

Joseph Ratzinger as Doctor of Incarnate Beauty

Tracey Rowland

To cite this article: Tracey Rowland (2020) Joseph Ratzinger as Doctor of Incarnate Beauty, Church, Communication and Culture, 5:2, 235-247, DOI: [10.1080/23753234.2020.1768130](https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2020.1768130)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2020.1768130>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 06 Jul 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2717



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Check for updates

Joseph Ratzinger as Doctor of Incarnate Beauty*

Tracey Rowland

Department of Philosophy and Theology, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Joseph Ratzinger is a theologian with the stature of a Church Doctor, notwithstanding the fact that he did not develop a theological system in the manner of other ‘big name’ theologians of the twentieth century such as Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. The author argues that it is Ratzinger’s manner of responding to the contemporary crisis in fundamental theology that is his outstanding intellectual contribution to the life of the Church, along with his effect of a Christocentric turn in magisterial theology and his defence of beauty within his theology of culture.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 March 2020

Revised 8 May 2020

Accepted 8 May 2020

KEYWORDS

Culture; Ratzinger; beauty; correlationism; church doctor

The title of Church Doctor is normally conferred upon someone who is deemed to have made a significant contribution to the resolution of intellectual problems in the life of the Church, especially where the intellectual issues have considerable pastoral consequences. Many scholars believe that in the future Joseph Ratzinger is likely to have the mantle of Church Doctor conferred upon him for this reason.

Nonetheless there are others who dismiss such judgments. Typically critics point to the fact that unlike other big-name twentieth century theologians, such as Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Ratzinger never developed his own theological system. As he himself once remarked, his aim was never to develop what he called ‘an isolated theology’ that he ‘drew out of himself’ but rather a theology ‘that opens as widely as possible into the common intellectual pathways of the faith’ (Ratzinger 1997, 66). One of his former doctoral students, Fr Vincent Twomey, remarked: ‘his methodology is to take as his starting point contemporary developments in society and culture, and then, he listens to the solutions offered by his fellow theologians before turning to a critical examination of Scripture and Tradition for pointers to a solution. He finally attempts a systematic answer by presenting the topic in the context of theology as a whole’ (Twomey 2007). As a consequence of this approach his

CONTACT Tracey Rowland tracey.rowland@nd.edu.au Department of Philosophy and Theology, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Australia

*This paper was presented as an occasional lecture at Santa Croce University in Rome, December 4, 2019. Material in some of its sections has already appeared in the essay ‘Beyond the Correlationist Paradigm’ published in the author’s *The Culture of the Incarnation: Essays in Catholic Theology* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic 2017) and in the *Benedict XVI* volume of *Bloomsbury’s Guide for the Perplexed* Series published in 2010.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

academic output is fragmentary – it is ‘filled with brilliant insights into almost every subject of theology and yet it is not a fixed system’ (Twomey 2007).

A whole book could be written exploring these brilliant insights with reference to contemporary fault-lines in the field of fundamental theology. Unlike in other periods of Church history when there has been some dominant theological issue creating a pastoral crisis, such as the battles in the early Church over Christology, or the battles in the medieval period over the reception of Greek philosophy or the battles in the sixteenth century over ecclesiology and sacramentality, today if we name *any* area in the field of fundamental theology we usually find that it is a battle zone.

In his *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ratzinger described the most serious crisis in contemporary theology as the problem of understanding the mediation of history in the realm of ontology (Ratzinger, 1987, 160). Fergus Kerr OP, in his *Versions of Thomism*, suggested that the most bitter battle in twentieth century Catholic theology was over the relationship between nature and grace, while, from another angle, Karl Rahner drew attention to the issue of how people in the post-Conciliar era understood the relationship between faith and reason (Kerr 2002). Rahner noted that after the Second Vatican Council the call for Catholic scholars to be more engaged with ideas from outside the Church’s own academies meant that Catholic theologians were confronted with numerous philosophies that cannot be synthesised with each other, and as a consequence ‘theology today is experiencing perforce what we may be permitted to call its ‘gnoseological concupiscence’ (Rahner 1992, 52). Every student of theology has heard of Rahner’s phrase the ‘supernatural existential’ but his concept of a ‘gnoseological concupiscence’, though much less cited, is just as important for fundamental theology as the supernatural existential is for theological anthropology.

