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CHRISTIANITY AND MODERNITY: WHY THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC REGIME NEEDS THE CHURCH

The comprehension of tolerance in pluralistic societies with liberal constitutions requires that, when dealing with non-believers and those of different [religious] faiths, the believers must understand that the dissent they encounter will reasonably persist . . . liberal political culture expects that the non-believers also understand the same thing in their dealings with believers.¹

Jürgen Habermas

The Christian faith is not a system. It cannot be portrayed as a finished and complete intellectual construction. It is a road and the characteristic of a road is that it is only recognized as such if one enters it, and begins to follow it.²

Josef Ratzinger,

THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH

1. “The evangelistic task of the Church in all times and all over the world necessarily reverberates in the life of human society. The Church cannot be confined their temples, as God cannot be confined to the conscience.”³ This assertion, made by Pope John Paul II in Asunción during his only visit to Paraguay in May 1988, reasserted not only the position of the Church in relation to politics, and the Paraguayan State, but also against its policy of exclusion and repression of that time. The historical-political context in mid-1988 was delicate: the national-populist regime of General Alfredo Stroessner had hardened greatly, trying to further stifle the yearning for greater freedom of the people, desires that the Catholic Church echoed by taking on a role as the “voice of the voiceless,” which upset the dictator and his henchmen, who criticized

its intervention in political affairs. Religion, they argued, was a spiritual issue, private, something to be reserved to the temples.

2. The words and the visit of John Paul II confirmed the opposite. Not only did he contradict the official line, but in pastoral fashion confirmed the faith of the faithful, and above all, highlighted a crucial aspect of its social teaching. Within this tradition, the papal proposal and position were not a novelty; the Christian faith should not be seen as purely private matter but as a broader reality, an experience that dignifies the relationships between groups, families and societies in general. With this claim, Pope Wojtyla also validated the recent past. Just four months before his visit to Paraguay, his first encyclical letter of a social nature was published, the *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [On Social Concern]. It was the month of December 1987 and celebrated with that gesture the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* [The Progress of Peoples] of Paul VI.

3. Within this historical frame, Pope Wojtyla mentions the commitment of the Church to social realities in his encyclical mentioned, asserting that the Church is an “expert in humanity” and that this capacity requires him to announce the good news of the Gospel in the public sphere of human endeavor, an area where the desire for happiness and achievement of justice that lies within the human heart is carried out. The gospel is a public statement about what is good. Hence it affects all “various fields in which men and women develop their activities,” but, it warned, this intervention is not always done fully, in a way satisfactory to all. The Church and the lives of Christians, like Christ, is a sign of contradiction.⁴ In summary, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* was just expanding further the themes of Paul VI in the *Populorum Progressio* which had not been fully developed, such as the need for a deeper foundation of politics in morality, and the urgency and imperative of social justice. The problems facing the second half of the decade of eighties were

not so different from the way Paul VI had portrayed the sixties. Nor was the desire for freedom and longing of Paraguayans for democracy different from that of other peoples in Latin America or Eastern Europe. No one imagined then that, less than a year Juan Paul II delivered the above-mentioned homily, the dictatorial regime of Alfredo Stroessner would be overthrown.⁵ But neither would anyone be able to deny the visible and dramatic influence of the Church's return to evangelism, complete with martyrs and heroic gestures, in cracking the impenetrable walls of the regime which collapsed after 34 years of ironclad authoritarianism.

4. Pope Wojtyla also communicated something more through his pastoral posture: religion as a foundational source of moral principles, in this case Catholic, not only strengthens democracy, but saves it from its own totalitarian impulses.⁶ He implicitly indicated that there was a lesson to be learned from the hermeneutic of continuity and renovation, a lesson that there are certain basic truths that inform democracy, and that these truths, even if their sources spring from religion, they do possess rationality in and of themselves and hence have the right to shape public reason. The idea was, in fact, but an application of what was said in the letter and spirit, in certain documents of Council Vatican II: that freedom, especially religious freedom, and democracy were "a sign of the times;" that the church saw as part of her ministry.⁷ Hence, faith was not a threat to a democratic political system or to pluralism, but on the contrary, it constituted a source of values such as justice and freedom which, in the case of the Paraguayan dictatorship, were being distorted and manipulated by political power and the legal system. Historical reality thus showed, in a fatal conclusion, the true pretention of the public dimension of religion and the Church. Democratization and liberalization were, then, the "sign of the times," the yearning for liberation, with its cry for justice and freedom not only from the old but

also the then newly-formed democracies of those years, showing their determination and, despite living in the midst of material poverty, inner desire to escape from political oppression.

