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## Relativism According to Joseph Ratzinger: An Attempt to Understand Central and Eastern Europe

### Europe and the world after 1989

In the summer of 1989, as Gyula Horn and Alois Mock cut the barbed wire at Sopron dividing their countries, Francis Fukuyama reflected on the political weather of that time in *The End of History*. Just as Western liberalism had defeated fascism in the Second World War, it would once again emerge victorious against Marxism, he predicted, foreseeing the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. The more important argument by Fukuyama was that the fall of communism would end the progression of history as a dialectical process conceptualised by Hegel and taken forward by Marx (FUKUYAMA 1989: 3). History had reached an absolute moment in which a final, rational form of society would come into being through the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the ultimate form of human government (FUKUYAMA 2006: 11). At that moment, events unfolded as Fukuyama had attempted to interpret them. Democratic movements arose and strengthened across Central and Eastern Europe like a chain reaction, and new governments were established in the true sense of the word. The Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. China, that called itself Communist, and India, a mixed-economy until then, were heading in the direction of liberal economic order with large-scale reforms. Free markets and consumerist culture showed signs of becoming universal.

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A decade later, however, the world began to see the triumph of ideological heritages radically different from that of liberalism. The terrorist attacks in the previous two decades testify to the fact of fundamentalism in our contemporary world. Communist authorities were replaced by nationalist authoritarian governments in several post-Soviet countries. China represents the combination of technocratic economic rationalism and illiberal non-democratic government. Russia resurged as a faux democracy. The West Asian countries prove that economic prosperity need not have democracy and education as preconditions, but it can also come about through potential variables such as oil. The Arab Spring failed to install liberalism in other countries of the same region. Communal ideologies began to determine democratic votes in South Asia – first in Pakistan and now in India. Notwithstanding the fact of illiberalism in politics, the cultural revolution in consumerist lines is real everywhere as the countries modernise economically and technologically even without being liberal democracies. The continuous exchange of values prompted by mass media, massive migration and internet in our times of globalisation connect people across the planet and relativise the value system of communities around the world. Fukuyama's observation about life after the end of history, that is, the consequence of liberal democratic advancement is relevant even today. In spite of innumerable freedoms, the rule of law and political accountability, the time of common marketisation will be "a very sad time", perhaps "centuries of boredom" with "economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands", he observed (FUKUYAMA 1989: 18). "We need a better theory of the human soul," he wrote several years later (FUKUYAMA 2018: 19).

In around the same time Fukuyama had said about the end of history, Joseph Ratzinger also attempted to reflect on the causes and consequences of what had happened in Eastern Europe. "The fact that closed doors have opened, that separating walls have collapsed and that there is more freedom – these are the consoling and encouraging events [...] and remain signposts of and a basis for hope" but "the collapse of Marxism does not of itself bring about a free state and a healthy society", he remarked. "One who abandons Marxism has not thereby automatically found a new foundation on which to base his life", he added (RATZINGER 1994: 42). Ratzinger said that the intellectual vacuum that has come into being after the failure of the Marxist experiment must be filled up with right contents and foundations in order to secure a stable future. Otherwise, he foresaw the possibility for the building up of relativistic culture on the ruins

of Marxism. “In many situations a dash of relativism, a bit of scepticism, can be useful”, but “where relativism is consistently thought through and lived, either it becomes nihilism or else it expands positivism into the power that dominates everything, thus ending again in totalitarian conditions”, Ratzinger warned (RATZINGER 1994: 32).

Ratzinger’s appeal to the people of post-communist Europe is to confidently contemplate about the formative values of this continent. The Pre-Christian marriage between the monotheistic faith of Jerusalem, the philosophy of Greece and the legal tradition of Rome was synthesised and nurtured by Christian faith through centuries. “Our cultural memory is marked by these rational insights”, Ratzinger tells about the harmony between faith and reason which originated in this continent and helped shape the ends of the earth (BENEDICT XVI 2011). But after three centuries of radical critique of religion, reason was totally separated from faith, giving way for the hegemony of agonistic and atheistic ideologies. Furthermore, in the age of empires, the idea of Europe as a common and binding cultural matrix was forgotten, giving way for extremist nationalism. In the backdrop of industrialisation, inequalities became so severe that Marx charted a radically new programme to build a completely new world. Their consequences – the traumatic dramas of national socialism, fascism and communism – are our wounded collective memory today, and this memory makes the citizens of this part of the world more vigilant against any form of totalitarianisms (MÁTÉ-TÓTH 2018). But, unlike the totalitarianisms of twentieth century which were loud and dominating and therefore quite visible, the relativism of our times – according to Ratzinger’s understanding – is a silent totalitarianism because it is disintegrative, hidden and parasitic. In the next part of our paper, we will summarise the arguments and the logic of Ratzinger concerning the worldview processes.

