

# The Primacy of Faith and the Priority of Reason: A Justification for Public Recognition of Revealed Truth

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*The Catholic tradition of the primacy of faith, as taught by both Augustine and Anselm, is not an endorsement of fideism, but rather a rule of respecting the supra-rational nature of divinely revealed truths that must be accepted by faith. The same tradition upholds the priority of unaided reason, which can confirm the truth of faith by examining the evidence of revelation, or the motives of credibility. This critical role of reason justifies the individual assent of faith and also offers a basis upon which a secular state, reliant on reason, could conceivably refer to revealed truths, to help it discover the objective moral principles that aid the state in its effort to promote human dignity and the common good.*

## ***Credo ut intelligam***

“*Credo ut intelligam.*” Perhaps second only to “*Cur Deus Homo,*” no other words come to mind more quickly at the mention of St. Anselm than “*credo ut intelligam*”—“I believe so that I might understand.” We find these words in the first chapter of Anselm’s *Proslogion*, which was originally titled *Fides Quarens Intellectum*, “Faith Seeking Understanding.” Here, St. Anselm famously states, “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe so that I may understand.”<sup>1</sup> This celebrated line of Anselm was based on the saying of St. Augustine, “*crede, ut intelligas*” (“believe so that you may understand”), which is found in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*.<sup>2</sup> The primary influence on the mind of Anselm was St. Augustine.<sup>3</sup>

*Credo ut intelligam*—I believe so that I might understand. Anselm explains the meaning of these famous words when he says that he desires to understand the truth that his heart believes and loves;<sup>4</sup> in other words, his faith seeks understanding (*fides quarens intellectum*). In the context of his lamentation on the plight of fallen man, who has “lost the blessedness for which he was made, and [has] found the misery for which he was not made,”<sup>5</sup> Anselm states that he seeks a greater understanding of what he believes by faith—the faith that teaches him some truths which

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<sup>1</sup> See *St. Anselm’s Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), ch. 1: “*Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam.*” Anselm cites Is 7:9: “*Unless you believe, you shall not understand.*”

<sup>2</sup> Commenting on Jn 7:17 (“*Whoever chooses to do his will shall know whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own*”), Augustine writes, “For understanding is the recompense of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand.” St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 29.6, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 88, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 18. Augustine explains that to do the will of God is to believe, by citing Jn 6:29: “*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.*”

<sup>3</sup> See M. J. Charlesworth, “St. Anselm’s System,” in *St. Anselm’s Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Proslogion*, 1: “*sed desidero aliquatenus intelligere veritatem tuam, quam credit et amat cor meum.*”

<sup>5</sup> *Proslogion*, 1.

are knowable by natural reason, but mostly divine truths that are not accessible to unaided reason, such as the ultimate purpose for which man was created. Thus, the famous motto clearly expresses *the primacy of faith*, by which man accepts and assents to what God reveals. Without faith, man would not know of God's plan of salvation, which includes man's destiny of eternal beatitude.<sup>6</sup> The assent of faith is determinative, and thus primary, in order for man to know and understand the ultimate meaning and purpose of his life.

But Anselm's motto should never be taken as an endorsement of fideism, by which the assent of faith would be a blind act of the will, unfounded on any preliminary act of reason. Indeed, the words that immediately follow Anselm's famous motto indicate that he does, in fact, recognize the need for reason to precede the act of faith. At the beginning of Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*, Anselm writes, "Well, then, Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as You see fit, that You exist as we believe You to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be."<sup>7</sup> What follows is his famous and controversial ontological argument for the existence of God as the Being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. Thus, Anselm seeks to know by reason alone what he also assents to by faith—that God exists as the Absolute Being. According to Anselm, the existence of God, which is the most fundamental preamble of faith, is knowable by reason alone. He, therefore, recognizes that the act of faith is not a blind movement of the mind or an unjustified act of the will. It is rather an intellectually responsible and free act of the person to believe what God reveals, *after* he can know by unaided reason that God exists.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the evidence that Anselm was no fideist, he has been identified as one by certain prominent thinkers such as the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth.<sup>9</sup> Barth regarded the *Proslogion* not as a rational proof for the existence of God, but rather as the application of reason to a datum of revelation—the revealed truth that God exists.<sup>10</sup> For Barth, Anselm was not concerned with defending the *credibility* of faith, but rather the *autonomy* of faith—that faith is possible without any prior rational preparation or justification.<sup>11</sup> For Barth and others, the *credo ut intelligam* motto represents the principle of the primacy of faith, but in a fideist tradition.

