

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Pope Benedict Wasn't Conservative. He Was Something Much More Surprising.

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“The words of a dead man,” W.H. Auden wrote in his elegy for a fellow poet, “are modified in the guts of the living.” In the case of Pope Benedict XVI, whose requiem Mass was celebrated on Thursday, this process of transformation began long before his death.

During the almost quarter-century in which Joseph Ratzinger served as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he carried on something of a good cop-bad cop routine with Pope John Paul II. Whereas John Paul’s sunny disposition and glad-handing stadium tours eventually won him the affection of nearly everyone not named Sinead O’Connor, Cardinal Ratzinger was seen by critics (and even some admirers) as a holdover from the period before the Second Vatican Council. His was an older, more aloof style of churchmanship that seemed ultraconservative, detached, forbidding, skeptical of emotion, indifferent to the experience of the laity and the lower clergy alike, much less to those of non-Catholics. His enemies called him “God’s Rottweiler.”

Having spent the last week reading again through the authorized biography by Peter Seewald and revisiting his own published writings, I find that Benedict the theologian bears almost no resemblance to popular caricatures. They are no more representative of the aging pope emeritus who resigned his office in 2013 than they are of the young romantic theology professor who wrote lyrically of the promise of postwar Bonn (“a celebration of first love”) and of his early years in Rome (“On my lemon tree on the terrace a ripe lemon is hanging for the second time, and many blossoms are promising a rich harvest”). The real Benedict is less straightforwardly conservative than many claim him to have been, an unclassifiable thinker whose legacy has more in common with that of Soren Kierkegaard or John Henry Newman or G.K. Chesterton — those idiosyncratic but somehow essential figures in the modern history of Western Christianity who, in translating fundamental questions about the nature of the universe into the language of their own era, spoke for all time.

Perhaps the best example of the disconnect between Benedict as he functions in the popular imagination and his actual views is his attitude toward the traditional Latin Mass. As one of the 100,000 or so Catholics in this country who attend the old Mass each week, I will always be grateful to him for allowing for its widespread celebration despite the promulgation of a new, vernacular liturgy.

But it would be absurd to suggest that he was some kind of traditionalist. To the end of his days he did not question the significance of the Second Vatican

Council, out of which the liturgical reforms and other changes in Catholic discipline emerged, or even doubt its prudence. While Benedict felt that celebrations of the new Mass were frequently unedifying and even banal and argued that liturgical change should be slow and organic, his reasons were fundamentally different from those of critics who opposed change for its own sake. For Benedict, one great failure of the new Mass as it is typically celebrated was its neglect of what he called the “cosmic” dimension of the liturgy — a groovy-sounding concept drawn from the writings of the Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, which were at one time condemned as heretical.

Benedict himself was considered suspect in the 1960s, by no less an authority than Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, the leader of the anti-progressive faction at the Second Vatican Council and the last cardinal to oversee the fabled [Index of Prohibited Books](#). For Ottaviani and his allies, part of the problem was the language of the new theology. In the past, church councils had issued long series of condemned propositions that the Catholic faithful must abjure under penalty of excommunication; the style of these announcements was technical and precise, leaving no room for ambiguity about what must be believed. By contrast the documents of Vatican II contain little — indeed, arguably no — dogmatic material, and in place of the precise terminology derived from Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas they substitute phenomenological jargon typical of midcentury continental philosophy.

The young Ratzinger was very much at home in this new world, one in which [Edmund Husserl](#) and Jean-Paul Sartre were treated as authorities on the same level as the early church fathers, and grandmotherly devotions centered on the Virgin Mary (such as the [Miraculous Medal](#) and the [brown scapular](#)) were regarded as embarrassments. In the decades to come, his orientation and interests did not shift; his thought would remain, in the words of Father Aidan Nichols, “alien to the philosophical and theological tradition which has provided the customary idiom” of the church before the 1960s.

This is why for many of his younger admirers today, those for whom Benedict is simply the pope who liberalized the old Mass, his published works can be discomfiting. These books are full of observations that on first glance seem astonishing, even scandalous — for example, his claim that “the real heart of faith in resurrection does not consist at all in the idea of the restoration of bodies, to which we have reduced it in our thinking,” which seems to cast

doubt on the idea that the resurrection of the dead at the end of time will be a literal, corporeal phenomenon.

For conservative Catholics of my generation, the existence of hell as a place of eternal torment is about as controversial as the existence of gravity. Yet in his “Introduction to Christianity” (widely considered his rebuke to the revolutionary spirit of 1968, the year in which it was published) the future pope describes hell as “real, total loneliness and dreadfulness,” a willed state beyond the reach of love, a definition he arrives at by way of Hermann Hesse. In “Eschatology,” he writes, “No quibbling helps here,” before admitting that hell “has a firm place in the teachings of Jesus.” Not exactly fire and brimstone.

It is precisely because Benedict did not feel at ease in the era right before the reforms swept through — an era that some traditionalists regard as a lost Golden Age — that he is relevant today. For Father Ratzinger, writing in 1958, the church on the eve of the Second Vatican Council was a “church of pagans, who still call themselves Christians,” a church exhausted by empty formalism. The Scholastic theology that had emerged out of the Middle Ages was unsuited to the task of bringing the most fundamental questions faced by our species — not only whether God exists but why matter does; the possibility of a coherent account of the good in ethics and politics; the role of reason in public life — to a coming generation that would not be grounded in basic Christian assumptions about the world.

This is why it seems to me that Benedict’s greatest legacy is the one that he has bequeathed — unasked for, needless to say — to nonbelievers. In 2011 he devoted an unusually large portion of his remarks at the World Day of Prayer for Peace not to his fellow Christians or even to members of other religions but to agnostics, who are “seeking the truth,” he said, “the true God, whose image is frequently concealed in the religions because of the ways in which they are often practiced.” For Benedict the “struggling and questioning” of agnostics was an admirable posture, a radical openness that ought to motivate believers “to purify their faith, so that God, the true God, becomes accessible.”

When asked by irreligious friends to recommend a book about God, I do not suggest a work of philosophy or any of the famous arguments meant to prove God’s existence but a slim volume of talks given by Cardinal Ratzinger on the Book of Genesis in the 1980s. In these pages the cardinal assumes that his readers are familiar not only with modern scientific accounts of the origins of the universe and humanity but also with the idea that the Bible has a great

deal in common with other ancient Near Eastern myths about the creation of the world.

Instead of denying the similarities, he acknowledges them, but he also draws our attention to the crucial differences. In the “foreboding picture” of the Babylonian account, the “world is a dragon’s body, and human beings have dragon’s blood in them” and the fundamental chaos at the heart of creation can be tamed only by the dictatorial representative of a cruel god. In Genesis, an omnibenevolent being recognizes the inherent goodness of the world that he has created.

For Benedict, this is the dazzling possibility that believers must share with their fellows: that all of us are the inheritors not of an ancient chaos but of something that despite the brokenness in our midst is fundamentally and recognizably good, a good we are invited to share for all eternity with a being who does not merely love but who is love itself.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/opinion/pope-benedict-legacy.html>