In this context of the faith and reason relationship, a major fault-line is between those theologians who believe that Christian theology needs to be rewritten taking its lead from contemporary social theory as a new handmaiden to theology, and those who believe that social theory is never theologically neutral and that before any such theory can be adopted as a handmaiden it first needs to be thoroughly studied for its theological presuppositions, which may or may not be consistent with what we know through revelation. This fault-line also connects to Ratzinger’s history and ontology fault-line since some social theories reject ontology altogether. This has major implications for the territory of scriptural hermeneutics. The same passage of scripture will be interpreted very differently by a feminist theologian than by a nonfeminist theologian, and those who accept social theories derived from the Marxist tradition will often have quite radically different interpretations from those who are critical of the Marxist tradition and so on. The feminist and Marxist traditions are also the subject of many internal divisions, so different subspecies of feminist and Marxist (Liberation) theologians will often have different interpretations of scripture from each other. Even the understanding of tradition as scripture’s historical partner is far from stable. Theologians influenced by postmodern philosophies have completely different understandings of the nature of tradition and how it should operate within a theological framework from those who are not post-moderns and who continue to believe that the truths of the faith do not change from one generation to the next. Depending on what one thinks of base-line issues like the nature of tradition and revelation, one can come

up with totally different and dialectically alternative ecclesiologies. Then there is a raft of soteriological questions which feed into the territories of eschatology and political theology. Where people stand on the issue of the theology of Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) and especially his theory of the three ages of salvation history will often be important for these areas.

One could therefore write a doctoral length thesis examining how Joseph Ratzinger dealt with each of the critical couplets in fundamental theology such as history and ontology, nature and grace, faith and reason, scripture and tradition and the raft of soteriological questions to piece together a Ratzingerian fundamental theology and no doubt doctoral students are already working on parts of this project. Catholic theology is a vast tapestry of interconnected threads and it's important to understand how in Ratzinger's mind the threads were woven together. The removal of threads or strands in one area will have dramatic repercussions in others. There is no way that issues can be isolated to one particular subfield and neatly classified as, for example, merely a matter of canon law, or merely a matter of pastoral theology. In the end, everything is related in some way to everything else.

When one looks at the collected works of Joseph Ratzinger, it seems as though he has spent his life trying to mend bits of the tapestry that have frayed in one area and have thereby created a giant pastoral crisis in another. Since he was a Peritus at the Second Vatican Council and then a University Professor during 1968, then Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith for over a quarter of a century, he has found himself in the epicenter of almost every theological drama for much of the past 50 years. The fact that in 1992, years before he held the keys of the Petrine Office, he was made an associate member of the *Academie francaise*, suggests that even non-Catholic scholars acknowledge that Joseph Ratzinger was one of the intellectual leaders of his generation. To be a member of the *Academie francaise* is to be what the French call one of the immortals. It is a pantheon of the academic gods. The piano-playing Joseph Ratzinger who can speak German, French, Spanish, Italian and English, as well as read Classical Greek, Latin and Hebrew, is thus, one may argue, a Church Doctor, not because he created an original theological system like his friend Balthasar, but because if one combs through his fragmentary publications one can find what Twomey calls 'brilliant insights' into so many of these fault-lines in the field of fundamental theology.

Thus, notwithstanding the lack of a multi-volume grand synthesis, Fr Emory de Gaál in his book *O Lord I Seek Your Countenance* has argued that the pontificate of Benedict XVI will be recorded by historians as the theologically deepest and most productive since Leo the Great (440–461) and Gregory the Great (590–604). Above all it signaled a Christocentric turn within magisterial theology. Fr de Gaál enumerates some nine particular elements of this turn beginning with the principle that Benedict teaches one to see and to interpret one's entire existence from the salvific mysteries of Christ. Moreover, in this Christocentric context, de Gaál highlights the fact that Ratzinger/Benedict's whole approach to theology stands in opposition to projects that 'seek to shackle the self-communication of the absolute and sovereign God to the immanent categories of Immanuel Kant' (De Gaál 2018, 4). While many theologians of the 1960s generation thought that they needed to do precisely this, or more broadly, to defend

the faith at the Bar of an assortment of modern philosophies, everything from Kant to Critical Theory, Ratzinger was of the view that the Bar, so to speak, lacked jurisdiction. Today, the rise of postmodern philosophies has made these late twentieth century projects of liberal theology look decidedly old-fashioned, while the publications of Ratzinger, and from the anti-liberal Protestant position, those of Karl Barth, retain the interest of young Christian academics across the denominations. According to Google Scholar, a search engine for academic publications, the twentieth century theologian who has had the largest number of scholarly articles published about his work is Karl Barth, while Joseph Ratzinger comes in second place.