### ***The fideism of the Reformers***

This reading of Anselm by Barth is guided by the Protestant theory of the effect of the Fall on human nature, and, in particular, on the human intellect. Primarily in the Lutheran tradition, the

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<sup>6</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), n. 1703.

<sup>7</sup> *Proslogion*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that "Anselm himself was not concerned formally and explicitly to demarcate the realm of faith and theology from the realm of reason and philosophy, assigning to each its respective 'formal object' and distinguishing the proper method of each, in the manner of Aquinas and the thirteenth-century thinkers" (Charlesworth, 22).

<sup>9</sup> A summary of Barth's reading of Anselm is provided in Charlesworth, 23.

<sup>10</sup> See Charlesworth, 41.

<sup>11</sup> See Charlesworth, 40.

roots of fideism can be found.<sup>12</sup> Luther emphasized that man's entire nature, both intellect and will, was corrupted by the Fall.<sup>13</sup> Luther held that the Fall caused man's will to be impaired and his reason to be completely defective.<sup>14</sup> Luther reaches this conclusion, in part, based on his interpretation of the Genesis account that, after the Fall, Adam and Eve foolishly thought they could avoid God by hiding among the trees, suggesting that they had lost even their common sense and that their intellects were completely depraved as a result of their rebellion against God.<sup>15</sup>

This theory of the postlapsarian condition of man means that, as a result of the Fall, man is no longer able to know or love God.<sup>16</sup> Luther held that, although man can still know by his reason that God exists, it is not within the reach of his fallen, unaided reason to know who or which is the true God.<sup>17</sup> Luther went further and held that the Fall caused the image of God in man to disappear entirely, along with the Paradise in which man lived.<sup>18</sup> As a result, man's fallen reason is poised to reject God's revelation as "unrealistic nonsense."<sup>19</sup> This is why Luther referred to reason as "Frau Hulda," the "Devil's Whore." For Luther, "Scripture is the one and only external, objective, source for any and all knowledge of God."<sup>20</sup> Even today, 500 years after the beginning of the Reformation, this Protestant theory of the effect of the Fall has major repercussions for the relationship between faith and reason and for the grounds upon which the contents of faith may be considered by the individual intellect, and by society at large.

The response of the Church to Luther's theory was that human nature is indeed impaired by the Fall, but that it is not totally corrupted as a result.<sup>21</sup> This teaching has perhaps more pressing theological implications as it applies to the will, which, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, was affected more by original sin than was the intellect;<sup>22</sup> but, the teaching also has major significance as it applies to the intellect, especially for the refutation of fideism. Man's nature, the Church teaches, "is wounded in the natural powers proper to it," but "has not been totally corrupted."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Although some authors, such as David Andersen, attempt to defend Luther from the charge of fideism, there are nevertheless many passages in Luther's writings which emphasize man's inability to know God through unaided reason and thus provide the seedbed for fideism. See David Andersen, *Martin Luther—The Problem of Faith and Reason* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See Andersen, 47.

<sup>14</sup> See Andersen, 46.

<sup>15</sup> See Andersen, 47.

<sup>16</sup> See Andersen, 46-48.

<sup>17</sup> See B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 15.

<sup>18</sup> See Andersen, 46.

<sup>19</sup> See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966), 68.

<sup>20</sup> Andersen, 57.

<sup>21</sup> See Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification* (January 13, 1547), in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. II (London: Sheed & Ward Limited, 1990), ch. 5, p. 672.

<sup>22</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 83, aa. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> *Catechism*, 405. See also John Paul II, *Discourse at General Audience*, October 8, 1986, in *Jesus, Son and Savior: A Catechesis on The Creed by Pope John Paul II*, Volume II (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), 51-52: "As regards spiritual faculties this deterioration consists in a darkening of the intellect's capacity to know the truth, and in a weakening of free will. . . . However, according to the Church's teaching, it is a case of a relative and not an absolute deterioration, not intrinsic to the human faculties. Even after original sin, man can know by his intellect the fundamental natural and religious truths, and the moral principles. He can also perform good works. One should

The Fall resulted in the loss of original holiness and justice,<sup>24</sup> but man remains in the image of God, even though he is deprived of the glory of God and of his likeness.<sup>25</sup>

This teaching that neither man's will nor his intellect was totally corrupted by the Fall means that man can use his will to choose freely to accept or reject the graces of sanctification and redemption,<sup>26</sup> and that he can still obtain some knowledge of God through the use of his unaided, natural reason.<sup>27</sup> This means that man can establish the preambles of faith by the use of reason alone, so that his assent of faith is not a blind movement of the mind.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it means that man can utilize his reason again *after* the act of faith to understand better what he chooses to believe by faith (*fides quarens intellectum*). So, in the Catholic tradition, reason is used both before and after the assent of faith.

