

**Christianity and the Culture of Relativism in the Anthropologies of Joseph Ratzinger and Stanley Hauerwas**

**A Commencement Address at St. Mbaaga Major Seminary, Kampala – Uganda.**

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**By**

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## 1. Introduction: Origin of the hypothesis

The Rector and Staff and Students,

I am honored and humbled for having been chosen to give a commencement address for this academic year. Thank you the Dean of Studies, Fr. Dr. Ambrose Bwangatto, for the invitation and for trusting me with this great responsibility.

When Fr. Ambrose requested me to give this address, I remembered a newspaper article I just read in passing on a flight. The writer was talking about living in ‘post-truth era.’ Even if he was discussing a topic not exactly I am going to discuss with you, his ideas were very related to mine. Also, in “*Classics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*” one of the very first courses I attended at the beginning of my STL, I read a book by Peter Berger *A Rumor of Angels* in which I found significant ideas that best describe the contemporary perception of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Peter Berger wrote:

The supernatural has departed from the modern society; God is dead; we are living in a post-Christian era; religion – a vanishing leftover from the dark ages of superstition; those to whom the supernatural is still a meaningful reality find themselves in the status of a minority – a cognitive minority – a group formed around a body of deviant knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

This talk of a post-Christian era and the proliferation of anti-religious ideas precipitated my search for a possible response first and foremost. Secondly, the reality of religious pluralism also led me to wonder if we can still speak of *the* Christian Truth that is one and indivisible. The prevalent pluralism seemed to me to be also the result of a relativistic view of reality, to the extent that we can no longer have objective truth and values, nor can we maintain the universality of the Christian mission, let alone keep it going to the end of time.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (N.Y: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970), 1-6.

The culture of relativism threatens to erode completely my own centuries-old Ganda culture in Uganda. One motivation for me to write this dissertation is to assist in combating this threat as priest and theologian.

I sought a theologian and a theology that address these contemporary questions about Christianity. I found Joseph Ratzinger the best contemporary theologian whose theology attempts an answer to the contemporary relativistic culture. I therefore chose to write my STL thesis on his theology. My doctoral project is an expansion of that thesis. In addition to the STL thesis, the doctoral project aimed at making a comparison between a Catholic perspective and a valiant Protestant attempt to address the same issues. I chose Ratzinger to represent the Catholic perspective and Stanley Hauerwas to represent the Protestant perspective.

## **2. The Culture of Relativism**

The reality of relativism is not new, but in fact a very old phenomenon whose origins have been traced back to the well-known Greek philosopher Protagoras who famously stated: “Everything is relative. There are two sides to everything. Man is the measure of all things, of those being that they are, of those not being, that they are not.”<sup>2</sup> Relativism can be described as a state of absoluteness of the individual, i.e. where the individual is source and summit of the truth, the good and bad, and the right and wrong. Joseph Ratzinger defined it as “allowing oneself to be led here and there by any wind of doctrine.”<sup>3</sup> He also notes that this trend defines our times today – that today “we are witnessing the ‘dictatorship of relativism’ which does not recognize anything as absolute and leaves as the ultimate measure only the measure of each one and his

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<sup>2</sup> “Protagoras” in *Great Philosophers*, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Protagoras/protagoras.html> (accessed on April 30, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

own desires.”<sup>4</sup> According to him, in “an un-reflected, uncritical and naïve way, the modern world has been ensnared into relativism.”<sup>5</sup>

Like Ratzinger, Hauerwas also envisions a world where absolute truth, norms and values, are being sacrificed, replacing them with subjective/relative ones and systematically ensuring that the objective ones never come back into play. For Hauerwas, relativism means “democratic policing of Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> According to him, relativism is a result of extreme liberalism which emasculated Christianity in the name of societal peace. “The ‘secular’ is not out there in the world, but it is in the souls of most people, including myself, who continue to identify themselves as Christians.”<sup>7</sup> Evidently, Hauerwas’ greatest pain is that,

Christians have learned to police their convictions in the name of sustaining such social orders. They cannot appear in public using explicit Christian language since that would offend other actors in our alleged pluralist polity. But if this is genuinely a pluralist society, why should Christians not be able to express their most cherished convictions in public? If we are in an age of identity-politics, why does the identity of Christians need to be suppressed?<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Ratzinger’s and Hauerwas’ Anthropological Discourses

Both Ratzinger and Hauerwas agree that relativism is a result of a defective anthropology which in the end results into a crisis of faith. Therefore, to revert it, the anthropological nuance must be corrected.

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<sup>4</sup> John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, eds., *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Gediminas T. Jankunas, *The Dictatorship of Relativism: Pope Benedict XVI’s Response* (New York: St. Paul’s Press, 2011), 337 (Back cover).