5. Today, the drama of this history and its cultural landscape is different. Not only has the notion of development become more complex while sweeping explanations and historical narratives and ideologies have become unsatisfactory and inadequate, but also the very definition of humanity and humanism have become almost unintelligible. The Church, an expert in humanity? Just proposing such claim, even uttering it, becomes difficult because there appears to be no consensus, much less certainty, on what a human being is, what it is that makes a human being so. Thus, a fragmented and multicultural era, diverse, pluralistic, ecumenical and relativistic, has replaced that of the eighties, with an almost unprecedented challenge to the universalist claims of the Catholic Church and of most of religious beliefs. The truth of certain propositions, it should be noted, seems to have ceased to exist. It is not possible or feasible, nor apparently legitimate, for a Christian to suggest basing a norm on a moral belief derived from religious experience because it would undermine the very foundations of democratic pluralism.

6. It is not surprising then that some sectors of Paraguayan and other Latin America societies, echoing the European and North American reality, question the Church's intrusion into matters of personal ethics such as abortion, euthanasia, and human sexuality in general.⁸ The Church advances, it is argued, intolerable limits on reproductive rights.⁹ The rationale of that claim is that religion is a private matter and should not be imposed from those beliefs and values in those who do not share them.¹⁰ Therefore, the morality derived from these principles should not shape the law because not all citizens in a liberal democratic society share the same faith. But the scientific foundations of the claims of believers are also questioned; assertions based on religious grounds should be excluded from the public sphere since their being religious means

they necessarily appeal to the authority of a text, an institution, or a faith and as such lack the scientific legitimacy required.¹¹ It is revealing that the ideological and political propositions are not necessarily in themselves supported by “scientific” facts; even the social sciences do not enjoy the same scientific status as the natural sciences, but, it must be noted, no one disputes their legitimacy as much as the Church’s propositions.

7. The role of the Church in the world today, however, creates a curious paradox. Here it is: while previously the Church’s criticism was welcomed as a form of democratic ferment with its denunciations of the abuses and the violation of human rights, the tendency and the tone have changed; the Church is rejected because it shouldn’t be meddling in political and moral issues, as this supposedly seriously affects the foundation of the democratic ethos. The Church’s proposals are supposedly discriminatory and undemocratic. They would be constitute “intrusive, and “illegitimate” meddling” in public affairs. This suggests that, on occasions, it is the content of its teaching that is rejected and, at other times, it is the imposition of that content on the rest of the political community, suggesting the impossibility of reconciling a liberal democratic regime with the morality [or some aspects of it] with the Church. This negative perspective of the Church portrays it not as an “expert in humanity,” but rather as “l’infâme” as Voltaire called it, a reactionary bastion of a vision of the moral reality that should be overcome.

8. This paper seeks to examine the moral legitimacy of the reasons why a religion such as Christianity or more specifically the Catholic Church must have a public presence. It is not the intent of this study to justify the claim that Christianity or Catholicism or any other religious belief should be “official,” legally or constitutionally. Rather, the perspective given here is more modest: it is the claim that there are fundamental truths of religious origin about personal ethics, life and sexuality, whose contribution to the debate is enriching for the formation of the political

ethos. The approach of this work is thus rather than strictly legal or constitutional, pertaining to the validity of this moral claim.

9. In order to do so, first the reasons for the repeated criticism so often called "fundamentalist" church will be analyzed. Then, the position of the Church with respect to modernity in general, and from the reading of Council Vatican II will be offered as a historic turning point. Finally, an explanation will be offered for the conviction that the proposal of the Church, while incompatible with a liberal democratic system that provides little or no room for religion, is compatible with a broader liberal democratic tradition, open to the inclusion of the content of certain fundamental values and principles.

THE REJECTIONS OF THE CHURCH

10. It is imperative to examine, first, some of the arguments in opposition to the public presence of the Church. This leads, in itself, to three basic claims: *its lack of scientific validity, its intolerance, and its integrationism*, which pointing to the absolutist nature of the institution and that, therefore, give it a lasting character of fundamentalist temptations, obliterating the boundaries between the private and the public, and imposing a comprehensive view of the good by the fiat of its authority, whether ecclesiastical, Holy Scripture, or an authoritative text. Therefore, the Church (as well as other groups of religious beliefs) would be holding back the democratic progress, contrary to the multicultural richness, rejecting certain values with particular regard to the ethics of life and human sexuality, thus preventing consensus from being reached on a core group of fundamental values for political life. In any case, the claim of truth for certain propositions claimed by the Church would go against the rights to freedom and self-realization that each citizen possesses for themselves.