The reliance on reason to justify the act of faith is a constant in the Catholic tradition, which means that the rejection of fideism is a constant in the Catholic tradition. Anselm certainly held to the primacy of faith—that only faith makes known the deepest and ultimate truths of man's existence—but he was no fideist. He also held that reason has a function “anterior to and independent of faith.”<sup>29</sup> It was part of Anselm's intention to defend the ability of reason to understand God *prior* to the act of faith.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Faith in accordance with reason***

This emphasis on the role of reason prior to the act of faith is found in the works of St. Augustine upon whom St. Anselm primarily relied. Augustine certainly agreed that one must believe in order to understand better the ultimate truths of reality and of our existence which are known by divine revelation and faith, but he nevertheless insisted that it is an initial act of reason that leads to and justifies the act of faith. The assent of faith, Augustine taught, is based on the authority of God who reveals. “But reason is not entirely absent from authority,” Augustine wrote, “for we have got to consider whom we have to believe . . . . It is our duty to consider what men or what books we are to believe in order that we may rightly worship God, wherein lies our sole

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therefore speak rather of a darkening of the intellect and of a weakening of the will, of ‘wounds’ of the spiritual and sensitive faculties, and not of a loss of their capacities even in relation to the knowledge and love of God.”

<sup>24</sup> See *Catechism*, 405.

<sup>25</sup> See *Catechism*, 705.

<sup>26</sup> See Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, ch. 5.

<sup>27</sup> See *Catechism*, 35: “Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God”; and John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), n. 19: “If human beings with their intelligence fail to recognize God as Creator of all, it is not because they lack the means to do so, but because their free will and their sinfulness place an impediment in the way.”

<sup>28</sup> See Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. II (London: Sheed & Ward Limited, 1990), ch. 2, p. 806: “The same holy mother church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”

<sup>29</sup> Charlesworth, 33.

<sup>30</sup> See Charlesworth, 40.

salvation.”<sup>31</sup> The assent of faith, in other words, must be justified by an act of reason.<sup>32</sup> Listen again to St. Augustine:

For who would not see that thinking comes before believing? For no one believes anything, unless he has first thought that it is to be believed. However hastily, however speedily, some of our thoughts fly before the will to believe, and even if this will follows them in such a manner that it appears to accompany them, as though they were inseparable, still it is necessary that all things which are believed, are believed after thought has preceded. Yet even to believe is in fact nothing other than to think with assent.<sup>33</sup>

In still another work, Augustine concludes, “They are very much in error who think that we believe in Christ without any proofs of Christ. For, what evidences are more clear than those which have been foretold and fulfilled?”<sup>34</sup> Thus, for Augustine, there is certainly a *primacy of faith*—man must believe in order to understand; but there is also a *priority of reason*—man must think before he chooses to believe. So, although Anselm based his *credo ut intelligam* principle on Augustine’s “*crede, ut intelligas*,” the influence of Augustine also includes an emphasis on the prior act of reason. Anselm, like Augustine, maintained a healthy and necessary tension between the principle “*crede, ut intelligas*” and the principle “*intellige ut credas*.”<sup>35</sup> For Anselm, the famous *credo ut intelligam* motto applied to the post-faith effort to understand the supernatural mysteries of divine revelation.<sup>36</sup>

Anselm and Augustine, therefore, represent the long Catholic tradition of rejecting fideism and defending the reasonableness of faith. This tradition was given formal magisterial expression by the First Vatican Council in 1870. In its dogmatic constitution, *Dei Filius*, the Council explained that the act of faith is based on a prior act of reason. It began by explaining that there is a “two-fold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards its source, but also as regards its object.”<sup>37</sup> The first order of knowledge is natural, known by reason alone. The second order of knowledge is *supernatural*, known by faith in God’s revelation.<sup>38</sup> The nature of this second order of knowledge consists of revealed, supernatural truths, “mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely

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<sup>31</sup> St. Augustine, *Of True Religion*, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. with intro. by John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), n. 45, p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> See also, St. Augustine, *Letter 120*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 18, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), p. 302: “If it is reasonable that faith precede a certain great reason which cannot yet be grasped, there is no doubt that, however slight the reason which proves this, it does precede faith.”

