

Pope Benedict XVI and Modernism—an assessment

by James Stevens Curl



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The death of Joseph Maria Aloisius Ratzinger (1927-2022), who reigned as Pope Benedict XVI from 2005 until 2013, triggered various sobering thoughts in these benighted times. A diligent scholar, with a fine mind, he was unusual: a Pope of *Æsthetics*, a lover of Bach and Mozart, he reminded an increasingly ugly and debased world that there is such a thing as *beauty*, a term which Modernism denies has any validity, because relativism has devalued it, even questioned its very existence. He connected the Church with Art, championed Latin and Tradition, and valued the Tridentine Mass. Given that Southern Germany possesses a wealth of delicious Baroque and Rococo churches, the architectural parallels of the music of Bach and Mozart, it is hardly surprising that Ratzinger responded to their astonishing, joyous, exquisite beauty.

It is significant that Ratzinger's 1953 Dissertation was on St Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Doctor of the Church, in whom intellectual brilliance, ardent temperament, and mystical insights combined to form a personality of extraordinary qualities. As a bishop, Augustine upheld order in times of great political strife as the Roman Empire disintegrated: indeed, at the time of his death, the Vandals were at the gates of Hippo itself. Augustine himself had been influenced by Trier-born Ambrose (339-97), bishop of Milan, who encouraged monasticism, and is also regarded as a Doctor of the Church. The curious state of the Europe of today suggests certain parallels with the fifth-century disaster that overcame Rome.

When Ratzinger was elected Pope, he chose his papal name because of admiration for two earlier Benedicts. The first was Giacomo della Chiesa (1854-1922), who reigned as Pope Benedict XV from 1914 until his death, and so was pontiff during the catastrophe of the Great War, and in fact proposed a seven-point peace-plan to the belligerents that was based on justice (this was ignored, of course), and after 1918 pleaded for international reconciliation in his *Pacem Dei munus* of 23 May 1920, having regarded the peace settlement of 1919 as a vengeful *Diktat*. Such was his reputation as a peacemaker that even the Turks recognised him as the benefactor of all peoples irrespective of nationality or religion. The second was St Benedict of Nursia (c.480-c.550), Doctor of the Church, author of the Rule which bears his name, Patriarch of Western monasticism, and Patron of Europe. His Rule incorporated much monastic teaching from St Basil the Great (c.330-79), who was steeped in Classical learning and advocated the integration of all that was best in secular culture in his view of a healthy, Catholic, inclusive Christian outlook, and who was the principal monastic legislator of the East. Indeed nearly all the monks and nuns of the Greek Church follow Basil's Rule, which survives in *Regulæ fusius tractatæ* and *Regulæ brevius tractatæ*. St Benedict recognised in his own Rule the influence of 'our Holy Father

Basil', but his philosophy was also guided by the writings of Cassian (c.360-433), notably the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, through which aspects of Egyptian monasticism were introduced throughout mediæval Europe. St Benedict's achievement was to create a guide for a monastic way of life that was orderly, practical, and complete: through the favours granted to the Rule by emperors, kings, and others in power, it was the most important monastic code of the early Middle Ages in Western Europe, and Benedictine monasteries became centres of learning, where not only the great legacy from the Classical past was kept alive, but the needs of society in terms of medicine, agriculture, architecture, education, and hospitality were catered for. The Benedictines probably rose to prominence through imperial decrees, not least through the influence of St Boniface (c.675-754), the English-born apostle of Frisia and Germany, archbishop of Mainz, who had a massive impact on the history of Europe, not only through alliances made between popes and emperors, but through the educational and literary contributions of his monasteries. In the context of recent history, and the fractured relationship between the Atlantic Archipelago and the European Continent, it would be salutary if politicians and commentators were to read Boniface's letter to his fellow-countrymen, asking for their prayers and help in the conversion of those who were 'of one blood and bone with you', referring to the European Saxons. St Boniface's body lies in the great cathedral-church at Fulda in Germany, in which country, and in The Netherlands, the Saint is widely venerated.