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

### a. Joseph Ratzinger

In very general terms, Ratzinger's anthropology is a 'doctrine' of relationality and creatureliness. His anthropology accrues from his relational theology. It stems from the fact of creation, from which follows logically, that a creature automatically depends and relies on a creator for its life and sustainability. He is opposed to the ideology of makability and relationlessness prevailing in today's society. His theology re-affirms that man is a creature of God, and not just a creature, but the *Imago Dei*. Therefore, by acting without God, man disassociates himself from his creator and denies that he is a creature. He ceases to be the *Imago Dei*. He illustrates:

The mentality of '*makability*' tells us that we must free ourselves from every requirement to receive, from all dependency. We must stand on our own, independent of others and of God. Ratzinger counters: *relationlessness* is not our own; cut off from relationships, our truth is denied – and, with it, our freedom – for freedom and truth go together. God is not the enemy of our freedom but its ground. When people deny their creatureliness, seeing it as an imposition from outside, they end up replacing God with a capital 'G' with a whole host of exploitative small 'g' gods, such as commercial forces, greed, public opinion, etc. the tyranny of these is an enslavement far greater (Gen. 3:3 – the original sin).<sup>9</sup>

The relationlessness of the contemporary culture is the concrete manifestation of relativism. As a remedy, Ratzinger proposes a re-building of the relationship with the Creator; a communion with the Lord. He suggests a reversal of what happened at the tower of Babel.<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger's anthropology is a response to modern culture's denial of truth. The theologian from Bavaria summarizes:

It is obvious that the concept of truth has become suspect. Of course it is correct that it has been much abused. Intolerance and cruelty have occurred in the name of truth. To

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<sup>9</sup> James Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas: Wise Cautions and Legitimate Hopes* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 40-41.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 61.

that extent people are afraid when someone says, “This is the truth”, or even “I have the truth.” We never have it; at best it has us. No one will dispute that one must be careful and cautious in claiming the truth. But simply to dismiss it as unattainable is really destructive. A large proportion of contemporary philosophies, in fact, consist of saying that man is not capable of ethical values, either. Then he would have no standards. Then he would only have to consider how he arranged things reasonable for himself, and then at any rate the opinion of the majority would be the only criterion that counted.<sup>11</sup>

Ratzinger believes that uncoupled from truth, humanity dies. Why? Because,

As human beings, we receive a dialogical, relational essence and are called to live this in history in an existence that is at once gift and task. We have a responsibility to shape our lives, always in fidelity to what we have received as created beings. We have no freedom of our own. Our freedom is a normed freedom – not blind and directionless, but guided by the light of what is given to us with our creation.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the first truth that all theology and religiosity and human activity are based on is the fact that man is a creature of God. When man realizes this, then his relation to the creator follows automatically.

### **b. Stanley Hauerwas**

Hauerwas’ theological dialogue seems to be a re-telling of the story of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus, according to Hauerwas, is the story of a Christian and it is the story of God’s creation.<sup>13</sup> In this, Hauerwas suggests recourse to creation – man situating himself in the story of creation as one of the creatures. The story of creation is manifested and fulfilled in the story of Christ. Therefore, a Christian is one who situates himself or herself in this story of creation. But this story is not only a story for a Christian but for all humanity; for we are all God’s creatures.

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, trans. Michael Miller and Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 50- 51.

<sup>12</sup> James Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas: Wise Cautions and Legitimate Hopes* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 41-42.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 40.

Hauerwas proposes a union in Christ in whom we become one with God our Creator. This union in Christ is fully realized in the Eucharist. In an interview, Hauerwas asserted that the Eucharist is “a rite in which we become part of the body of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, according to Hauerwas, unity in Christ is key in theology and Christian living. He desires a communion of Christians. “In the Eucharist, Christians learn how to be like Christ; to lead a Christ-centered life.”<sup>15</sup>

Hauerwas is critical of making ‘creation’ synonymous with ‘nature’.<sup>16</sup> However, this is what the prevailing culture wants to impose on humanity: that the idea of creation is mythical. It denies that there is a force above nature and in which nature finds meaning and fulfillment.

This relational nature brings us to another fact of the human condition, that is, the fallen nature of man. After God created a perfect universe and perfect man, man misused his freedom against God’s order. Man consequently lost his holiness/perfection and original justice. For this reason, man needs redemption, which is also an attribute of the Godhead.

Hauerwas teaches a fallen nature of man, and insists that this is the reason for the world order thereafter. He wants the fact of Original Sin to be re-told as a basic truth. He is acutely conscious of humanity’s fallenness, and envisages God’s dealings with us as being converting and transformative, creating a new language.<sup>17</sup> He firmly believes in original sin and its transmission to all humanity. According to him, both original sin and personal sin are a reality

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<sup>14</sup> This was in an *Interview with Hauerwas* on January 28, 2011 at Duke University Divinity School (Cf. Appendix).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Interview with Hauerwas in the Appendix.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 181.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Church as God’s new Language*, <http://jeremyberg.wordpress.com/2010/01/05/essay-stanley-hauerwas-the-church-as-gods-new-language> (accessed on October 19, 2010).

that cannot be denied. They are consequences of an epochal misuse of freedom by man.<sup>18</sup> Hence, man bears the responsibility for sin. He is opposed to the prevailing culture which downplays the notion of sin and punishment.