<sup>33</sup> St. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 86, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), n. 5, pp. 221-222.

<sup>34</sup> St. Augustine, *On Faith in Things Unseen*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 4, trans. Roy J. Deferrari and Mary Francis McDonald (New York: CIMA Publishing Co., Inc., 1947), n. 5, p. 456.

<sup>35</sup> See Charlesworth, 28.

<sup>36</sup> See Charlesworth, 38.

<sup>37</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

<sup>38</sup> See *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

revealed, are incapable of being known.”<sup>39</sup> Because these divine mysteries are supernatural, they are also *supra-rational*—they are above and beyond the power of reason, although they never contradict what can be known by reason.<sup>40</sup> Revealed truths which are believed by faith can never be known by natural, unaided reason, and their meaning can never be exhausted by the use of reason after the assent of faith. Here’s how Vatican I put it:

Now reason, if it is enlightened by faith, does indeed when it seeks persistently, piously and soberly, achieve by God’s gift some understanding, and that most profitable, of the mysteries, whether by analogy from what it knows naturally, or from the connection of these mysteries with one another and with the final end of humanity; but reason is never rendered capable of penetrating these mysteries in the way in which it penetrates those truths which form its proper object.<sup>41</sup>

Because revealed, divine truths cannot be known by natural reason, they must be accepted in the act of faith on some other basis, and that basis is the authority of the One who reveals them. As Vatican I taught, “[W]e believe to be true what [God] has revealed, not because we perceive its intrinsic truth by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself, who makes the revelation and can neither deceive nor be deceived.”<sup>42</sup> And, this operating premise of God’s inherent truthfulness, by the way, is known by natural reason, through careful metaphysics which concludes that God is eternal, personal, omnipotent, omniscient and infinitely just and veracious.<sup>43</sup>

So, the divine truths of faith cannot be known by reason, but this does not mean that reason is wholly absent from the decision whether to believe them, for that would be to fall into the fideism of the Reformers. No, reason is still very much involved in the act of faith, albeit it in an initial, preliminary way. This was perhaps, the main concern of Vatican I, to explain and justify the act of faith in the face of a hostile rationalism then opposing the Church. Thus spoke the Council:

Nevertheless, in order that the submission of our faith should be in accordance with reason, it was God’s will that there should be linked to the internal assistance of the Holy Spirit external indications of his revelation, that is to say divine acts, and first and foremost miracles and prophecies, which clearly demonstrating as they do the omnipotence and infinite knowledge of God, are the most certain signs of revelation and are suited to the understanding of all.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

<sup>40</sup> See *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 3.

<sup>43</sup> See Joseph Clifford Fenton, *Laying the Foundation: A Handbook of Catholic Apologetics and Fundamental Theology* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2016), 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 3.

What justifies the assent of faith, then, is a prior act of reason by which the intellect examines the evidence of divine revelation to confirm the event or fact of revelation. As Augustine said, “They are very much in error who think that we believe in Christ without any proofs of Christ.” Once the event of revelation is confirmed by reason, then the assent of faith and the acceptance of supernatural truths based on God’s authority can be justified, and the danger of fideism is avoided. This is why Vatican I stated clearly that “the assent of faith is by no means a blind movement of the mind.”<sup>45</sup>

The relationship between faith and reason, Vatican I taught, is one of mutual support. Before the assent of faith, reason can establish the foundations of the faith; and, after the assent of faith, reason can be employed again to “develop the science of divine things.”<sup>46</sup> Faith, on its part, the Council taught, “delivers reason from errors and protects it and furnishes it with knowledge of many kinds.”<sup>47</sup>

### **“Reason before the mystery”**

Although the topic of faith and reason received such careful and detailed attention at Vatican I, the subject received “only passing and disconnected remarks” at the Second Vatican Council.<sup>48</sup> It was not until the arguably climactic 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* by Pope St. John Paul II that the Church’s magisterium spoke again directly on the relationship between faith and reason. The encyclical clearly emphasizes the importance of faith in order to know ultimate truth,<sup>49</sup> but its main purpose and intention is to defend the ability of reason to pursue and know transcendent truth, in opposition to the “metaphysical agnosticism” of the age.<sup>50</sup> This defense of natural knowledge was part of John Paul II’s effort to preserve the role of reason *prior* to the assent of faith, both in establishing the preambles of faith, including God’s existence and His credibility, and also in confirming the event of Christian revelation, and thereby preserving the universality of the Christian proposition.