Pope Benedict's early life, from a relatively humble Bavarian background, was spent during the dark days of National Socialist Germany, and much was made of that in the public prints when he rose to prominence, indicative of a total failure to understand that it was *compulsory* for youngsters to join the Hitler Youth, despite the fact that his parents were opposed to Naziism. One of Ratzinger's cousins, who had Down's Syndrome, was murdered in 1941 as part of the *Aktion T4* euthanasia programme, which Clemens August, Graf von Galen (1878-1946), bishop of Münster from 1933, had denounced in a series of sermons in which he also condemned inhumanity, persecution, cruelty, and injustice, among much else. Von Galen had helped to draft the anti-Nazi papal encyclical of 1937, *Mit brennender Sorge*, ordered by Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti (1857-1939), who reigned as Pope Pius XI from 1922. During the 1939-45 war, von Galen said that Germany was being destroyed more by negative forces *within* the nation than by the ferocious British and American attacks on her from the air. His fine sense of what was just was demonstrated after the war, when he also deplored the behaviour of the Allied forces occupying Germany, especially the looting, raping, and abusive lawlessness all-too prevalent in some areas. In 2005 von Galen was beatified by Benedict XVI. Irresponsible reporters gleefully revealed that Ratzinger had also been drafted into the German armed forces during the war (again, there was no option in the matter, and one wonders how self-righteous scribblers would behave in a totalitarian terror-State): they called him 'the Panzer Cardinal', which hurt him deeply, given that he had deserted in 1945 and made his way back to his home in Bavaria. The Nazi takeover of the *Lutheran* Church provides a frightening example of what can happen when a Church is tied to the State, and it is worth considering that Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), who warned against the glorification of the *Führer* as idolatry, and who opposed Naziism (paying for that with his life) and all that it stood for, came to the conclusion that Christianity would survive in the form of small monastic or semi-monastic communities of faithful disciples.

In considering Benedict XVI, several historical parallels are suggested. When Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti (1792-1878) was elected (1846) as Pope Pius IX, he was perceived as a liberal, moderate progressive, sympathising emotionally with Italian national aspirations, but following economic breakdown, the murder of his prime minister in 1848, and the proclamation of a Roman republic (1849), *Pio Nono's* liberal stance was discarded. A paternalistic régime was established in the Papal States which was opposed to nationalist hopes, so this alienated educated opinion, and by 1860 all the papal dominions, with the exception of Rome and its immediate hinterland, were annexed to the new kingdom of Italy, which Pius regarded as having usurped his temporal territories, especially after Rome itself was incorporated into the Italian State in 1870. The reign of *Pio Nono* saw increasing centralisation of

authority (the pontiff was the first to identify himself wholeheartedly with Ultramontanism); the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchies in England (1850) and The Netherlands (1853); the definition of the Immaculate Conception of the BVM (1854); the declaration of Papal Infallibility in matters of faith and morals (1870); and denunciations of the ‘principal errors’ of the times (including the demand that the Pope should reconcile himself to, or agree with, progress, moral relativism, liberalism, secularism, modernism, pantheism, materialism, atheism, and other fashionable stances).

It was therefore fascinating to trace a similar change of direction in Ratzinger’s position following the upheavals of 1968-9. Before then, his had been liberal, perhaps even hearkening to some of the siren voices of modernity, but the destructive anarchy, mob-violence, and vandalism so horrifyingly evident, which led to the murderous criminality of the German Baader-Meinhof Group (*aka* Red Army Faction), backed, as it turned out, by East Germany (ludicrously mis-named the German Democratic Republic), drove him to adopt a conservative-traditionalist position, recognising that relativism’s denial of objective truth and moral values was actually the central problem of the times. Relativism recognises nothing as definitive, and its ultimate authority is only the self, with its own limitations and desires: under the guise of ‘freedom’ it becomes a prison for each individual, separating people from each other, and locking each person into his or her ego alone. He was clear that absolutising what is not absolute, but relative, leads to totalitarianism, and, given his own experience of having lived in a totalitarian, godless State when young, he proclaimed that Christianity is the religion of the *Logos*, religion according to creative reason.

Another pontiff, who lived under the tyranny of Communism in Poland, Karol Józef Wojtyła (1920-2005), and reigned as John Paul II from 1978, was profoundly influenced by German theologians and philosophers, notably the German-Jewish Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl (1859-1938) and his investigations into Phenomenology. That the Polish pope was close to his German successor is well attested, for the two men shared much in the way of outlook, but Ratzinger especially seems to have been influenced by the Swiss, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88), the one major theologian to reflect in depth on the question of *beauty* and *aesthetics*. Both popes were concerned with the investigations into John Henry Newman (1801-90—beatified 2010, canonised 2019), and again Newman was profoundly worried by liberal individualism and where it would lead when divorced from the secure foundation of authoritative teaching. The Englishman argued for the encouragement of *liberal education within a confessional religious context*, and for intellectual training of the *whole mind*, rather than wallowing in narrow specialisms which ignored so much of value, something that is painfully obvious in what passes as ‘education’ today.