11. The first claim rejects the moral standing of the Church for its inherent irrationality. The Church proposes a series of statements that have no foundation in rationality or science. It is instead morality based on dogmatic assumptions lacking scientific rigor, and it would therefore be problematic if it were implemented as a matter of public policy. This critique carries serious consequences, for a public morality requires a kind of objective rationality that the Church would not be able offer. It would also pose a limitation to technology as an irresistible force transforming nature that undergoes continual metamorphosis to adapt to the winds of scientific progress.¹² The morality proposed by the Church would be thus tinged with prejudice, but it would also imply something more: ideological knowledge, namely, a series of values based on revealed faith, and socialized, and then believed, by a group with a mission to impose it on others. The denunciation of this claim has become vociferous in some cases, where concepts like dignity are rejected as "stupid," devoid of any meaningful hermeneutical significance, and moreover as a merely subjective, vague notion difficult to assign any real moral weight.¹³ All this would imply unjust interference with the rest of society, imposed on the grounds of an unsubstantiated scientific claim, which should therefore be restricted to the private sphere.

12. This leads to a second attitude of criticism and rejection, that is, of a latent intolerance of the religious believers, who are described as stubborn in so far as lacking any rational explanations of their beliefs, so they are stuck in an intransigent posture, and therefore have no other available means of persuasion than the arbitrary imposition of their views on others. Only the neutrality of the state would be what protects from this form of authoritarianism, converting it thus into the legitimate alternative, the legal antidote against such irrationality and intolerance. The rational attitude would then be that in a pluralistic democracy, the coexistence of diverse versions of what the good life is requires a neutral arbitrator, a neutral state. The best vision of

politics for liberal democratic societies, then, would be that which proposes that the law and the state be neutral with respect to issues of life such as abortion and euthanasia, and in short, to the central themes of bioethics and human sexuality. The public presence of a church or religious experience would then, be, incompatible with this neutrality. The point is that the call to divinity, of whatever sign, should not be an obstacle to the State.

13. The absence of scientific rationality together with intolerance will result, thus, in a vision of the cultural and political life where the church (or other faiths) is accused of fundamentalism: a single total, paralyzing, rigid view, incapable of noticing the nuances of pluralism, and far less the historicity of moral and political realities. This perspective entails a monochromatic bias, and such would be, *a fortiori*, the religious morality that it professes. Integrationism would destroy the democratic dialogue, for its inherent need to impose its arbitrary, irrational and ideological beliefs. For the fundamentalist, then there would not be mediation; what is morally good comes from God's will whose commands are simply to be obeyed.¹⁴ All of this leads to an attitude sentencing the Church to a role of permanent fundamentalism, in allusion to the intimate, symbiotic integration it operates in the domain of the political and religious. These two normative orders would be fatally undifferentiated. The moral-ecclesiastic morality would be a hindrance to the advancement of science and biotechnology; generating intolerance and proposing a structure for society that is incompatible with a liberal democratic regime. The all-encompassing view of the Church would not leave room for any distinction between law and morality, public and private, the person and human life.

III. FROM THE ENLIGHTENED MODERNITY TO THE HERMENEUTICS OF VATICAN II

14. To understand the position of the Church and to avoid the misunderstandings that have been spelled out, it is imperative to employ a reading from the experience of the church as historical subject, without appealing to a conception of ideology. The Christian faith is neither a closed system from history nor a way of life divorced from the human drama.¹⁵ Nor is it intended to be taken as a finished product without any further refinements or corrections necessary. It is a unique experience – a vision of reality and things – and as such, only becomes intelligible when one becomes part of it. In that sense, one does not make the decision to be a Christian by appealing to intellectual or moral arguments, but following the model for life proposed by Christ.¹⁶ This leads us to make a brief summary of the process of how the Church came to terms with the modern project up to a key point in the twentieth century, Vatican Council II. It should be noted, that this council was, in this process, a privileged moment for the Church, a turning point, a time of synthesis between Christianity and modernity. It was a moment of encounter, dialogue and openness to enlightened modernity not confrontation and mutual accusations.¹⁷

15. But why is that there was a need for a kind of synthesis, and a kind of reconciliation with modernity? The main reason, not the only one, was the presumed hostility of the modern project to the Church. The fact is that the emphasis on subjectivity and consciousness, experimental rationality and the so-called new science, put the Church on the defensive.¹⁸ The project of modernity would advance experimental science and rationality so that the irrationality and superstition of religion could be substituted and surpassed. That was the reading and the position of Max Weber and especially of someone else very critical of the role of religion, Emile Durkheim. The modern self wanted to understand itself, as a modern consciousness, a “worldly” conscience – with an awareness of being living in the world – a possibility of life given by

reason, self-sufficient, without any aid or reference from above. It must be noticed, however, that modernity was not necessarily hostile to religion as such. It was certainly secularizing but in a way – as the sociologist Peter Berger has noted, "pluralizing," as well, that is, "a process of integrating the various versions of reality, beliefs, values and visions of the world," modernity is not characterized by the absence of God but by different gods."¹⁹