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<sup>45</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, “Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II,” in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio*, eds. David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 194.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, *Fides et Ratio*, 14: “Revelation has set within history a point of reference which cannot be ignored if the mystery of human life is to be known. . . . Revelation therefore introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort . . .”; and *Fides et Ratio*, 80: “The mystery of the Incarnation will always remain the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself.”

<sup>50</sup> See Dulles, 197. See also *Fides et Ratio*, 83: “I want only to state that reality and truth do transcend the factual and the empirical, and to vindicate the human being’s capacity to know this transcendent and metaphysical dimension in a way that is true and certain, albeit imperfect and analogical”; and *Fides et Ratio*, 106: “I appeal also to *philosophers*, and to all *teachers of philosophy*, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth—metaphysical truth included—which is proper to philosophical enquiry” (italics in original).

John Paul II begins by reaffirming the supernatural character of revealed truths which are accepted by faith. “[T]he truth made known to us by Revelation,” he wrote, “is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason. It appears instead as something gratuitous, which itself stirs thought and seeks acceptance as an expression of love.”<sup>51</sup> Because unaided reason cannot attain revealed truths, he explained, “[r]eason in fact is not asked to pass judgment on the contents of faith, something of which it would be incapable, since this is not its function. Its function is rather to find meaning, to discover explanations which might allow everyone to come to a certain understanding of the contents of faith.”<sup>52</sup> So, reason cannot judge the contents of revelation, because they are supra-rational, and they are accepted based on the authority of God who reveals them.<sup>53</sup> What reason *can* do, however, is attempt to gain a better understanding of what is believed by faith—this is the post-faith, *fides quarens intellectum*, role of reason.

What reason can also do, as emphasized by Vatican I and affirmed by St. John Paul II, is justify the *act* of faith by confirming that what is believed by faith is actually revealed by God. This is the pre-faith role of reason that safeguards against fideism. In the section of the encyclical titled, “*Reason before the mystery*,” John Paul II refers to “the signs which revelation itself presents.”<sup>54</sup> These signs are the traditional “motives of credibility” which identify divine revelation. They are the miracles of Christ, the fulfillment of prophecy and the phenomena of the Church—her growth, her stability and her holiness—that are “the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all.”<sup>55</sup> It is by judging these indications or evidences of revelation that a believer can justify the decision to make the assent of faith.

This pre-faith act of reason makes the assent of faith an intellectually responsible and reasonable act, and it protects faith from the charge of superstition. “Deprived of reason,” John Paul taught, “faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition. It is an illusion,” he said, “to think that faith, tied to weak reasoning, might be more penetrating; on the contrary, faith then runs the grave risk of withering into myth or superstition.”<sup>56</sup> This analysis of the role of reason in the act of faith allowed John Paul II to conclude that “[a]lthough faith, a gift of God, is not based on reason, it can certainly not dispense

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<sup>51</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> See *Fides et Ratio*, 13: “Faith is said first to be an obedient response to God. This implies that God be acknowledged in his divinity, transcendence and supreme freedom. By the authority of his absolute transcendence, God who makes himself known is also the source of the credibility of what he reveals. By faith, men and women give their *assent* to this divine testimony. This means that they acknowledge fully and integrally the truth of what is revealed because it is God himself who is the guarantor of that truth. They can make no claim upon this truth which comes to them as gift and which, set within the context of interpersonal communication, urges reason to be open to it and to embrace its profound meaning” (italics in original).

<sup>54</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Catechism*, 156, quoting *Dei Filius*, ch. 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 48.



with it.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, faith without reason offers no explanation for itself. It offers no justification for itself. It gives no reasons for its credibility.

So, for example, a Christian believes the revealed truth that God is a Trinity of Persons,<sup>58</sup> or that Christ’s death on the Cross redeemed the world,<sup>59</sup> or that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist,<sup>60</sup> *not* because he or she can perceive the truth of such beliefs by natural reason, but rather because he or she is convinced that God actually revealed such truths to the world and gave evidence or indications of this revelation that can be assessed by the universal faculty of reason. And this is why we insist that it is *reasonable* to believe the truths of faith that cannot be attained or proven by reason. How else are we to give a satisfactory explanation for why we believe the Christian revelation? How else are we to fulfill the Scriptural mandate, “*Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope*” (1Pet 3:15)? And, how else are we to refute the accusation of fideism?