### **Intensification of relativism**

Two developments in religion after the Second World War intensified relativism at least in the Western part of Europe. Firstly, there was the interaction of Enlightenment philosophy with Asian religions. Ever since Enlightenment, the Western world was characterised by scepticism about the traditional structures of Christianity. Modern science had taken God’s non-existence as the working hypothesis to explain the universe. After the high tide of atheistic philosophies,

the dominant line taken by secularisation in the Western world since the seventies of the previous century was agnosticism (RATZINGER 2006: 25). To deny the existence of God altogether was too difficult a claim to prove and, therefore, outright atheism was increasingly replaced by agnostic worldview. “In the leaden loneliness of a God-forsaken world, in its interior boredom, the search for mysticism, for any sort of contact with the divine, sprung up anew”, observes Ratzinger (RATZINGER 2004a: 16). Religion did not simply disappear, rather it became modern. “Wherever there is a report of apparition, thousands travel there, in order to discover, perhaps, a crack in the world through which heaven might look down on them and send them consolation”, observes Ratzinger about the new search for religion (RATZINGER 2004a: 16). In the seeking for divine after the waves of secularisation, the Enlightenment philosophical tradition of Europe found new appeal in Asian religions, particularly those of the Indian subcontinent (RATZINGER 1996). Hinduism and Buddhism are not institutionally structured, nor are they dogmatically determined (RATZINGER 2004a: 17). From these models, it was assumed that religious faith need not necessarily have any particular creed or mandatory catechism. Both of these religions emphasised orthopraxis and not orthodoxy. This seemed to be more convenient and reasonable for the enlightened sensibilities of the post-modern man.

Although relativism is a typical offshoot of the Western world and its irreligious and pragmatic forms of philosophical thought, John Hick and Paul Knitter point to the curious similarity between the post-metaphysical philosophy of the West and the philosophical and religious intuitions of India (RATZINGER 1996). The starting points of both these traditions are different; the directions they provide for human existence are also different. However, the point of convergence is in the understanding of Indian religions that the divine cannot enter unveiled into the world of appearances in which we live (RATZINGER 1996). The essential idea of Hinduism is the experience of unity between oneself and the total cosmic reality. This worldview of universal harmony was first established by the notion of ‘Tat vam asi’ in ancient Upanishads and it was recently clarified in neo-Hinduism represented by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. The understanding that the divine which is absolute transcendence can express itself in the world of appearances only in relative reflections is embedded in the Hindu worldview (RADHAKRISHNAN 2009). This religious intuition finds ally in Immanuel Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena.

Let us make a brief excursus to understand the historical encounter of Western Christianity and Asian religions following Ratzinger's argumentation in order to grasp the background within which their post-modern interaction later happened. In the age of colonialism and missionary movements, unlike Africa or Latin America, the Christian message could not be convincing for the vast majority of people in India, China, or Japan precisely because the high religious cultures in these regions had already produced a great legacy of sacred texts and writings of theological reflection (RATZINGER 1993). In Africa and Latin America, pre-literary tribal cultures had lost their inner credibility and vitality, and there was a longing for monotheism, for one God over all the gods. Thus, Christian and Islamic proclamation were here the interiorly awaited answers. On the other hand, in India and China, philosophical reasoning had already interpreted the world as a whole and, in so doing, assigned a rational structure for life and culture of people. Hence Christianity could not be experienced here as a new stage of life, rather it appeared more as a foreign culture and religion establishing itself next to one's own and threatening to supplant it (RATZINGER 1993). Therefore, the effects of encounter between Christian and Asian religious worlds were minimal as long as the West was characterised by Christian Churches.

But the situation began to change once pluralist theology became the feature of Europe and America. As the Western philosophy advanced in Kantian lines, there too, it began to be held that the absolute reality could not enter history. Jesus of Nazareth was consequently relativised by a historical-critical method and he began to be understood by many as a mere religious figure. Once the figure of Jesus was relativised and pluralist religion became part of the Western consciousness, the philosophy of the West could find points of convergence with Indian religious cosmology. The concept of an impersonal God in Buddhism became appealing to many. According to this understanding, there is no truth in the world. We find truth only when we leave the world. The entire world is the source of suffering with cycles of re-incarnation. In order to break free from this endless entanglement, we must take the path of enlightenment. For many, this mystical enlightenment in the God-concept of Asian religions appeared to be more humble and respectful to the great mystery of God and man, than the dogmas of Christianity (RATZINGER 2004a: 17).