16. But this process of secularization (or separation of the sacred) was not always a stable continuum without surprises.²⁰ There were times of rejection, and times of closeness, but when the tenuous unity of the modern project and religious experience was broken, especially after and because of the Enlightenment, a new trend of secularism would absorb the entire process of secularization making it markedly irreligious. Since then, the road between enlightened modernity and the Church was widened, making any reconciliation very difficult. That was at the root of the contemporary hostility to a possible synthesis between modernity and the Church, the sacred and secular society, the first understood as rational, open, while the second was seen as rigid, unchanging, dogmatic, and intolerant. Hence, we can speak today of secularism not only as a single negative way of rejecting religion – an anticlerical, anti-Christian position but also, as a positive, all-encompassing positing, a substitute for religion, a vision of the world, with its beliefs about substantive issues, such as life, morality, with its "priests" and "churches," its ideas about the role of science and, above all, with a mission of quasi-religious fervor that these principles be embodied the political and legal of contemporary democratic liberal society.²¹

17. The event of Vatican II, constituted, in this historic process, a privileged moment and attempt by the Church to respond to the challenges of enlightened modernity.²² The Catholic Church embraced the process of secularization in the sense of recognizing a legitimate autonomy to the secular world, but this position did not amount to sanction secularism as a worldview

rejecting God, entrusting to him only the construction of history.²³ The council exceeded and surpassed the antinomy Church-modernity or traditionalism-modernism, deepening its own anthropology, its own vision of the human person.²⁴ The Church sees potential conflicts between the rationality of instrumental knowledge and the ethical ends of any political society. Thus, the new approach to judging, assessing, and challenging contemporary society in such difficult cases will be drawn from a view of the human person endowed with the intrinsic value of human life and dignity, a renewed hermeneutical approach brought about by the *Gaudium et Spes*.²⁵ This new anthropological hermeneutics would bring unexpected consequences, such as a non-ideological view of society.²⁶ The Christian faith cannot be reduced to ethics, or to ideology. It requires a life-experience, which should nurture first a way of life, an experience of solidarity, which in turn, render a morality, and this lead people to confront their own humanity, finding and capturing their own freedom.²⁷

IV. THE CHURCH AND THE LIBERAL- DEMOCRATIC REGIME

18. Dignity is the key concept for reading the Church's assessment of situations of injustice or moral disorder just as it is, according to some, the sign of its stupidity. It must be noted that the dignity attached to human beings is not only rationally justified according to nature of persons as persons – the long-standing appeal to natural law – but also implies a religious assertion that, thanks to the event of the Incarnation, human beings were not been alienated from themselves. Without that tradition, concepts such as solidarity, responsibility, common good, freedom of conscience, or even secularity would be difficult to discern within a liberal democratic regime.²⁸ Modern democracy not only owes to Christianity those concepts but it

requires them to justify its own moral claims. It is particularly interesting enough that while the Church's desire is to humanize society and the temporal order by serving as an instrument of love, its actions are interpreted contradictorily; on the one hand, it has been welcomed as a "progressive and modern force" when defending the dignity of immigrants or of fair wages, denouncing the violation of human rights, and the inhumanity of a preventive war, but on the other hand, it is rejected and labeled as reactionary and conservative and traditionalist when it proposes a way of living human sexuality.²⁹ Then people complain that the church should not intrude into secular matters wielding a concept of dignity (and moral) knowledge based on the supernatural, etc. This brings us back to the initial claim of this presentation. Is reconciliation possible between religion, or the Catholic Church, and a liberal democratic regime?