Another often overlooked element of the intellectual achievement of Ratzinger is that he seeks to defend the objective intellectual dimensions of the faith, the perennial Church teachings as it were, but also to address the issue of the subjective reception of these teachings. Ratzinger is equally concerned with the head and the heart, with objectivity and affectivity, not merely with the pair of faith and reason but with the triad of faith, reason and love. Like his predecessor in the papacy who developed an Existential Thomism, he understood the need to address the issues of existentialist philosophy. He wanted a Catholic theology that was neither ontology without history or history without ontology, but both brought together. His interventions on these topics have enriched the field of theological anthropology and incorporated some of the insights of St. John Henry Newman and Roman Guardini, as well as the personalist philosophy of Theodor Steinbüchel, Martin Buber, Ferdinand Ebner and Dietrich von Hildebrand. While universal human nature has been a perennial theme in Catholic theology, the uniqueness of each person, born into a particular family with a particular history, is also important. Both Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger understood this. Wojtyła dealt with the issue by fusing elements of Thomism with elements of French philosophical personalism, while Ratzinger dealt with it by fusing elements of Augustinian theology with elements of German philosophical personalism.

In a short paper, there is not time to go through Melchior Cano's list of fundamental theological building blocks known as *Loci theologici* or even the more updated lists one finds in the recent International Theological Commission documents, show-casing Ratzinger's contributions to each *Loci*. There is however time to say something about one part of the tapestry, and that is Ratzinger's thought on culture and the transcendental of beauty. This particular building block is chosen because it is one that is very close to the heart of Ratzinger/Benedict. In an interview given in 1985, Ratzinger remarked that 'a theologian who does not love art, poetry, music and nature can be dangerous since blindness and deafness toward the beautiful are not incidental: they are necessarily reflected in his theology' (Ratzinger 1985, 130). He has also said that: 'the only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments: namely, the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb' (Ratzinger 1985, 129). Even more personally, he has written that the greatness of Western music from Gregorian chant to polyphony to the Baroque age, to [Anton] Bruckner and beyond is, for him, 'the most immediate and the most evident verification that history has to offer of the Christian image of mankind and of the Christian dogma of redemption' (Ratzinger 1986, 10). These statements speak volumes about the importance of the transcendental of beauty for the spirituality of Joseph Ratzinger.

In his *Spiritual Passages*, Fr Benedict Groeschel argued that people tend to have what he called a ‘primary transcendental’ (Groeschel 1984). This is a Catholic theory of personality types. Fr Groeschel thought that when giving spiritual direction to people it was helpful to know whether they were primarily beauty types, goodness types, truth types or unity types (truth, beauty, goodness and unity being what philosophers call ‘transcendentals’). He argued that those of advanced spiritual development will appreciate all the transcendentals, but nonetheless he believed that people still tend to have a primary attraction to one or other of them, and it is important to discern what this is, because it will tell a spiritual director what a particular person is likely to grasp easily and what areas of the spiritual life he or she is likely to find more challenging. For example, it has been suggested that St Francis of Assisi was a goodness type, St Augustine a beauty type, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross a unity type, and St Thomas Aquinas a truth type. Given the above-listed statements, which are a small sample of what could be collated, it may be concluded that Ratzinger is, like St. Augustine, a beauty type. Since all Church Doctors get their own sub-titles or honorary names, Doctor of Incarnate Beauty may be a good title for Ratzinger.

So let me now defend this title by considering Ratzinger’s contributions to the field of the theology of culture.

Ratzinger defines culture as the ‘system of notions and thought patterns that preconditions the individual human being to judge in certain ways’ (Ratzinger 2005, 44). This is not a modern definition which specifically links the concept to a high level of tertiary education. Even the untutored can tacitly acquire such a system of thought patterns. To use the idiom of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre both ‘plain persons’ and ‘philosophers’ can operate within a culture as Ratzinger understands it. The philosopher Peter Wust (1884–1940) addressed this issue in the following paragraph:

The Man who kneels in church before the gracious image of the Mother of God is not divided by his intellectual culture, be he statesman, artist or thinker, from the intellectually less cultivated man who kneels beside him, for he shares with him the same supernatural atmosphere. Indeed, he feels at once that the mere presence beside him of the relatively less cultivated man passes over to him something of his being, so that a union is effected between them, in the very substance of the soul, which no method of intellectual cultivation that modern pedagogics could devise, however ingenious, could produce. (Wust 1931, 64)

To use Ratzinger’s language ‘the system of notions and thought patterns that preconditions the individual human being to judge in certain ways’ is the system of the faith itself, and this is a gift given in baptism and expressed in the *Credo*. It does not require a long period of tertiary education.

