

The Truth of Love and the Image of God

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I. Fumbling in the Dark for Meaning^[2]

In his address at the Sorbonne in 1999, to celebrate the arrival of the millennium, Joseph Ratzinger argued that Christianity is in deep crisis because of the loss of belief in the idea that reason and religion have anything to do with one another. He noted the popularity of the Buddhist fable promoted by Leo Tolstoy that compares the different faith traditions to different perceptions of an elephant as given by blind men, some having caught hold of its trunk, others its tail, others its ears and so on. The fable suggests that human beings have no faculty for contact with the divine. They are like blind men grasping parts of an elephant. Also implicit in the fable is the idea that no one religious tradition holds the truth. If this is so then human persons cannot rely on a religious tradition for insights into the nature of their own humanity. If Tolstoy is correct then humanity requires a non-theological explanation.



In the last two centuries a number of alternative explanations were offered. Most were variations on Feuerbachian and Nietzschean themes. In works such as *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach argued that God is only the sum of the attributes that make up the greatness of man. Feuerbach also wrote: ‘The true atheist is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom and justice, are nothing’.^[3] Friedrich Nietzsche argued that there is no universal human nature, just different people governed by different drives, some with a will to power and others content to live a herd-like existence following the moral code of Christianity he declared to be a crime against life itself. Sigmund Freud analysed human behaviour with reference to sexual drives. Adolf Hitler and the scientists who supported him thought that genetics was the key to understanding humanity. Marx and those who followed in his trajectory offered explanations based on economics. The Bolshevik revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin famously described the human person as a concentrated collection of social influences united in a small unit, as the skin of a sausage is filled with sausage meat. Rejected in all of these accounts, either explicitly or implicitly, is the notion that the search for love and truth may lie at the core of what it means to be human.

Beginning with the book of *Genesis*, however, one can find another reading of humanity’s predicament completely different from that of Tolstoy, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, Hitler, Marx or Bukharin. According to the allegorical account of creation presented in *Genesis*, human beings are creatures made by God in his own image. Indeed, the whole cosmos is created by God and humans have a place within it that is higher than the animals but not as high as God himself. According to the *Book of Genesis* the purpose of human life is friendship with God, though not as another god,

but as a creature with its Creator. Since creation was for the end of this friendship, human beings are not like blind men fumbling around the body parts of an elephant, searching for an understanding that must always allude them.

II. *The Imago Dei*

Throughout the Christian centuries scholars have sought to explain how humanity's knowledge and friendship with God is possible. In doing so they have also sought to understand what it means to be created in God's image. Central themes in this scholarship have been: that God is a Trinity of Persons defined by their relationships to one another; that the First Person of the Trinity is God the Father, the Creator of the world, the second Person of the Trinity is Christ, the divine *Logos*, who become incarnate in the womb of a virgin to redeem fallen humanity and to reveal to humanity the truth about itself, including the truth of its relationship to the Trinity; that the third Person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, whose spiritual gifts strengthen and enlighten the human soul, and further, that human beings were created to participate in the love that abides between the Persons of the Trinity. This participation is made possible by the fact that the human person has an intellect created to discern the truth, and a will to pursue goodness. Human beings were also created with an affective dimension, often described as the "heart", where the other operations of the soul, including the memory and the imagination, are integrated. There is thus both a cognitive and affective dimension of the human person and integration occurs when they work in tandem. Although different scholars have put forward different accounts of the operations of the human soul, there is a consensus within the tradition that human persons are both reasoning beings and feeling beings made for friendship and love and capable of discerning the truth and pursuing goodness and appreciating beauty.

Also central to the *imago Dei* theology is the notion that the *imago Dei* manifests itself, at the outset, in the difference between the sexes. According to the Scripture, "God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them" (Gen. 1:27; cf. Gen. 5:1-2). As the International Theological Commission stated in its document *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004) at §33:

Far from being an accidental or secondary aspect of personality, sexual difference is constitutive of person identity. Each of us possesses a way of being in the world, to see, to think, to feel, to engage in mutual exchange with other persons who are also defined by their sexual identity. According to the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#): "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others". The roles attributed to one or the other sex may vary across time and space, but the sexual identity of the person is not a cultural or social construction. It belongs to the specific manner in which the *imago Dei* exists.

The friendship dimension of the *imago Dei* is often described as the dimension of relationality. Human beings, like the Trinity itself, are never isolated monads. They are conceived within their mother's womb and enter history as someone's son or daughter, with a specific father and mother, and often siblings as well. As they grow up they make

friends and sometimes they enter upon a sacred partnership known as marriage. Their identity is always defined by their relationships, including, though not exclusively, their relationship to the Trinity.