The answer is yes, and it was precisely John Paul II, as a proponent of that affirmative assertion by warning Paraguayans of the perils of not taking the church's views into consideration. The point is if God is marginalized from the conscience of mankind, democracy becomes empty, sliding slowly into the torpor of inaction, slouching slowly towards a "soft" totalitarianism.³⁰

19. The affirmation of John Paul II in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* that the human person is the way of the Church points to the central aspect on which turns the democratic program proposed by the Church. This is the criterion of dignity, subtracted from the political maneuverings which, as proposed truth that makes man free, is to guide the conduct and political action of citizens. A procedural democracy is not enough. The Church proposed a conception of justice where human dignity occupied a central place.³¹ Bracketing or ignoring this view will make a liberal democratic regime powerless and powerless to defend itself.³² Given the belief in the inability to ever arrive at the *terra firme* of truth that some skeptics claim, the configuration

of the individual and their rights would be left in the hands of powerful and the back and forth sway of public opinion.³³

20. The insight of John Paul II's statement is, on these considerations, striking; it is that without a sense of God, the chances of human beings to acknowledge their own humanity becomes problematic. That leads us to the debate regarding the membership of the human condition.³⁴ Why, ultimately, does the human person deserve respect and protection? Contrary to contemporary utilitarianism which reduces the individual to utility, the claim of a theistic perspective of the person avoids the risks of a near-absolute autonomy that makes the individual the sole and ultimate criterion for defining what is human which may lead to propositions which will not only be difficult to argue but morally repulsive. Bracketing religious faith and moral conviction thus prevents a better understanding of what being human constitutes. There is no reason to believe, as Professor Sandel suggests, that "in principle why in any given case, we might not conclude that, on due reflection, some moral or religious doctrines are more plausible than others."³⁵ But if contemporary liberalism limits public reason by preventing the discussion of comprehensive moral view such as those of the Catholic Church, then we must go back to the questions formulated much earlier, that is, whether it is possible to support a religious belief and a liberal democratic regime? Is there any chance one can be a liberal and "Catholic"?

21. The answer is affirmative but a more precise terminology might be necessary. Liberal democratic "Catholics" referred to here are not the same as those identified with procedural liberalism. The liberalism of Kant and that bearing a Rawlsian imprint, it must be noticed, give primacy of rights over the good. This is the liberalism which has proposed bracketing moral and religious convictions.³⁶ This liberalism is hesitant about the possibility of agreement on the nature of truth, so that all that remains is the affirmation of tolerance, fairness and, mutual

respect as core values. The fact that there would not be a comprehensive conception of the good – religious and moral truths should be bracketed – make possible the principles of a public discourse not be based on those views but on those of a "shared culture." Hence, a democratic, liberal, and pluralistic political culture will be derived from principles itself provides, those accepted by the majority based on an "overlapping consensus." But if this is so, is this procedure not proposing a "principle" in itself, that is, a liberal secularist comprehensive vision which is then imposed upon others?³⁷

22. This version of liberalism is precisely that which tends to slide into relativism which, in turn, makes it impossible to put limits on the power to define what a human being is.³⁸ The claim is that although arguments inspired by religious belief may be reasonable most of the time, this does not make them necessarily so. Put in the position of voting against abortion, it limits the right of women to choose based on a comprehensive vision of the good that has no place in the public square. Given this alternative, not merely procedural but substantive, that of human dignity based on a religious belief for instance, the Church's position is irrational and can not be accommodated. But, it must be said, this view is inconsistent with the reality of the fact of religious experience, something altogether important for human existence, but that also promotes a moral vacuum that hinders any moral claims as to why citizens must tolerate others and the freedom of others.³⁹ Expressing a political conception of justice by proposing substantive truth does not imply the denial of rights, but on the contrary, seeks to provide a foundation, first, by reflecting on what constitutes a good life in the sense that Aristotle⁴⁰ proposed or, in the development of anthropology as a John Paul II, and the tradition of Church has consistently taught. It must not be assumed either that democracy may well be a substitute for morality, let

alone the fact that the pretensions of truth of certain moral propositions have generated unjust and even tyrannical impositions.⁴¹

23. This brings us to three very modest basic ideas regarding a democratic liberal and "Catholic" regime that will give rise to a new secularism. The first is the concept of dignity that is conceived as an objective and intrinsic human good, as a minimum ethical foundation. Without a measure of what constitutes rights or pluralism, all goods are in serious peril of becoming negotiable, so freedom becomes emptied of content, and hence the concept of dignity itself will be contradicted.⁴² If this situation occurs we will merely have a "caricature" of a democratic state.⁴³ It should be insisted that if there is no basic agreement on substantive truths, then there will be no criterion on which the limit of tolerance can be founded, and the plausibility of any shared ethic will be difficultly reached.⁴⁴ This indicates the reasons for the Church to be heard and to voice what it considers legitimate in matters of morality and to plead for their incorporation into law.⁴⁵ Among these truths are the proposals on sexuality and marriage as an expression of the nature of love where the Church contests the moral permissibility of certain actions in terms of functions and inclinations and not merely of desires.⁴⁶ The claim of neutrality of the law regarding matrimony, neutrality which is being asked of the Church, is in and of itself a moral claim. It proposes a perspective of those who see an alternative as more persuasive, that is, not heterosexual but gay marriage. Neutrality undermines not only the argument of the Church but also of those who offer a different proposal.