However, in accord with the theological insights of Henri de Lubac, Ratzinger rejects the proposition that the realm of culture can ever be theologically neutral. Since one of the missions of the Church is to restore all things in Christ, there can never be some part of social life that is cut off from receiving the graces of the Incarnation. Every social practice is either open or closed to such a reception. To put the matter in other words, the relationship between faith and culture is an intrinsic relationship. The relationship can be expressed in a positive way, or a negative way, but not in a neutral way. As a consequence, it is axiomatic for Ratzinger that the Catholic faith is not some intellectual system which can be tied on to any cultural framework and expressed in

any cultural form. Rather, for Ratzinger, ‘the Church is her own cultural subject for the faithful’ (Ratzinger 1993).

Ratzinger therefore expressly rejects the idea that national cultures might allocate their own body to the faith. He argues that the logic of such a proposal is that ‘the faith would always have to live from borrowed cultures, which remain in the end somehow external and capable of being cast off’. The culture of such a faith, its practices, would be debased, becoming ‘a mere exchangeable shell’ and the faith itself would be reduced to the standing of ‘a disincarnated spirit ultimately void of reality’ (Ratzinger 1993). Ratzinger has observed that such modes of thinking are typical of the eighteenth century, reducing culture to mere form and religion to either pure emotion or pure thought, that is, so-called ‘pure reason’ for the rationalists, and feeling or emotion for the generation of romantics who followed the rationalists. Ratzinger rejects the philosophies of culture that flow from German Idealism. Neither is there anything in his work that echoes the Romanticism of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), famous for his belief that each nationality contains its centre of happiness within itself, as a bullet the center of gravity, and thus that every nation bears within itself the standard of its own cultural perfection. Herder’s ideas are a source of many pastoral projects that seek to affirm the social practices of pre-Christian peoples and correlate the faith to them. Since Ratzinger opposes theories of culture that became popular in the eighteenth century, especially the nationalist-leaning dimensions of these theories, he prefers the expression ‘interculturality’ (the meeting of two different cultures and a constructive search for the truth embodied in both) to ‘inculturation’ (which may imply the notion of hooking up the faith to a new exchangeable shell). Rather than going to Herder for advice, Ratzinger prefers to examine the works of the Early Church fathers to see how they addressed these issues when seeking to evangelize the tribes of the Roman Empire. Christian Gnilka’s *Chrësis: Die Methode der Kirchenväter im Umgang mit der Antiken Kultur* is a valuable resource in this context (Gnilka 1993).

Implicit within Ratzinger’s opposition to the “extrinsic shell” approach is his rejection of the so-called “cup-cake” account of the relationship between nature and grace. According to the “cup-cake” theory, grace sits on top of nature like a garnish, just as icing does not actually penetrate through to the dough of the cup-cake but is merely spread over its top. Ratzinger’s understanding of an authentically Catholic culture is one where the grace of the Incarnation has penetrated the social fabric of a people deeply. He believes that the uniqueness of Christian culture is rooted in the Incarnation and develops out of the interaction of nature with the graces unsealed by the Incarnation, as the International Theological Commission under his leadership expressed the position in the following paragraph:

In the last times inaugurated at Pentecost, the risen Christ, Alpha and Omega, enters into the history of peoples: from that moment, the sense of history and thus of culture is unsealed and the Holy Spirit reveals it by actualizing and communicating it to all. The Church is the sacrament of this revelation and its communication. It recenters every culture into which Christ is received, placing it in the axis of the world which is coming, and restores the union broken by the Prince of this world. Culture is thus eschatologically situated; it tends towards its completion in Christ, but it cannot be saved except by associating itself with the repudiation of evil. (ITC 1989)

This need for the repudiation of evil means that for Ratzinger evangelisation is not simply ‘adaptation to a culture, along the lines of a superficial notion of inculturation

that supposes that, with modified figures of speech and a few new elements in the liturgy, the job is done', but rather 'the Gospel is a slit, a purification that becomes maturation and healing' and such cuts must occur in the right place, 'at the right time and in the right way' (Ratzinger 2005, 46). Using St. Basil the Great's metaphor of a sycamore tree to describe pagan culture, Ratzinger argues that the necessary transformation cannot come from the tree itself or its fruit, but must come from the intervention of an outside dresser, from the Church mediating the revelation of Christ. Thus he argues:

When people rightly call for a new dialogue between the Church and culture today, they must not forget in the process that this dialogue must necessarily be bilateral. It cannot consist in the Church finally subjecting herself to modern culture, which has been caught up to a large extent in a process of self-doubt since it lost its religious base. Just as the Church must expose herself to the problems of our age in a radically new way, so too must culture be questioned anew about its groundlessness and its ground, and in the process be opened to a painful cure, that is, to a new reconciliation with religion since it can get its lifeblood only from there. (Ratzinger 1996, 96)

This approach to the theology of culture and its pastoral application in the work of evangelization placed Ratzinger in opposition to the dominant pastoral strategies of the 1970s. These were marketed under the banner of 'correlationism'. Correlationist theologians sought to find elements of contemporary Western culture that were Christian-friendly or had a Christian pedigree, and then they aimed to tie the faith to these elements to make it look more modern and socially acceptable. The Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx OP (1914-2009) was a leading proponent of this strategy. Ratzinger used the metaphor of a haberdashery shop that updates its windows with each new fashion season to describe this particular pastoral strategy. In many of its applications it had more in common with marketing theory than with a theology of culture. The church, he declared, was not a haberdashery shop (Ratzinger 1992, 314). It does not operate by sprucing up its windows to lure more customers inside the shop. Such strategies were a pastoral failure wherever they were tried and, indeed, the country where correlationism originated, Belgium, has suffered one of the worst rates of religious disaffiliation of any country in the world.

Correlationism was a failure for more than one reason. In some ways it was like the 'cup-cake' theory of grace and its exchangeable shell. It attempted to hook up the faith to a culture without in any sense penetrating the culture with purifying graces. Its proponents also often assumed that intellectual concepts or fashionable ideas with an origin in Christian thought could be used as a *pietre d'attente* (toothing stone), as Marie-Dominique Chenu OP (1895-1990) recommended, to which the faith could be attached. Not only is this an example of the 'exchangeable shell' problem but the strategy overlooked the fact that concepts with a Christian heritage have often undergone a mutation in meaning over the centuries. In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Benedict XVI gave an example of this process of a secularisation of a Christian concept in relation to the theological virtue of hope. Merely because Christians and secularists share an endorsement of some particular concept, it does not automatically follow that they have the same understanding of the concept. The difference between Liberal and Christian conceptions of the 'natural right' doctrine in jurisprudence is a classic example of this problem. Sociological research on the secularization of young Christians of the Generation of 1968 is showing how young university students from Christian families

found the myriad Marxist movements of this era attractive because such movements claimed to share Christian values like human rights and human dignity (Pagis 2010, 61-89). Without an understanding of the difference between, for example, a Christian understanding of human dignity and a Marxist understanding of human dignity, Christian youth were vulnerable to the secularist tsunami that tore through western culture in this generation. The French writer Georges Bernanos, author of *The Diary of the Country Priest* and *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*, among many other less famous works, described the issue as the problem of the ‘prostitution of ideas’. He declared that ‘all the ideas one sends out into the world by themselves, with their little pigtailed on their back and a little basket in their hands like Little Red Riding Hood, are raped at the next corner by some slogan in uniform’ (Bernanos 1953, 208). The words ‘by themselves’ mean disconnected from the ‘baggage’ of Christian revelation.

Today a second-generation of Belgian theologians inspired by the works of Schillebeeckx is promoting a newer version of correlationist theory. Instead of arguing that the faith needs to be correlated to the culture of modernity, the new strategy is that the faith needs to be ‘re-contextualized’ to the culture of postmodernity. Either way, whether it is a case of correlating or re-contextualizing, it is the culture that ends up positioning the faith, rather than the faith infusing every dimension of the culture and thereby restoring all things in Christ. This issue has been addressed in greater depth in the essay ‘Beyond the Correlationist Paradigm’ (Rowland 2017, 7–23).

Ratzinger’s approach to the promotion of a Catholic culture is not that of the marketing agent but that of the priest. The core elements in his theology of culture are the theological virtues (faith, hope and love), the transcendentals (truth, beauty and goodness), the graces of the Incarnation mediated by a priest in the sacramental life of the Church and, above all, the Trinity (God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit). There is no marketing, only spiritual development in the life of the Trinity. He has not offered an alternative metaphor to ‘correlationism’ to describe his own theology of culture, but something like ‘Trinitarian Transformation’ might do it justice.

