" nonetheless with extensive usage of the Christian faith, i.e., Catholicism as an example. See Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. F. Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), pp. 64ff. Also cf. *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE) 28a.

⁶ In the article "Purifier of Reason or Public Religion? A Critical Analysis of Ratzinger's Political Thought vis-à-vis Casanova's Notion of Public Religion" *PHAVISMINDA Journal* 12 (2013): 73-93, I pointed out the limitation of the former pope's perspective in the light of sociological thinking. Consistent with my contention expressed in other works, I contend that theological or faith-based discourse must be subject to the critique of the social sciences. Working within this framework, it is argued in the same essay that Ratzinger's view on Church and State cannot be used as "an absolute

universal model to analyze” Church and State relations and thus of the role of religion in the public sphere. Critiquing his notion of the Church as a “purifier of reason” the essay, while appreciating the normative value of the pope’s, also points out its limitations. This current essay does not seek to undo or contradict any of those earlier positions. Rather, I only propose a more nuanced reading of Ratzinger by showing the other side of the coin, with much focus on the contexts of his discourse. Also cf. R. Abellanos, “From Justice to Charity: the CBCP and Philippine Politics after *Deus Caritas Est*” *TALAD* 5 (no. 2): 16-31; R. Abellanos, “Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: the Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines” *Philippine Sociological Review* 61 (no. 1): 175-205.

⁷ For concrete examples on papal encyclicals written or prepared by writers other than the pope, see Aloysius L. Cartagenas, “The Interpretation of the Catholic Social Teaching (Last of Three Parts: the Communicative Conditions of the Tradition)” *Talad* 3 (no. 2): 114-150.

⁸ DCE 29

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Communio: a Program” *Communio* 18 (Fall): 436-449.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, “Culture and Truth” *The Essential Benedict XVI*, 367.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 368. For further discussions on truth, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 231-258.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: the West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic, 2006), 128. Already in his 1991 work, *A Turning Point for Europe?* Ratzinger highlighted the dangers of relativism, thus: “if truth is inaccessible... then there is no distinction between right and wrong, no distinction between rightful and wrongful power, but only the pressure of the momentarily stronger group, the supremacy of the majority.” See J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe*, 57.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, “Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI, Reichstag Building Berlin (22 September 2011),” [essay online]; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html.

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe*, 108.

¹⁶ Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, 30 - 31.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe*, 91. Cf. his much earlier work, "Theology and Church Politics" in *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1987), pp. 150-151. "The farther the Enlightenment advanced historically, the more it fell into the habit of narrowing the concept of reason: Reason is what is reproducible. Reason is positivistic. Thus it restricts itself to what can be demonstrated over and over experimentally; but the consequence of this is that it abandons its own question "What is it?" and replaces it with the pragmatic question "How does it function?"

¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, 41. In the same work he points out that "Above all, however, we must affirm that this Enlightenment philosophy, with its related culture, is incomplete. It consciously cuts off its own historical roots, depriving itself of the powerful sources from which it sprang. It detaches itself from what we might call the basic memory of mankind, without which reason loses its orientation..." (41).

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?*, 92.

²⁰ See for example what he says in an essay in 1986: "A scientific approach that believes itself capable of managing without an ethos misunderstands the reality of man. Therefore it is not scientific." Joseph Ratzinger, "Church and Economy: Responsibility for the Future of the World Economy" *Communio International Catholic Review* 13 (Fall, 1986), 204.

²¹ Habermas and Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, 78. In an earlier part of the same paragraph, Ratzinger speaks of the "hubris of reason that is no less dangerous."

²² Benedict XVI, 2006. "Faith, Reason and the University" (the *Regensburg Address*), [Essay online]; available online from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ St. Augustine admits the autonomous value of the State as an agency of justice, temporary as it may be. According to this great African Father in *The City of God* XIX.17: "Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life, and makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven; for this alone can be truly

called and esteemed the peace of the reasonable creatures, consisting as it does in the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and of one another in God.” Cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. M. Dods, DD (NY: Random House, 2000), 696-697.

²⁵ DCE 28a

²⁶ This line was cited again in his Bundestag Address titled “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law” [essay online]; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html; 20 May 2012.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapter on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 38. Schmitt argues that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God because the omnipotent lawgiver, but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.

³¹ D. Vincent Twomey SVD, “Introduction” in Thornton and S. Varenne, *The Essential Benedict XVI*, xxxv.

³² “Theology and the Church’s Political Stance” in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (NY: Crossroad, 1988) [book online]; available from <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig6/ratzinger2.html>.

³³ SS, 22

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Culture*, 27.

³⁶ Ibid., 28.

³⁷ Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?*, 137.

³⁸ DCE 29.

³⁹ Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 144.

⁴⁰ SS 21.

⁴¹ CV 2.

⁴² DCE 3.

⁴³ CV 2.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 146-147.