24. Second is the idea of liberty not as a negative but a positive value for human dignity. Freedom proposed not simply in terms of what is avoided but that which affirms the fundamental condition of human sociability, the truth of man. Freedom not as the manifestation of a desire to do what one wants, but rather as what one ought to in accordance with the natural functions. The

individual is not defined by absolute autonomy, but as a part of a community where they are raised, generating solidarity. A society where if a maximum of freedom is guaranteed, there is need to reach to some basic agreement. But if there is no reference to what is human and what it represents, truthfully, then we return to the membership problem already mentioned, swamped again in the sands of relativism, where everything would be negotiable.⁴⁷ The reasons why one should advocate for the poor or the objectivity of solidarity are left lacking any final, plausible justification.⁴⁸

Third comes the idea that this model of political regime, nourished by certain truths and inspired by religion, does not advocate the arbitrary justification for these values, or that they are accepted based on a criterion of authority but by their reasonableness and evidence. The opposite would be a fundamentalist position.⁴⁹ A faith which seeks understanding is not arbitrary. This content comprises a vision and a position which if rejected *prima facie* on the grounds that it is religious would be an arbitrary rejection, a critique which precisely will fall into what it rejects, a fundamentalist secularism.⁵⁰ In a democracy, something is always “imposed,” the question is how to avoid arriving at the “imposition;” on a whim or arbitrary basis but on an agreement from its own perspective, in competing and engaging in dialogue with other legitimate proposals, suggesting evidence and not by appealing to an alleged “neutrality,” of a hypothetical “shared political culture, which in itself is just a negative conception of the good.”⁵¹

26. Thus, the final product is a positive secular perspective that is born with dignity, freedom and in conformity with human experience. This refers to a model of secular state, secular and open to opportunities to all denominations, all forms of religious freedom. One thing is a secularist state, adverse and hostile to any proposed ethics derived from faith, quite another would be a secular state, where the state, although not professing an official religion, allows

proposal coming from religious claims. A secular state is not hostile to religion, a secularist state might be. Christiano-phobia? Our aim is not complain about that supposedly “phobia” but rather, as explained, the crux of the problem and the debate is between a concept that argues for the privacy of religion and, another, which welcomes it to the public square. Stroessner’s regime unsuccessfully attempted to marginalize and persecute this form of political action. In the early twenty-first century, the economic and financial crisis call for a dialogue that must necessarily address the problem of ethics of the person if it is to rebuild a civilization worthy of human beings.

27. Christians and non-believers must both be open to a dialogue of mutual respect.⁵² Catholics, paying attention to the new challenges of secularized culture ever since Vatican II, in recognition not only of their own sinful nature, but also of the sins committed in the past recognized by John Paul II; the enlightened denizens of secularism recognizing that when acting in its role citizens of one state should not deny [...] that the images of the religious world have the potential to express truth, or deny the right of believers to contribute to religious language in public debate.⁵³ How should the dialogue begin? By learning from one another, as Josef Ratzinger suggested, following Jürgen Habermas,⁵⁴ recognizing the limits of both sides, of faith and pure reason; in a word, purifying the pathologies of religion with reason and noting the hubris of reason without faith.⁵⁵ This brings us back to the initial question of this paper. Could there be any compatibility between religion and a liberal democratic regime? Certainly. John Paul II told precisely Paraguayans twenty years ago that if God is confined to the conscience of humanity, democracy becomes empty, sliding slowly into the indolence of inaction, the reluctance to stand up for values, and disengagement from the things that really matter.

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¹ “Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?” in *The Dialectics of Secularization. On Reason and Religion*, Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, p. 50

² Truth and Tolerance, *Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2004, p. 145.

³ Juan Pablo II, Homily to the Builders of Society, May 11988.

⁴ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41.

⁵ Stroessner was deposed by a coup d’etat on February 3, 1989..

⁶ This perspective will be explained and developed further three years later with the publication of the Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* on May 1, 1991. So, says the Pope in the encyclical that "A true democracy is possible only under the rule of law and based on a correct understanding of the human person," [...] However, today we tend to say that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and attitude essential for the democratic political forms, "[...] but, nevertheless, be noted that, if there is no ultimate truth, which guides and directs political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. A democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism as history shows. "(John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46)

⁷ In the final days of the Council on December 8, 1965, Pope Paul VI, answered questions about the temporal power with the following question: "What do they want from the Church today? – And the Pope replied: "She [the Church] says in one of her major documents. She [the Church] asks from you freedom, freedom to believe and preach her faith, freedom to love and serve God, freedom to live and to bring her message of human life.,” quoted by Cardinal Avery Dulles SJ on Religious Freedom: Innovation and Development, *First Things* (December 2001).