Benedict XVI was very interested in, and sympathetic to, the problems the religious face, particularly in England: he identified the contemporary economic system as displaying the effects of sin through its excessive adulation of consumerism, and seems to have recognised in Newman’s fears that liberalism would lead to relativism, with all that that implied. Indeed Newman, according to the dean of St Paul’s, Richard William Church (1815-90), observed that the main concern of his life was to find an effective way of opposing and even destroying liberalism, because he sensed how that would evolve. Church, incidentally, did much to enhance the dignity of the liturgy in London’s cathedral, including music. Benedict, however, went much further than Newman, seeing clearly that relativism was connected with the collapse of Western civilisation, and that has clearly been the case, not least in architecture, town planning, and in virtually all the arts. Benedict could see how relativism was ruining just about everything, and was a monstrous assault on civilised Western values, history, and culture, which partly explains why he emphasised beauty, tradition, and the rejection of relativism as essential elements of life and worship, why he championed the Tridentine Mass, and encouraged the use of fine music, correct vestments, Latin, and much else in worship.

The pontiff's responses to English sensitivities included not only recognition of Newman, but also the creation (2011) of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham to allow Anglicans to enter into full Communion of the RC Church whilst retaining much of their heritage and traditions (although the latter caused some friction because it was announced without any previous dialogue with the then Archbishop of Canterbury). But it should also be remembered that Benedict was among a generation of leaders whose lives had been moulded during the legacies of two terrible man-made catastrophes and their resulting aftermaths, the inevitable offspring of what was described by the great Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) as a mental eclipse among those who were in charge of the destinies of Europe caused by their lost acknowledgement of the supreme power above them, an eclipse that now seems total among Western leaders today.

When an academic at Tübingen, Ratzinger saw clearly that the events of 1968-9, still myopically regarded in a rosy light by Western 'progressives', were actually extremely destructive phenomena that would lead inevitably to tyranny, brutality, cruelty, ugliness, and destruction, and that any person who still wished to claim to be 'progressive' in such a calamitous epoch must abandon his or her integrity. It was a very dark and shocking time for the gentle, cerebral scholar, whose study of Urs von Balthasar's works, especially *The Glory of the Lord*, reinforced his conviction that the *beauty* of holiness was an antidote to the *ugliness* of modernism: he viewed history in dramatic apocalyptic terms, with satanic adversaries promoting relativism, with no moral restraints, pitched against a Church that was in mortal peril. He deplored the amnesia, loss of confidence, even self-destruction, of Western Christianity, something profoundly different compared with persecution, schisms, or other major threats in previous times, prophesying that the Faith might survive only in small and apparently insignificant communities, and could well shrink into something that was almost barely evident anywhere. He developed this in his concept of the survival of Christianity as the mustard seed described in the parable mentioned in Matthew XIII: 31-2.

Benedict's vision of small communities of Christians looked back to the early history of Christianity, but more especially to those monastic communities which continued after the barbarians had destroyed a Roman Empire already weakened within itself: he perceived that a Church led by monastic Orders had once been the Ark on which it managed to survive, but that in the twenty-first century, after attempts to reconcile the Church to modernity had obviously not taken into account the reality and demonic power of its satanic enemy, the Ark was holed, as relativism had succeeded in dissolving all objective criticism and moral restraints: everything was now acceptable, everything was turned on its head, that which is ugly was acceptable, even admired, and lies were received as truth.

Like von Galen, who had perceived, identified, and warned against the evils that were eating away at the collective soul of Germany, Benedict could see that throughout the West, falsehoods and warped perceptions which are relativism's legacies were undermining every institution, society, and walk of life: today, one senses an omnipresent existential fatigue in government, the Church, the arts, and the media.

Perhaps Benedict will be recognised as a Doctor of the Church, an accolade he richly deserves, but what sort of a Church will survive? It is possible that small monastic or quasi-monastic groupings, surviving ever-more secretively, behind protective screens of some kind, might not be too far off what might happen: in which case, Benedict XVI, like Bonhoeffer, profoundly influenced by what had happened in his own country in his lifetime, was right.

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Professor James Stevens Curl is the author of many books, including *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018, 2019). He has based this paper on his own personal knowledge, but also acknowledges with thanks the following:

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