### ***The “corrective” role of faith, and the “purifying” role of reason***

There are other, perhaps more macro, practical implications of this relationship between faith and reason. These include implications for the political realm which were teased out and raised systematically by Pope Benedict XVI in a series of major addresses he gave on the subject. Since Pope John Paul II had already issued an encyclical with a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between faith and reason, Pope Benedict XVI was able to focus on more specific applications of the theme.

Benedict’s treatment of faith and reason arises in the context of his teaching on the relationship between religion and politics, and between the Church and the state. He begins by acknowledging the competing claims of divine revelation among world religions and the modern reality of pluralism in the West. In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, he refers to the world of politics as “the sphere of the autonomous use of reason.”<sup>61</sup> Because reason is the universal faculty among men of different religions, it is the common currency of dialogue in the political sphere. Benedict emphasized that the distinction between the Church and the state is fundamental to Christianity, because the Church recognizes and respects the legitimate autonomy of the temporal sphere.<sup>62</sup> Benedict insisted, however, that “[t]he two spheres are distinct, yet always interrelated.”<sup>63</sup>

The relationship between Church and state, and between faith and reason, comes about because it is the purpose and responsibility of the state to order society and individual freedom

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<sup>57</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 67. See also *Fides et Ratio*, 43: “Faith is in a sense an ‘exercise of thought’; and human reason is neither annulled nor debased in assenting to the contents of faith, which are in any case attained by way of free and informed choice.”

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Jn 10:30 and Jn 15:26.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Mt 20:28; Rom 4:25; 2Cor 5:19; Col 2:13-14; and 1Pet 3:18.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Jn 6:51.

<sup>61</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), 29.

<sup>62</sup> See *Deus Caritas Est*, 28a, citing Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, 28a.

toward what is good for the human person, and it is divine revelation accepted by faith that teaches the deepest truths about man's existence, the purpose and meaning of his life, and the proper ordering of his freedom. Here, Benedict said, faith is able to help reason, and to help the state, in its pursuit of truth and justice. "[F]aith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly."<sup>64</sup> The aim of the Church's social doctrine, Benedict said, is "simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just."<sup>65</sup>

In his historic address at Westminster Hall in 2010, Pope Benedict spoke more specifically about how faith helps to purify reason, or what he called the "corrective" role of religion vis-à-vis reason."<sup>66</sup> In his meeting with representatives of British society, he explained that faith helps reason to discover the objective moral principles upon which political decisions must be based, even in a democratic, pluralistic and secular society. "[T]he role of religion in political debate," Benedict said, "is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers— . . . but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles."<sup>67</sup> In other words, as Fr. James Schall points out in his reading of the Westminster address, "reason has its own domain or validity. But reason's domain is not so self-enclosed that it cannot be open to truth whatever its source."<sup>68</sup> Pope Benedict summarized this point by explaining that "[w]ithout the corrective supplied by religion, . . . reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person."<sup>69</sup>

One example of how faith helps to purify reason and discover objective moral principles that could be known by unaided reason is the truth about human freedom, and the refutation of positivism and voluntarism. In his 2011 address to the German Parliament, the Bundestag, Pope Benedict XVI challenged lawmakers not to forget the natural law as an objective basis and standard for their legislation, and he summarized in forceful words what is known by Christian revelation, but which can also be known by reason. He told the lawmakers,

I would like to underline a point that seems to me to be neglected, today as in the past: there is also an ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who

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<sup>64</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, 29a.

<sup>65</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, 29a.

<sup>66</sup> See Benedict XVI, *Address at Westminster Hall* (September 17, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> *Westminster Address*.

<sup>68</sup> James Schall, "Foreword: 'The Novelty of Christian Proclamation,'" in *Liberating Logos: Pope Benedict XVI's September Speeches*, ed. Marc D. Guerra (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2014), xxii.

<sup>69</sup> *Westminster Address*.

he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, the truth of human freedom and ordered liberty, which is taught by divine revelation, is also known by reason through reflection on human nature.

But, how is the state, in a pluralistic society, to choose among different religious beliefs, even if it were willing to consider the content of faith in order to assist reason in discovering objective moral values? On what grounds could a secular state justify referring to the truths of faith, even in its effort to promote justice and the common good? This thorny issue was only obliquely referenced by Pope Benedict when he mentioned that the relationship between faith and reason is “a two-way process.” On the one hand, faith helps reason to discover objective moral values. On the other hand, reason helps faith to know what to believe. Pope Benedict referred to “the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion,” when he mentioned “distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism,” which “can be seen to create serious social problems.”<sup>71</sup> Here, Pope Benedict implied that reason can help to identify *true* religion—actual divine revelation—which can be of assistance to the state in its effort to promote the common good and the dignity of the human person.