⁸ The trend towards an feverish secularism in the realm of politics or the public square is to promote, as the sociologist Peter Berger observes, as a part of a international intelligentsia enlightened elite with Europeans overtones. See Peter L. Berger "Secularization Falsified," *First Things* (February 2008).

⁹ It should be noted that this argument, if accepted, must also be for any kind of moral discourse and not just those who base their claims on religious knowledge. Look at this view in Sweetman, Brendan, *Why Politics Needs Religion. The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Arguments*, Intervarsity Press, 206 pp. 150

¹⁰ Note a recent case in the United States, that of Proposition 8 on 4 November 2008 which proposed to reserve the very definition of marriage to heterosexual couples, not to those of the same sex in the Constitution of the State of California. The initiative argued that this concept must be explicit because heterosexual marriage is an institution essential to society. Opponents to the measure, which narrowly lost (52% to 48%) claimed that it was successful thanks to the efforts of religious groups that have sought to use state power to impose their beliefs on their fellow citizens without considering whether the people share their beliefs. It is interesting to note that, non-believers, generally were opposed to the measure. These religious communities in favor were mainly Protestants, Mormons and Catholics. But this position, professor Geoffrey Stone said, constitute "a serious threat to a free society that is committed to the principle of separation of church and state,” and that "religion should be private, " and "should be [reserved] to the individual." See Geoffrey Stone, "Democracy, Religion and Proposition 8." posted in *The Huffington Post* (November 15, 2008)

¹¹ This is the position recently held by the Paraguayan daily newspaper ABC Color in his editorial on March 2008; that is, only a laicist, neutral state, would be identified with liberal democracy.

¹² Social movements, including groups of gays, lesbians and left-wing associations, marched Saturday through the streets of Rome in the third edition of the protest "Not to the Vatican," against which they consider "interference "from the Vatican in Italian politics." Demonstrators, more than a thousand, according to the police, roamed the streets of Rome with banners criticizing the invasion of the Holy See in the open debate in the country on the law of civil union, artificial insemination, and abortion. AFP, January 4th, 2008, 10:15 am. Rome..

¹³ This is the opinion of Professor Steven Pinker, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard. See Pinker, Steven, "Stupidity of Dignity" in *The New Republic*, May 28, 2008)

¹⁴ This is the standard response to the ancient and ever-renewed question of Socrates/Euthyphro question : in the Platonic dialogues, that is, morality is good because it is commanded by the gods or is it commanded by them because it is good. The voluntarism of integrism does not see moral goodness in itself, but as long as it is willed by God or divinity. If so, then there would not be other way but to obey, because the nature of the originator of the claim becomes indisputable moral, dogmatic judge.

¹⁵ The vision of the world from the faith – a worldview - it involves a philosophy of life and also of practical philosophy, which includes the belief that life is a gift, human beings has a role to play and a final destiny, a history, that they are endowed by freedom that comes from the truth of human dignity and so on. Not all of these beliefs can be rationally demonstrated, at least, completely rationally demonstrated, but the same goes for the secularist stance. This is the vision of the world that says that the universe spontaneously arises from a combination of primordial elements, human nature does not exist but is built, or evolves, so morality is nothing but an expression of that evolutionary process , which requires freedom of choice; on this topic see, Sweetman, Brendan, op. cit., Chapter 2.

¹⁶ This topic was explained at length by Benedict XVI in his Encyclical *Spe Salvi*.

¹⁷ Vatican II was an historic event which emphasized the necessity not only of "renewing the sources" but, above all, a new dialogue, and openness to the world a central in the experience of human subjectivity. The experience of faith becomes an existential significance. The issue was of reasonableness and objectivity of truth for the believer's life. The council seems to echo Kierkegaard sentiment, that is, : if a truth is not a reality with which and by which a person can live, making it intimately hers, then, any official or objective truth, would therefore be divorced from life and be meaningless.

¹⁸ Modernity extends from the end of the Middle Ages to today. This process will include a series of facts and events that advocate a new role of human consciousness exemplified among others by Renaissance humanism, the Protestant-style individualism, the liberal enlightenment, collectivism, all of which, has presented a continuous challenge to the Church. See Lucio Gera, "Christianity and Modernity," *Nexo Magazine*, September 1986, pp. 64-65.