We must now look into the result of this syncretism. Wherever this synthesis was applied, it was told that faith is not required. Instead, psychological therapies

and practices began to be emphasised. It began to be held that such rational-cognitive remedies are completely aware of all scientific findings and that they are based more on scientific knowledge than the method of faith and prayer (RATZINGER 1994: 44). But in the background culture of materialism and hedonism, all the intensities of ecstasies were depicted as joy of the infinite. Intoxicating music, frantic lights, dark shadows and rhythms of raves were held as legitimate methods to forget the agony of the finite and to experience eternity. Magic and occultism became appealing once again. Rational and irrational elements compounded weirdly, and the re-entry of Gnosticism through the New Age School of thought ended up as a new paganism (RATZINGER 1994: 44). This pattern of interaction is a grave philosophical loss for both parties because it relativises both systems of ethics (FERGUSON 1987: 464). It undermines some of the great values of Indian orthopraxis which has sustained the large masses of people in unity despite diversities over millennia. It also overlooks the fundamental aspects of Christian orthodoxy which had matured in the West and served as the formative idea of modern liberal democracy. In sum, relativism regards religion as a self-satisfying programme. The new assumption is that no single form of revelation can fully reveal the mystery of the Divine. We can never comprehend God himself, rather everything is merely a symbol. It is also understood today that the great peace among religions today requires the relativising of faiths. Thus, an assertive relativism in turn becomes intolerant to all religions that remark about doctrines of truth. This is also a situation in which substantial proportions of people are left in ethical confusion.

Let us now examine the second train of thought, which according to Ratzinger, relativised ethics towards the end of the previous century: Marxism. Its political career was kick-started with the promise of universal justice, peace, and the abolition of inequitable master–servant relationships. It claimed that it knew the fundamental pattern of world history and proposed to use that knowledge to firmly guide society into the future in the right direction. Many believed that Marxism would provide a universally valid formula for the right configuration of historical action. All the unfulfilled promises of religions seemed attainable through its scientifically based political praxis (RATZINGER 2004a: 13–14). Over the course of century, Marxism assumed various forms. While the communist political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the Marxist-inspired student revolution of 1968 were largely atheistic, Marxism joined hands with religion in Latin America for the pursuit of liberation theology. The atmosphere in the Christian countries of Latin America in the 1980s was that millions had been

gradually tortured by structural injustice. It seemed that class struggle was a reality. As the orthopraxy of religion became badly deficient, its orthodoxy was also called into question. Against this background, Marxism was proposed as a hermeneutical system for interpreting the Bible (RATZINGER-MESSORI 1985: 190). To refuse the validity of this theology was considered an escape from reality as well as a denial of reason and morality. Ratzinger observes about then existing state-of-affairs: "In fact, in the background there is always the same observation: We experience a world that does not correspond to a good God. Poverty, oppression, all kinds of unjust domination, the suffering of the just and the innocent constitute the signs of the times and of all times. And we all suffer. From this the theology of liberation deduced that the situation could only be overcome through a radical change in the structures of this world, which are structures of sin and evil. Overthrow of sin will come about not through individual conversions but through struggle against the structures of injustice. This struggle ought to be political because the structures are consolidated and preserved through politics. Redemption thus became a political process for which Marxist philosophy provided the essential guidelines" (RATZINGER 1996).

The radical theology of liberation ended in the late eighties but its synthesis with the pluralist religion that was being strengthening in Europe since the mid-twentieth century had created a more lasting impact on the common mindset of our times. The syncretic understanding of liberation theology and pluralist religion deduces that absolute reality could not be understood, but it may be constructed. A system of right *orthopraxis* could effectively exclude all inconvenient *orthodoxy* of religion (RATZINGER 2008: 64). In this way, truth is suspected and only praxis is counted, and radical positivism replaces and relativises the values confirmed by long historical experiences.