Three of the most important books published in English on the theology of marriage in recent times emphasise the relationship between Trinitarian theology and sacramental theology. They are: *The Nuptial Mystery* (2005) by Cardinal Angelo Scola, followed by *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (2006) and *Mystery and Sacrament of Love: A Theology of Marriage and the Family for the New Evangelisation* (2015) both by Cardinal Marc Ouellet. These works present marriage as the supreme manifestation of the love of the Holy Trinity. In *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, Cardinal Ouellet explained the relationship between Trinitarian love and human love in the following paragraph:

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* should be reconsidered in a radically Trinitarian perspective... The gifts of creation, the gift of life, the gift of *fides* and of the sacrament signify, in the final analysis, the gifts of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Created gifts express and signify the uncreated love between the divine persons. Thus human love in its beauty and fragility allows us to see, like a living icon, the Glory within God. The Holy Spirit prolongs in marriage what he does in the relationship of Christ and the Church, he makes of it the nuptial incarnation of the “Nuptial Mystery” par excellence.^[4]

Therefore as creatures made in the image of God human beings are created in acts of love for the experience of love. Love however is not merely a feeling, love is a spiritual reality with its own internal logic.

III. The Logic of Love

These themes are summarised in Joseph Ratzinger’s statements that ‘love and reason are the twin pillars of all reality’^[5] and that ‘intelligence and love are not in separate compartments: love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love’.^[6] They also find an echo in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, drafted by Benedict XVI but completed and promulgated by Francis. At paragraph 27 of *Lumen Fidei* we find the following words:

If love needs truth, truth also needs love. Love and truth are inseparable. Without love, truth becomes cold, impersonal and oppressive for people’s day-to-day lives. The truth we seek, the truth that gives meaning to our journey through life, enlightens us whenever we are touched by love. One who loves realizes that love is an experience of truth, that it opens our eyes to see reality in a new way, in union with the beloved. In this sense, Saint Gregory the Great could write that “*amor ipse notitia est*”, love is itself a kind of knowledge possessed of its own logic. It is a relational way of viewing the world, which then becomes a form of shared knowledge, vision through the eyes of another and a shared vision of all that exists.

In his review of Ratzinger’s 1968 best-selling work *Introduction of Christianity*, Hubertus Mynarek explained this theological vision in the following terms:

If love plays a decisive role in the fundamental determination of the act of faith, this applies even more to the content of the faith. In contrast to the essentially self-

referential God of philosophy, the god of faith is fundamentally determined by the category of relationship. The highest is not the absolute self-contained self-sufficiency, but ... relatedness ... creative power that creates, sustains and loves others. It is connected with the fact that the philosophical God is a self-thinking thought, while the God of faith is love as thought and thought as love. The absolute is the identity of truth and love.^[7]

This theme is also found embedded in the Conciliar document *Gaudium et spes*, especially in paragraph 24 where one finds the statement: ‘The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one as we are one” (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth that God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself’. Self-giving to others in acts of love is thus another component of the *imago Dei*.

While love is the most dynamic force in a Christian account of the meaning and purpose of human life, an alternative contender for “most dynamic force” status is power. This alternative is found in the post-Christian anthropologies of the nineteenth century and beyond.

The choice between love and power is presented in the *Book of Genesis* by the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, respectively. The “original sin” of the first human couple was to choose power over love. The choice between love and power is also at the centre of the drama in Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle where the message is that those who choose power not only reject love for themselves but attempt to deny it to others as well. Those who choose power over love attempt to pull all whom they encounter into the vortex of a self-destructive will to power.

IV. Original Sin

Holding love and reason together and integrating them within the human heart is not, therefore, a simple operation. This is explained in Christian theology by reference to the idea of “original sin” – the idea that human persons are born with the potential for friendship with God and participation in the life and the love of the Trinity, but also with a spiritual wound, inherited from the first human couple, that makes the quest for such friendship a struggle against self-destructive ideas and impulses. It is a struggle against the tendency to become entangled in the logic of power rather than allowing one’s life to be governed by the logic of love. As St. John Paul II made the point to the scholars of the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) in 1987:

The human person must in the name of the truth about himself stave off a double temptation: the temptation to make the truth about himself subordinate to his freedom and the temptation to make himself subordinate to the world of objects; he has to refuse to succumb to the temptation of both self-idolatry and of self-subjection: *Positum est in medio homo: nec bestia—nec deus*.^[8]

In the very first paragraph of his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (1993) St John Paul II also observed that because of original sin there is a tendency for the human person to

give himself over to relativism and scepticism and to go off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself. Nonetheless, he added that ‘no darkness of error or of sin can totally take away from man the light of God the Creator. In the depths of his heart there always remains a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it’. (VS §1).