In *Christendom Awake* Aidan Nichols OP suggested a Trinitarian paradigm for culture composed of the following elements:

First, a culture should be conscious of transcendence as its true origin and goal, and this we can call culture’s tacit ‘paterological’ dimension, its implicit reference to the father. Second, the forms which a culture employs should manifest integrity – wholeness and interconnectedness; clarity – transparency to meaning; and harmony – a due proportion in the ways that its constituent elements relate to the culture as a whole ... we can call such qualities of beautiful form the specifically Christological aspects of culture ... and thirdly, then, in the Trinitarian taxis, the spirituality and vital health-giving character of the moral ethos of our culture yields up culture’s pneumatological dimension, its relation to the Holy Spirit, of whom we sing in the *Veni Sancte Spiritus: Sine tuo numine, nihil est in homine, nihil est innoxium*. (Nichols 1999, 16-7)

While Nichols did not suggest that his own Trinitarian taxis was ‘applied Ratzinger’ he did nonetheless cite Ratzinger extensively throughout the work, especially in relation to matters liturgical. Arguably Ratzinger’s many contributions to the theology of culture could easily be fitted into Nichols’ over-arching Trinitarian framework. Not only is Ratzinger’s theology of culture consistent with Nichols’ Trinitarian taxis but, moreover, at its core there is a very personalist theological anthropology that seeks to bring

the human person with all of his or her unique characteristics into communion with each of the Persons of the Trinity. This is absolutely fundamental to Ratzinger's understanding of evangelization. The 'Great Commission' was not to make the Catholic Church socially popular but to 'make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. Cultures can only be changed by persons, and persons can only be changed by grace.

While each of the transcendentals has its place in a Catholic culture, and while Ratzinger has written quite extensively about truth and the relationship between truth and goodness, it is his appreciation of the epiphanic capacity of beauty that is so striking in his publications. Like Sts. Augustine, Bonaventure and John Henry Newman, he has taken on board insights from Plato. As Ratzinger summarizes Plato: 'through the appearance of the beautiful we are wounded in our innermost being, and that wound grips us and takes us beyond ourselves; it stirs longing into flight and moves us toward the truly Beautiful, to the Good in itself'. (Ratzinger 2000, 126-7). Ratzinger also quotes the 14th century Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas:

When men have a longing so great that it surpasses human nature and eagerly desire and are able to accomplish things beyond human thought, it is the Bridegroom himself who has wounded them. Into their eyes he himself has sent a ray of his beauty. The rise of the wound is evidence of the arrow, and the longing points to the one who has shot the arrow. (Ratzinger 2002a)

In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ratzinger applies this Platonic theory to the history of Western art. He outlines a descent from the 'high moments' of Christian art in the Romanesque and Gothic periods through to the Renaissance when a nostalgia for the pre-Christian gods emerges. His genealogy is similar to that of E. I. Watkin in his *Catholic Art and Culture*. Watkin speaks of the period of the 'Classical Autumn and Christian Spring', followed by the 'Summer of Medieval Christendom', the 'late Summer of the Renaissance', the Autumn of the Baroque and the Winter of the modern world (Watkin 1945). Ratzinger follows the same trajectory, concluding that today Christian art stands between two fires: 'It must oppose the cult of the ugly, which says that everything else, anything beautiful, is a deception and that only the depiction of what is cruel, base, and vulgar is the truth and true enlightenment. And it must withstand the deceptive beauty that diminishes man instead of making him great and that, for that very reason, is false' (Ratzinger 2002b, 1).

It is however Ratzinger's comments on music that are better known than his thoughts on art history. Both he and his siblings received a strong musical education and his priest-brother Georg famously became the conductor of the Regensburger Domspatzen, the cathedral choir of Regensburg. During their seminary days the brothers were nick-named Bücherratz and Orgelratz (the bookish Ratzinger and the organ-playing Ratzinger). Not since the time of the Council of Trent and its debates on the suitability of polyphony for liturgical purposes, with Cardinal Borromeo defending the music of Palestrina, has there been so much discussion about music in ecclesial circles. The arrival of folk Masses and 'children's liturgy' in the 1970s represented a much greater break with the previous tradition than the Gregorian-Polyphony cleavage of the sixteenth century. Ratzinger stood alone among the ecclesial leaders of his generation in actually offering *academic* interventions on the subject. Others either applauded the

arrival of rock and sacro-pop music for liturgical use or found it appalling, but Ratzinger studied it from a theological perspective. His academic interventions on this subject appear in several places, predominately in the books *The Feast of Faith* and *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*.