Post-communist societies where atheistic Marxism once prevailed are also prone to relativism, but in a different way. The communist political and economic system shattered because of its own internal weaknesses. Wherever the Marxist philosophy of liberty had been faithfully applied, a total lack of freedom had evolved, whose horrors were exposed (RATZINGER 2004b: 38). The material failure of the Marxist system in the economic and social realm also resulted in people's loss of conviction. The disintegration of Marxism does not instinctively lead towards the emergence of liberal and fair societies. We must keep in mind that all the questions once raised by Marxism were not sufficiently addressed and the non-fulfilment of the hope once instilled by Marxism has brought a great disillusionment which is alive even today. Therefore, Ratzinger warns that new

forms of Marxism can continue to emerge and influence the people in the future (RATZINGER 1996). If the void left by Marxism is not replaced by solid ethical foundations, society can sink into the pathologies of liberalism itself. “This is demonstrated today, on the one hand, in the way that science treats human life: man is becoming a technological object while vanishing to an ever greater degree as a human subject, and he has only himself to blame. When human embryos are artificially “cultivated” so as to have “research material” and to obtain a supply of organs, which then are supposed to benefit other human beings, there is scarcely an outcry, because so few are horrified any more. Progress demands all this, and they really are noble goals: improving the quality of life – at least for those who can afford to have recourse to such services. But if man, in his origin and at his very roots, is only an object to himself, if he is “produced” and comes off the production line with selected features and accessories, what on earth is man then supposed to think of man? How should he act toward him? What will be man’s attitude toward man when he can no longer find anything of the divine mystery in the other, but only his know-how?” (RATZINGER 2004: 15–16).

It then becomes clear that Marxism was only the radicalisation of an ideological concept that even without Marxism significantly determined the signature of the previous century (RATZINGER 1994: 37). Absolutisation of the belief in progress and scientific-technological civilisation shattered and relativised the traditional ethos that had given shape to the liberal culture of democracy. More lasting ethics require of us to overcome mere current opinions and embrace more tranquil demands made by the greater truths.

## Conclusion

According to Ratzinger, these two developments in post-war religiosity, however, has deeper roots in the two intellectual revolutions in philosophy (RATZINGER 2004a: 42). Almost a hundred years after Luther announced the freedom of conscience, Descartes grounded philosophy in self-awareness (*cogito, ergo sum*) and later, Kant famously pronounced *Sapere Aude* (*Dare to use your reason*) (LAMBERT 2006: 55–67). Since then, conscience was detached from objective moral truth and the notion of reason is understood as subjective. The second movement started from Hegel for whom the world is not a firm housing of Being, rather, *Being* is a historical process (RATZINGER 2004a: 44). Marx shaped



Hegel's philosophy into a concrete plan for shaping history. Since then, the notion of reason was understood as *techne* – makability – the ability to re-shape the world is the core of reason. As a result, the ideology of progress, discourse of freedom, and scientific advancements became key orientations in the modern man's thinking, and the whole spectrum of reason has today reduced to a narrow ghetto of scientific-positivist category. This reduction in the notion of reason is the philosophical deficiency of relativism. Ratzinger says that this reason looks like “a concrete bunker with no windows, in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to obtain either from God's wide world” (RATZINGER 2011).

This deficient reason makes its manifestation in every sphere of the life of contemporary man. The exclusion of classical sources of knowledge such as religious ethics, historical traditions and collective memory from the realm of reason relativised time-tested values, thereby disintegrating the structures of solidarity in society. Technical growth without adequate moral criteria is reflected in today's economic inequalities and grave bioethical problems (RATZINGER 2005). Radically individualistic anthropology based on utilitarian and hedonist ideologies perverts the idea and purpose of freedom (RATZINGER 2007: 387–390). Exclusive reliance on majority principle and the neglect of axiological principle in the procedural tradition of legal positivism at times result in the triumph of legality over justice.

We must therefore affirm with Böckenförde: “A liberal state is sustained by conditions it cannot itself guarantee” (BÖCKENFÖRDE 2020 [1967]). We must contemplate on the potentiality of nature and reason as the true sources of law. On the academic level, Natural Law must engage in fruitful dialogue with contemporary philosophy, particularly the Critical Social Theory, and make itself once again intelligible and compatible with the fact of pluralism and the aspirations of liberalism. As for Europe, the pre-political moral foundations for orienting her states and societies require the resources of Christian faith which is the bedrock of its civilisation and progress. It may take longer time for Christian faith to convince its hope to our secularised world. But Ratzinger's life and works is an illustrious example for us to continue with confidence in this pursuit, like a voice in the wilderness, that takes more time to make itself heard. Let us recall the proclamation by John Paul II at Warsaw which set the chain reaction for the political transformation in Poland and Europe: “Let Your Spirit descend. Let Your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth – of this earth.” Along with John

Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger, we also believe that this Spirit is the source of all pre-political moral foundations, and the same Spirit is the promised support for Christians and for the Church in seeking and formulating relevant answer to the questions of the Signs of the Times.

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