Friendship with God requires that the human intellect is open to the truth and that the human will is open to goodness. Both are necessary and problems arise when one or other or both is disordered, that is, ordered to something other than truth and goodness. Reason and truth without love and goodness will end in a sterile and pastorally insensitive moralism, while love and goodness without reason and truth can be equally destructive since there are no criteria for judging the merits of alternative acts and styles of life. The person who has love and goodness but not truth and reason goes through life defenceless against those who would use them for their own selfish ends. Truth includes knowledge of one’s own dignity as a child of God and this is an important bulwark against being demeaned by social practices that treat human beings as mere objects and commodities. Not only do human beings sometimes treat other persons in this manner but so too is it typical of totalitarian governments to regard the populations under their control as commodities, cogs in production processes, raw material for social engineering experiments and unreasoning animals. The two social institutions that have the greatest capacity to withstand the anti-human policies of totalitarian states are the Church and the family and it is no accident of history that these institutions are the greatest defenders of the unity of love and reason. As Ratzinger argued:

Amidst this contemporary crisis of humanity, the effort to restore the understanding of Christianity as the true religion or religion of truth in the classical sense, must be based equally upon orthopraxis as well as orthodoxy. Today as in the past, its deepest aspect must consist in love and reason converging with one another as the essential foundation pillars of reality: real reason is love and love is real reason. In their unity, they are the real basis and goal of all reality.^[9]

V. The Priority of *Logos* over *Ethos*

In the theology of Joseph Ratzinger one also finds many references to the principle of the priority of *logos* over *ethos*, a principle he learned from Romano Guardini. The truth he says, cannot be replaced by ‘good opinion’ since the loss of truth corrupts even good opinions and ultimately even ‘corrupts love, which without truth is blind, and hence, cannot fulfil its real purpose: to will and to do for the other what is truly good’ – ‘Goodness without truth can bring about subjective justification but not salvation’.^[10] In *Principles of Christian Morality*, Ratzinger wrote:

If the word “orthopraxis” is pushed to its most radical meaning, it presumes that no truth exists that is antecedent to *praxis* but rather that truth can be established only on the basis of correct *praxis*, which has the task of creating meaning out of and in the face of meaninglessness. Theology becomes then no more than a guide to action, which, by reflecting on *praxis*, continually develops new modes of *praxis*. If not only redemption but truth as well is regarded as “*post hoc*”, then truth becomes the product of man. At the same time, man, who is no longer measured against truth but produces it, becomes himself a product.^[11]

Using an expression from the psychoanalyst Albert Görres, Ratzinger has argued that the mentality that wants to give priority to *ethos* over *logos* represents the “Hinduisation” of the faith. Without timeless, binding faith propositions, there is nothing to judge the elements within the spiritual atmosphere, nothing to distinguish the Christian-friendly elements from the Christian-toxic elements.

The contemporary relevance of sustaining the cognitive and affective dimensions of the human person in a mutually auxiliary relationship can also be discerned from the following exchange between two very prominent continental philosophers, Gianni Vattimo and the late René Girard. In the exchange Vattimo remarked that he views the ‘trajectory of contemporary philosophy – from Wittgenstein’s language games to the idea of Being as an event in Heidegger to Richard Rorty’s particular version of pragmatism – as a passage from *veritas* to *caritas*’. He added that ‘truth matters nothing to me except in relation to some particular goal’.^[12] To this statement Girard responded:

Personally, I agree with Vattimo when he says that Christianity is a revelation of love, but I don’t exclude that it is also a revelation of truth, because in Christianity truth and love coincide and are one and the same. I think we ought to take very seriously this concept: the concept of love, which in Christianity is the rehabilitation of the unjustly accused victim, which is truth itself, which is the anthropological truth and the Christian truth.^[13]

In effect Vattimo endorsed what Ratzinger called the Hinduisation of the faith. Implicit within this is the severance of any intrinsic relationship between dogmatic and moral theology.