This role of reason, however, in identifying actual revelation, might be considered at first glance to contradict the earlier teaching of Pope John Paul II. After all, *Fides et Ratio* stated that “[r]eason in fact is not asked to pass judgment on the contents of faith, something of which it would be incapable, since this is not its function.”<sup>72</sup> So, how, one might ask, can reason identify true religion, if it cannot judge the contents of revelation?

Well, first, reason can recognize false revelation by identifying religious propositions that are actually contrary to reason. As Vatican I made clear, revealed truths may be beyond the grasp of reason, but there can never be any real contradiction between reason and revealed truth, because both natural and supernatural knowledge have their ultimate origin in the same Creator God.<sup>73</sup> Thus, reason cannot prove or disprove what is actually revealed by God, but it can identify an alleged revelation that is shown to be contrary to reason.<sup>74</sup> God, Pope Benedict explained, is *Logos*,

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<sup>70</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the Bundestag* (September 22, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> *Westminster Address*.

<sup>72</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 42.

<sup>73</sup> See *Dei Filius*, ch. 4: “Even though faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason.” See also *Fides et Ratio*, 34: “This truth, which God reveals to us in Jesus Christ, is not opposed to the truths which philosophy perceives. On the contrary, the two modes of knowledge lead to truth in all its fullness. The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning, as the principle of non-contradiction makes clear. Revelation renders this unity certain, showing that the God of creation is also the God of salvation history. It is the one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend, and who reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

<sup>74</sup> See John W. Carlson, *Understanding Our Being: Introduction to Speculative Philosophy in the Perennial Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 252. See also Fenton, 32: “If the doctrine which

as revealed by St. John in the prologue of his Gospel.<sup>75</sup> In his famous and controversial Regensburg address, Benedict explained that “*Logos* means both reason and word—a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason.”<sup>76</sup> Benedict went on to explain that

the faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy, in which . . . unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language. . . . [T]he truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as *logos* and, as *logos*, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf.<sup>77</sup>

This means that whatever is actually revealed by God is consistent with what man can know by the light of his natural reason, and thus reason can help to identify true revelation.<sup>78</sup>

But there is a second, and just as important, way that reason can serve to identify true religion, and that is, once again, the role that reason plays *prior* to the assent of faith, when reason looks for and evaluates the external signs and evidence that a revelation has, in fact, been made, and is therefore credible, without regard to its content. There is a *primacy of faith*, yes, in order to know the deepest truths about human existence; but there is also a *priority of reason*, in order to identify the revelation that is to be believed. It is this priority of reason that safeguards against fideism, and it also provides the basis upon which a secular state could conceivably refer to the contents of divine revelation in its effort to promote the common good.

### ***Justifying reference to revelation***

In the course of his Westminster Address, Pope Benedict XVI urged that “the world of reason and the world of faith—the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief—need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the

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we receive on divine faith can be shown to contradict the facts which we obtain through our natural powers of intellect, then this doctrine cannot be credible as divine revelation.”

<sup>75</sup> See Jn 1:1: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*”

<sup>76</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address at the University of Regensburg* (September 12, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> *Regensburg Address*. See also Benedict XVI, *Homily of the Easter Vigil* (April 23, 2011): “The world is a product of the Word, of the *Logos*, as Saint John expresses it, using a key term from the Greek language. ‘*Logos*’ means ‘reason,’ ‘sense,’ ‘word.’ It is not reason pure and simple, but creative Reason, that speaks and communicates itself. It is Reason that both is and creates sense. The creation account tells us, then, that the world is a product of creative Reason. Hence it tells us that, far from there being an absence of reason and freedom at the origin of all things, the source of everything is creative Reason, love, and freedom. Here we are faced with the ultimate alternative that is at stake in the dispute between faith and unbelief: are irrationality, lack of freedom and pure chance the origin of everything, or are reason, freedom and love at the origin of being? Does the primacy belong to unreason or to reason? This is what everything hinges upon in the final analysis. As believers we answer, with the creation account and with Saint John, that in the beginning is reason.”