A common theme in his many reflections on what's wrong with contemporary music is that it has become a product that can be industrially manufactured. He is not opposed to pop music because it is popular but because so much of it is referred to mass society. Like Romano Guardini, one of the intellectual luminaries of his youth, he is critical of mass society and its culture, or rather, anti-culture. In his collection of essays on *The End of Modern World*, Romano Guardini spoke of the need for a 'fruitful and lofty culture' that provides the sub-soil for healthy spiritual life, rather than a form of personal development that is 'numb and narrow' and develops along 'mawkish, perverted and unlawful lines' (Guardini 1957, 88-9). Mass culture on the contrary is geared to quantity, production, and success, not personal development. It is a culture of the measurable and the marketable, not a culture pursuing truth, beauty and goodness. In *The Feast of Faith*, Ratzinger remarked that 'one shudders at the lacklustre face of the post-conciliar liturgy as it has become, or one is bored with its banality and its lack of artistic standards' (Ratzinger 1986, 100).

Ratzinger also rejects the idea that form and substance can be easily separated, and thus that the only problem with rock music is the sometimes explicitly sexual or otherwise crude lyrics. He finds the music itself objectionable and claims that it has no place in the liturgy even if it is hooked up to sacred lyrics. In various publications he recommends a work by Calvin M. Johansson titled *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*. Johansson identifies a tendency of liturgists to oscillate between the poles of aestheticism and pragmatism. He defines aestheticism as a preoccupation with beauty for its own sake. This runs into the danger of idolatry, while pragmatism creates a false dichotomy between medium and message, music and gospel, in which each may go its own way without regard for the other. The pragmatist 'uses music uncritically as a message lubricator, sweetener or psychological conditioner' and 'emasculates the gospel by using commercialized music to sell it' (Johansson 1998, 5). Similarly, Ratzinger uses the expression 'utility music' to describe the kind of music that is used in a liturgical context to appeal to the tastes of a real or imagined congregation. For example, it is often assumed that teenagers like sacro-pop, while, in fact, millennials often prefer forms of sacred chant which offer a greater experience of God's transcendence and a more meditative ambience in a world dominated by noise and the constant interventions of social media. Whatever the preferences of the 'market' Ratzinger has declared that the trivialization of the faith by following the trends of mass culture 'is not a new inculturation, but the denial of its culture and prostitution with the non-culture' (Ratzinger 1996, 109).

In his reflections on 'the theological basis of Church Music' found in the *Feast of Faith* Ratzinger is critical of both Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler for their endorsements of utility music. He argues that Thomas Aquinas is a much worthier guide than Rahner or Vorgrimler on this subject. Specifically, he argues that there needs to be a movement of spiritualization within creation and that this in turn means that creation must be brought into 'the mode of being of the Holy Spirit and its

consequent transformation, exemplified in the crucified and resurrected Christ' (Ratzinger 1996, 118). What Ratzinger calls 'pagan music' has not undergone such a transformation. Rather, 'through rhythm and melody themselves, pagan music often endeavors to elicit an ecstasy of the senses, but without elevating the senses into the spirit; on the contrary, it attempts to swallow up the spirit in the senses as a means of release' (Ratzinger 1996, 118). Emphatically, Ratzinger asserts that 'the "God" found here, the salvation of man identified here, is quite different from the God of the Christian faith' (Ratzinger 1996, 118-9).

There is so much more that could be said about Joseph Ratzinger and his defence of beauty. Not only is he interested in beauty in music and art and the liturgy but also moral beauty, the beauty of a life well lived, the beauty of the priestly vocation, the beauty of Catholic family life, the beauty of the consecrated life, the beauty of a conscience well-formed and so on. One can also comb through his papal documents for engagements with the concept of culture and the transcendental properties of truth and goodness. There are many references to culture in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and to truth in his various addresses to parliaments. It is beyond the scope of this paper to include an analysis of the work of all three transcendentals within Ratzinger/Benedict's theology of culture, but this could certainly be done in a larger work, and placed within Nichols' Trinitarian taxis. Priority has been given in this paper to the transcendental of beauty because of the judgment that this is the transcendental closest to his heart – his primary transcendental - in the sense of Groeschel.

Ratzinger understands that Christian culture in its highest manifestations is beautiful, even glorious. In contrast, lives lived according to the principles of a tax-lawyer morality that searches for loop-holes and exemptions lack the passion, heroism and general pathos of sanctity. Such lives and the cultures they promote are lacking in *eros*, as well as truth, beauty and goodness, and are ultimately boring. Another way of saying this is to conclude that only something like Ratzinger/Benedict's theology of culture and defence of the transcendental of beauty has any chance of defending Christianity against Nietzsche's charge that Christianity is a crime against life itself and a religion fit only for members of the herd. Ratzinger understands the Nietzschean indictment, and far from wanting to market a Christianity sufficiently low-brow to appeal to the tastes of 'mass man', he wants to liberate mass man from his herd-like behavior and offer him an alternative high culture wherein he will be eligible for membership of a royal priesthood and participation within the life of the Trinity itself. Tragically many of Ratzinger's contemporaries simply want to prostrate themselves before the Hegelian *zeitgeist*, however unheroic, primitive and actually hostile to truth and goodness, as well as beauty, this may be.