VI. Truth and Conscience

An approach to sexual morality that follows in the trajectory of Vattimo is that of marginalising truth by eschewing the existence of moral absolutes. It is first argued that the moral quality of sexual acts depends on so many contextual factors that each particular moral question must be examined at the tribunal of the human conscience. It is further argued that given the enormously wide variety of contextual factors, individual persons may well reach different conclusions in their conscience from that of the official magisterial teaching that merely offers general guidelines. Variations on this theme were found in proportionalist and consequentialist and “fundamental option” moral theories that were criticised by St John Paul II in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (1993). With regard to such ideas, Ratzinger wrote:

It is of course undisputed that one must follow a certain conscience or at least not act against it. But whether the judgment of conscience or what one takes to be such, is always right, indeed whether it is infallible, is another question. For if this were the case, it would mean that there is no truth — at least not in moral and religious matters, which is to say, in the areas which constitute the very pillars of our existence. For judgments of conscience can contradict each other. Thus there could be at best the subject’s own truth, which would be reduced to the subject’s sincerity. No door or window would lead from the subject into the broader world of being and human solidarity. Whoever thinks this through will come to the realization that no real freedom exists then and that the supposed pronouncements of conscience are but the reflection of social circumstances. This should necessarily lead to the conclusion that placing

freedom in opposition to authority overlooks something. There must be something deeper, if freedom and, therefore, human existence are to have meaning.^[14]

Ratzinger's ideas on the rôle of conscience and its relationship to truth were influenced by the theology of St. John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Ratzinger observed that for Newman the middle term that establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity is truth.

VII Truth and Freedom

Central to Catholic moral theology is the principle that truth and freedom are never in competition, never opposed to each other, providing one begins from the understanding that the human person was created by God for freedom that is linked to the observance of the divine law. Here Ratzinger draws on the theology of Saints Basil the Great and Augustine. He writes:

Basil speaks in terms of “the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us,” an expression which was to become important in medieval mysticism. In the spirit of Johannine theology, Basil knows that love consists in keeping the commandments. For this reason, the spark of love which has been put into us by the Creator, means this: “We have received interiorly beforehand the capacity and disposition for observing all divine commandments ... These are not something imposed from without.” Referring everything back to its simple core, Augustine adds: “We could never judge that one thing is better than another if a basic understanding of the good had not already been instilled in us.” This means that the first so called ontological level of the phenomenon conscience consists in the fact that something like an original memory of the good and true (both are identical) has been implanted in us, that there is an inner ontological tendency within man, who is created in the likeness of God, toward the divine. From its origin, man's being resonates with some things and clashes with others. This anamnesis of the origin, which results from the godlike constitution of our being is not a conceptually articulated knowing, a store of retrievable contents. It is so to speak an inner sense, a capacity to recall, so that the one whom it addresses, if he is not turned in on himself, hears its echo from within. He sees: “That's it! That is what my nature points to and seeks.”^[15]

In summary, the fact that human persons are made in God's image means that the logic of love is encoded within them and that the logic of love is rational.

Conclusion:

The Church's teaching on the *imago Dei* and the logic of love, and in particular, St. John II's re-centering of the sacramentality of marriage within the life and love of the Holy Trinity has been described by Cardinal Ouellet as ‘a prophetic message for the salvation of the confused and nihilistic cultures of our time’.^[16] It is the alternative vision of the meaning and purpose of human life from that offered by post-Christian philosophers from Feuerbach and Marx, Nietzsche and Freud all the way down to Vattimo and others who either reject the faith or seek to destroy it by a Hinduisation process.

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2. This paper is a synthesis of ideas expressed in other publications by the author. For more extensive treatments of this topic see the author's *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 'Ratzinger and the Timelessness of Truth', *Communio: International Review*, 44 (2), (Summer, 2017) and 'Joseph Ratzinger/Benedetto XVI' in *Dizionario su sesso, amore e fecondità*. A cura di José Noriega, René & Isabelle Ecochard (Siena: Cantagelli, 2019). [↑](#)
3. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Essence du Christianisme* (1864), 46-47. Cited by Henri de Lubac in *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 31. [↑](#)
4. Marc Ouellet, *Divine Likeness Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 234. [↑](#)
5. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 183. [↑](#)
6. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §30. [↑](#)
7. Hubertus Mynarek, 'Das Wesen des Christlichen: Ein Fundamental-Theologe und ein Dogmatiker zu dem Buch von Joseph Ratzinger: Einführung in das Christentum', *Theologische Revue*, Number 3 (1969), 177-182 at 178. [↑](#)
8. John Paul II, Address to the Scholars of Lublin University, *Christian Life in Poland*, November, 1987, 51. [↑](#)
9. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 183. [↑](#)
10. J. Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 94. [↑](#)
11. J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 318. [↑](#)
12. G. Vattimo and R. Girard, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* Pierpaolo Antonello (ed), (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 39. [↑](#)
13. G. Vattimo and R. Girard, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, 47. [↑](#)
14. J. Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 12. [↑](#)
15. J. Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, 32. [↑](#)
16. Marc Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love: A Theology of Marriage and the Family for the New Evangelisation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 24. [↑](#)