¹⁹ Berger, Peter, op. cit. p. 24.

²⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 23.

²¹ On the omnicomprehensive of contemporary secularism, see Sweetman, Brandon, op. cit., p. 60-83.

²² This was the new perspective of Vatican II that calls all Catholics to share the hopes and aspirations of modern man, making an effort to "redeem the times," taking part of that quest for freedom, the science and harmony in the construction of the city politics.

²³ Cfr The Pastoral Constitution of the Church for the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* 36, was issued by Pablo VI, December, 1965..

²⁴ Juan Pablo II, *Memory and Identity*, *Conversation at the Dawn of a Millennium* Rizzoli, New York, 2005, p.111

²⁵ See especailly *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

²⁶ Cfr. Karol Wojtyla, *Sources of Renewal. The Implementation of Vatican II*; Harper & Row, 1975, p. 17.

²⁷ "Jesus Christ [He] came into the world to call man back to the depth of all questions, to his own fundamental structure, and to his own real situation;" Giussani, Luigi, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen University press, London, 1998., p. 97

²⁸ "For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than a just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which spring the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love," Jurgen Habermas, cited by Novak, Michael, *No One Sees God, The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers* Doubleday, New York, 2008, p. 254

²⁹ This is what the theologian Karl Ranher called "anthropological revolution" of the Council, that is, an Christological anthropology which take the human person as the way of the Church. See John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*; op. cit., p.112.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Centessimus Annus* N. 42

³¹ "The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate. Thus she cannot encourage the formation of narrow ruling groups which usurp the power of the State for individual interests or for ideological ends. Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the "subjectivity" of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility. Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends. It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism." JP II, *Centessimus Annus* , N. 46. .

³² This is what the Canadian philosopher George Grant suggests, that is, the decision to legalize abortion in the United States, the ruling *Roe v. Wade* has been like a cup of poison on the lips of a liberal, a threat to the life of liberalism itself, by suspending any judgments of a definition of

what constitutes a human person as such. See about this issue in Ramos-Reyes, Mario, "The Right to Privacy: A Cup of Poison held to the Lips of the liberal Unpublished paper. 2006.

³³ "If all views can be equally tolerated as none of them is true, and if man has no capacity to know the truth, then what remains is only the will to power," see Buttiglione, Rocco. Karol Wojtyla. The Thought of the Man who became Pope John Paul II, William B. Eerdmans publishing Company, Cambridge, UK, 1997, p.192

³⁴ This issue of membership of the human in contemporary culture as one of the most interesting features in JP II ethical proposal, was recently suggested by Professor David Solomon, University of Notre Dame..

³⁵ See Political Liberalism, in Justice. A Reader. Edited by Michael Sandel. Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 374

³⁶ Sandel, Michael, Democracy's Discontent. America in Search of a Public Philosophy The Belknap Press, Harvard, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, pp. 17-20.

³⁷ Cfr. Swetman, Bradan, op. cit. 166-167.

³⁸ It is revealing the case of the permissibility of abortion the contemporary culture, mentioned by Rawls himself.

³⁹ See about this Redemptor Hominis de 1979, and also the Gaudium et Spes. .

⁴⁰ A Aristotle's Politics, especially 1323 a14,

⁴¹ See Evangelium Vitae [Gospel of Life], 1995, N. 70.

⁴² Idem

⁴³ idem.

⁴⁴ Ibidem., N. 19

⁴⁵ Ibidem, N. 71,

⁴⁶ See George, Robert P; op. cit. p. 76.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, N. 20

⁴⁸ Idem.

⁴⁹ Nehaus, Richard, "Proposing Democracy Anew "First Things," November 1999, p. 90.

⁵⁰ Professor Brendam Sweetman coined the term "seculocracy" as the opposite version to "theocracy;" see op. cit., p. 65-6

⁵¹ See Swetman, op. cit., p. 178

⁵² The late Avery Cardinal Dulles referred to the mistakes of the past. During the Reformation, Protestants and Catholic kings, often exiled, arrested and executed those who did not adhere to the religion of the state. Also, Christians of different traditions often have persecuted Jews, Gypsies and other minorities.

See on this, Cardenal Avery Dulles, Religious Freedom: Innovation and Development,, First Things, (2001)

⁵³ Habermas, Juerguen y Josef Ratzinger, op. cit. p. 51.

⁵⁴ Habermas, Juerguen y Josef Ratzinger, op. cit. p. 77-8.

⁵⁵ Interesting is the fact that Habermas refers to natural law of the Spaniard theologians in the Sixteenth century as a contribution to the foundation of human rights, op. cit., p. 2.