#### 4. Synthesis

Ratzinger makes the following conclusion:

*Gratia praesupponit natura* is correct and fully biblical in saying that grace does not destroy what is truly human in man but, salvages and fulfills it. This genuine humanity of man, the created order “man”, is completely extinguished in no man; it lies at the basis of every single human person and in many different ways continuously has its effects on man’s concrete existence, summoning and guiding him. But of course in no man is it present without warping or falsification; instead, in every individual it is caked with the layer of filth.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, Ratzinger elucidates that the way grace travels to reach man has to pass through the “second nature,” breaking open the hard shell of vainglory that covers the divine glory within him. And that means that there is no grace without the cross. On the basis of a robust Chalcedonian Christology he is able to affirm: only the humanity of the Second Adam is fully true humanity. The Cross is not the “crucifixion of man” at all, as Nietzsche thought, but rather his true healing. “The humanity of God is indeed the true humanity of man, the grace that fulfills nature.”<sup>20</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas holds quite a different position. First and foremost, Hauerwas rejects natural theology (and therefore rejects natural law as well). His thesis is that “natural theology is

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<sup>18</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Church as God’s new Language*, <http://jeremyberg.wordpress.com/2010/01/05/essay-stanley-hauerwas-the-church-as-gods-new-language> (accessed on October 19, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Ratzinger: Pope Benedict XVI, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to daily Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 158.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-161.

impossibly abstracted from a full doctrine of God.”<sup>21</sup> According to him, natural theology would equate to a natural science without reference to or reliance on any supposed special exceptional or miraculous revelation.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as Hauerwas objects to the use of reason alone to describe the nature of God, he is right. Revelation is the indispensable basis for knowing God. However, this does not mean that nature is devoid of grace. For, as Ratzinger illustrates above, also postlapsarian human nature is endowed with grace – with the desire to seek God. Thus, the second nature of humankind fulfills that to which human nature is ordered towards from the beginning, namely God. Further, Hauerwas does not seem to be consistent with his position as he later tends to base his ecclesiology on political and existential arguments.

Despite his critique of natural theology, rendering it a mere humanism, Hauerwas turns around and unwittingly tends to lean actually more toward the humanistic side. His ecclesiology tragically betrays his anthropology because in it, Hauerwas portrays an “acting” church, i.e. a people who live by acting, fighting, and resisting evil, a community within a community – “resident aliens” – very much like the great humanists such as Henry David Thoreau or Mahatma Gandhi have advocated. Rather than one allowing God’s strength and grace to work through Christians, Hauerwas’ Christians resort to their own human devices. Such people would be little different from humanists who struggle for only establishing “a kind and caring society.” But the psalmist says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain” (Ps 127:1). This makes Hauerwas a tragic figure: an existentialist whose anthropology actually contradicts his revelational and theological concerns.

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

## 5. Conclusions

Anthropology hinges on Christology. If Chalcedon says Jesus became fully human,<sup>23</sup> then it means that it is only in Jesus that we learn to be fully human. In ultimate analysis, if Gen 1:26 and the incarnation of the Lord are ignored, human rights remain hollow. The question is, what religion is able to redeem the dignity of human being? This begs the second question, in what religion but Christianity has God become a human being?

A Godless world appears to be the most palatable and convenient idea to humanity today, as it frees people from the promptings of the law and a divine law-giver. The greatest craving for man, it so seems, is to be a solipsistic self-legislator. However, the end result of this is a replacement of the truth with slavery (for true freedom lies in the truth) and the good with the bad, the wrong, the evil, the unjust and at the end of the line, self-willed death.

The following words from Ratzinger sum up our project:

Once more, we have to say: How far we are from a world in which people no longer need to be taught about God because he is present within us! It has been asserted that our century is characterized by an entirely new phenomenon: the appearance of people incapable of relating to God. As a result of spiritual and social developments, it is said, we have reached the stage where a kind of person has developed in whom there is no longer any starting point for the knowledge of God. Whether that be true or not, we would have to admit that our distance from God – the obscurity and the dubiousness surrounding him today – is greater than ever before; indeed, that even we who are trying to be believers often feel as if the reality of God is being withdrawn from between our hands. Do we not ourselves often begin to ask where he is amid all the silence of this world? Do we not ourselves often have the feeling that, at the

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<sup>23</sup> ND 614, Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man.” Cf. Vatican II Council: “He who is the ‘image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), is himself the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin. Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare.” GS 22.

end of all our thinking, we have only words in our grasp, while the reality of God is farther away than ever before?<sup>24</sup>

Thank you for bearing with me!

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *What it means to be a Christian* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 24-25.