<sup>78</sup> The main purpose of the Regensburg Address was to highlight the problems that result from voluntarism, which denies any necessary order in reality, and to show how revelation is related to reason. See Schall, “Foreword: ‘The Novelty of Christian Proclamation,’” xv.

good of our civilization.”<sup>79</sup> Later that same year, when Benedict reflected on his visit to the United Kingdom in his annual address to the Roman Curia, he lamented the loss of a fundamental moral consensus as the basis of democratic experiments. His words became rather ominous, when he said,

Only if there is such a consensus on the essentials can constitutions and law function. This fundamental consensus derived from the Christian heritage is at risk wherever its place, the place of moral reasoning, is taken by the purely instrumental rationality. . . . In reality, this makes reason blind to what is essential. To resist this eclipse of reason and to preserve its capacity for seeing the essential, for seeing God and man, for seeing what is good and what is true, is the common interest that must unite all people of good will. *The very future of the world is at stake.*<sup>80</sup>

Pope Benedict was concerned that if political decisions are made on the basis of instrumental rationality, or utilitarian calculations, determined only by majority vote, rather than on objective moral principles discovered with the assistance of faith, then the whole project of political and social life will turn in a very dark direction that will jeopardize authentic human dignity. Thus, politics and the state, even in a secular society, need the contribution of faith for the good of the human person.

Now, I understand that all this may still sound rather theoretical and abstract, and without any concrete, practical effect for our lives. But, to appreciate better Pope Benedict’s teaching, and its very practical application, it might be helpful to consider a paragraph of the *Catechism* that receives relatively little attention (at least in my reading). The *Catechism* teaches,

Every institution is inspired, at least implicitly, by a vision of man and his destiny, from which it derives the point of reference for its judgment, its hierarchy of values, its line of conduct. Most societies have formed their institutions in the recognition of a certain preeminence of man over things. Only the divinely revealed religion has clearly recognized man’s origin and destiny in God, the Creator and Redeemer. *The Church invites political authorities to measure their judgments and decisions against this inspired truth about God and man.*<sup>81</sup>

Yes, the Church invites political authorities—that is, the state—to consider the revealed truth of the human person’s origin and destiny when it makes the very practical judgments and decisions that are involved in lawmaking and governing.

More specifically, what the state might choose to recognize and accept from revelation is the deepest truth about human dignity. As the Second Vatican Council taught, “[t]he root reason

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<sup>79</sup> *Westminster Address*.

<sup>80</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address on the Occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia* (December 20, 2010) (italics added).

<sup>81</sup> *Catechism*, 2244 (italics added).

for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God."<sup>82</sup> The fundamental reason for man's dignity is his divinely ordained end of sharing in God's own life.<sup>83</sup> This is a divinely revealed truth. "Created in the image of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all men have the same nature and the same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude: all therefore enjoy an equal dignity."<sup>84</sup>

Because she has been entrusted with this revealed truth, the Church is confident that she "can anchor the dignity of human nature against all tides of opinion," and that "[b]y no human law can the personal dignity and liberty of man be so aptly safeguarded as by the Gospel of Christ which has been entrusted to the Church."<sup>85</sup> The Church does not hesitate to share this deepest knowledge about human dignity with the state, even though this knowledge has been revealed by God in Christ. And the Church dares to make this invitation aware that such a suggestion would seem to run afoul of the very notion of a secular society, which seeks to remain neutral on matters of religion and faith.

It is important to note that a mere reference to divine revelation would not amount to some type of impermissible, coercive confessionalism or establishment of religion. Pope Benedict XVI made clear that the Church does not request the imposition of Catholicism by the state. In his address to the Bundestag, he explained that

[u]nlike other great religions, Christianity has never proposed a revealed law to the State and to society, that is to say a juridical order derived from revelation. Instead, it has pointed to nature and reason as the true sources of law—and to the harmony of objective and subjective reason, which naturally presupposes that both spheres are rooted in the creative reason of God.<sup>86</sup>

But Benedict still held that faith can contribute to the political process by helping reason to identify those objective moral principles that are the basis of justice, true freedom and human dignity.

And although a modern secular state might likely balk at the idea of referring to any revealed truths, the tradition of the Church holds that there is, in fact, a justification, grounded in reason, for the state's consideration of revelation. For although we hold to the rule of the primacy of faith (*credo ut intelligam*), we nonetheless acknowledge the priority of reason.

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<sup>82</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

<sup>83</sup> See *Catechism*, 356. See also *Catechism*, 1700: "The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God; it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude."

<sup>84</sup> *Catechism*, 1934.

<sup>85</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 41.

<sup>86</sup> *Bundestag Address*.