Another of the intellectual heroes of Ratzinger's youth (in addition to the above-mentioned Guardini) was the philosopher Peter Wust, mentioned above in the context of the issue of the culture of so-called 'plain persons'. In a monograph published in 1931 as *Crisis in the West*, Wust wrote:

...when we remember that the forces of destruction broke in fullest fury upon the center of Europe, the region of Teutonic culture, we may say that the brunt of responsibility rests on the shoulders of German Catholicism, on that section of the Catholic people which lives in the heart of Europe, and which, ever since Luther and the

Council of Trent, has had to put up one single unbroken struggle to preserve its Christianity and Catholicism. (Wust 1931, 53)

One might conclude by saying that the lack of a developed theological system notwithstanding, the Bavarian Joseph Ratzinger has earned his stripes as a Church Doctor ‘struggling to preserve Catholicism’, not only because of what Fr Twomey identified as his many brilliant insights, or because of what Fr de Gaál identified as his effect of a Christocentric turn in Catholic theology, but also because he offers a theology of culture and a defence of beauty, built upon the philosophy of Plato, and the theology of St. Basil the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St Bonaventure, St John Henry Newman and Romano Guardini. Moreover, in doing so, he offered an alternative to the correlationism of the 1970s with its debts to Kant and Hegel and the Romanticism of some missionary theologies with its debts to the philosophy of Herder. It is here in the field of the culture of the Church herself that the plain person in the pew receives his primary experience of the faith. For Ratzinger it is axiomatic that this experience must be rich and ennobling, not numb and narrow, mawkish and mass-produced.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Professor Tracey Rowland holds the St John Paul II Chair of Theology at the University of Notre Dame (Australia). She has a civil PhD from the Divinity School of the University of Cambridge and a pontifical STL and STD from the Pontifical Lateran University. She is a member of the editorial board of *Communio: International Catholic Review* and was also a member of the Ninth International Theological Commission.

References

- Bernanos, Georges. 1953. *La Liberté, Pourquoi Faire?* Paris: Gallimard.
- de Gaál, Emery. 2018. *O Lord, I Seek Your Countenance: Explorations and Discoveries in Pope Benedict XVI's Theology*, Steubenville: Emmaus Academic.
- Gnilka, Christian. 1993. *Chrësis: Die Methode Der Kirchenväter im Umgang Mit Der Antiken Kultur*. Basel: Schwabe and Co AG –Verlag.
- Groeschel, Benedict. 1984. *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development*. New York: Crossroad.
- Guardini, Romano. 1957. *The End of the Modern World*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- International Theological Commission. 1989. “Faith and Inculturation.” *Origins* 18, 800–807.
- Johansson, C. M. 1998. *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Kerr, Fergus. 2002. *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons.
- Nichols, Aidan. 1999. *Christendom Awake: On Re-energizing the Church in Culture*. Edinburgh. T & T Clark.
- Pagis, Julie. 2010. “The Politicization of Religious Commitments: Reassessing the Determinants of Participation in May.” *Revue Française de Science Politique* 60 (1): 68.
- Rahner, Karl. 1992. *Theological Investigations*, Volume 9. London: Dartman, Longman and Todd.

- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1985. *The Ratzinger Report: An Interview with Vittorio Messori*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1986. *Feast of Faith*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1987. *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1992. *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for Every Day of the Year*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1993. 'Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures', Address to the Presidents of the Asian Bishops' Conference. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/incontri/rc_con_cfaith_19930303_hong-kong-ratzinger_en.html
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1996. *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*. New York: Crossroad.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1997. *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium: An Interview with Peter Seewald*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2000. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2002a. "The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty", Message to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2002b. "Art, Image and Artists." *Adoremus Bulletin* 8 (1), 1-2.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2005. *On the Way to Jesus Christ*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Rowland, Tracey. 2011. *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Rowland, Tracey. 2017. *The Culture of the Incarnation: Essays in Catholic Theology*. Steubenville: Emmaus Academic.
- Twomey, Vincent. 2007. Interview with C. E. Olsen, Ignatius Insight, 7th June. http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/vtwomey_interview_jun07.asp
- Watkin, E. I. 1945. *Catholic Art and Culture*. London: Hollis and Carter.
- Wust, Peter. 1931. *Crisis in the West*. London: Sheed & Ward.