

Irreducible faith: Benedict the theologian

by [Edward T. Oakes](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by Sergey Kozhukhov.

In 1968, Joseph Ratzinger, professor of theology at the University of Regensburg, wrote a modestly sized treatise on the Apostles' Creed called *Introduction to Christianity*. Its impact was anything but modest. The book so captivated Pope Paul VI that he made its author archbishop of Munich (and later a cardinal, one of his last appointments to the College of Cardinals), and just a few years later Pope John Paul II summoned the same man to Rome to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). After a long career in this position, Ratzinger himself was elected pope in April 2005.

Not many books have changed history, but this one certainly did, not just for the author personally but also for the wider church. What made this book so remarkable was not just its deft use of the Apostles' Creed to explain Christianity to the lay reader or its acute analysis of unbelief and the secular mind. An even greater virtue of the book was the future pope's keen analysis of why the promising spirit of

Vatican II failed to bring about a reunited Christianity and a re-Christianized Europe: a weak and less than full-bodied Christology.

According to his analysis, post-Enlightenment Christianity in Europe had been conned into adopting an evangelical strategy too superficial in its approach and too intimidated by Enlightenment-based objections to Christian doctrine, a strategy that usually goes under the name of "accommodationism."

Of course, at the time that strategy carried considerable plausibility, which Ratzinger illustrated with a parable, one that Søren Kierkegaard once used, about a fire that breaks out backstage right before a circus troupe is set to perform. In a panic the stage manager sends out one of the performers—a clown, as it happens, and naturally already in costume—to warn the audience to leave immediately. But the spectators take the clown's desperate pleas as part of his schtick—and the more he gesticulates the more they laugh, until fire engulfs the whole theater.

This, said Kierkegaard, is the situation of Christians: the more they gesticulate with their creeds, the more laughable they seem to their skeptical neighbors, until the world becomes engulfed in the flames of war and mutual hatred: a hell on earth as prelude to the hell after death. If only these Christian clowns had first thought to change out of their goofy costumes, he implied, the theatergoing world might have been spared.

Kierkegaard did not explicitly say just what kind of funny clothes he thought Christians should strip off to make their message of impending doom more credible. But whatever costume this Danish philosopher felt Christians should doff, his parable, at least for the professor from Regensburg, does not really get at the real dilemma of preaching the gospel to a secular culture. For the very news that a fire is on the way and, above all, that we can be spared by the simple expedient of a belief in a transworldly message (why not just leave the theater?) strikes the contemporary secular spectator as much more incredible than any costumed language in which it might be couched. Even with changing the rites of the mass from Latin to the vernacular, calling on nuns to modernize their habits, introducing guitars and folk music in the church's worship, addressing the modern world in tones of respect and hope, praising modernity for its achievements, the core of the message will still seem absurd to the secular mind.

So maybe Kierkegaard misled us with his famous parable. Perhaps another story is more appropriate. For that reason, the future cardinal and pope began his book with an even more somber narrative, one of the fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm: Once upon a time, a poor widow sends her young son Hans into the village to fetch a simple meal, but along the way he discovers a lump of gold. Thrilled, he heads back home to show his mother his amazing good luck. But no sooner has he started back than he meets a knight who persuades him to exchange the gold for the knight's steed. "The better for plowing!" the knight assures the boy. Then a farmer farther along the way explains that the widow can't eat a horse, so why not exchange the horse for the farmer's cow? After making this seemingly reasonable bargain, the boy continues home but then meets up with a neighbor carrying a goose under his arm. Of course the widow wants a meal today, says the neighbor, so why not exchange cow for goose? Done.

Finally, nearly home, Hans meets up with a boy who tells him that if he exchanges the goose for a whetstone, he can keep his knife sharpened for slaughtering any number of geese in the future. Done again. But when he gets home he notices this clumsy stone in his pocket and, forgetting its purpose and puzzled at its presence, throws it away before crossing the threshold of his home, none the sadder and certainly none the wiser.

Anyone who has followed the path taken by Protestant theology in the past two centuries and by Catholic theology in the past five decades knows the point of this story: *not all the costume changes in the world will matter if the messenger has squandered his treasure by altering his message to suit the convenience of the audience*. For Ratzinger, creeds matter only if what they proclaim is true, and if Christians deep down don't really believe it so, then all the translation strategies in the world will mean nothing.

The worried Christian of today is often bothered by questions like these: Has our theology in the last few years not taken in many ways a similar path? Has it not gradually watered down the demands of faith, which had been found all too demanding, always only so little that nothing important seemed to be lost, yet always so much that it was soon possible to venture on to the next step? And will poor Hans, the Christian who trustfully let himself be led from exchange to exchange, from interpretation to interpretation, not soon hold in his hand, instead of the gold with which he began, only a whetstone, which he can be confidently recommended to throw away?

For anyone remotely familiar with Ratzinger's career, this passage from his book will be recognized as his personal manifesto. Obviously in his role as cardinal enforcer of the church's orthodoxy, his efforts to arrest this unsettling trend aroused intense controversy. The question before us here concentrates solely on his personal theology out of which he acted as head of the CDF and is now acting as pope.

The first place in which Ratzinger takes up the question of Christology in a fully systematic way is in *Introduction to Christianity*. Commenting on a line in the Apostles' Creed—"and I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord"—he gets right to the scandal of particularity and begs the reader to notice how sheerly astonishing is this profession of faith:

It is only in the second section of the Creed that we come up against the real difficulty . . . about Christianity: the profession of faith that the man Jesus, an individual executed in Palestine about the year 30, the *Christus* (anointed, chosen) of God, indeed God's own Son, is the central and decisive point of all human history. It seems both presumptuous and foolish to assert that one single figure who is bound to disappear farther and farther into the mists of the past is the authoritative center of all history. Although faith in the *logos*, the meaningfulness of being, corresponds perfectly with a tendency in the human reason, this second article of the Creed proclaims the absolutely staggering alliance of *logos* and *sarx*, of meaning and a single historical figure. *The meaning that sustains all being has become flesh*; that is, it has entered history and become one individual in it; it is no longer simply what encompasses and sustains history but is a point *in* it.

To accept this claim entails an important methodological consideration, one that must overthrow the usual philosophical approach to reality:

Accordingly the meaning of all being is first of all no longer to be found in the sweep of mind that rises above the individual, the limited, into the universal; it is no longer simply given in the world of ideas, which transcends the individual and is reflected in it only in a fragmentary fashion; it is to be found in the midst of time, in the countenance of one man.

In his commentary on the first section of the creed ("I believe in God") Ratzinger stresses a key motif that runs through all his writings: the harmony between faith and reason, between the God of faith and the God of the philosophers and the

dangers to the faith when they are divorced. But here he tempers that theme with another point: a union of faith and history for him is based on the union of word and flesh, which, he concedes, is much harder for the human intellect to grasp and then to accept:

Perhaps it is already clear at this point that even in the paradox of word and flesh we are faced with something meaningful and in accordance with the *logos*. Yet at first this article of faith represents a stumbling block for human thinking. In this have we not fallen victim to an absolutely staggering kind of positivism? Can we cling at all to the straw of one single historical event? Can we dare to base our whole existence, indeed the whole of history, on the straw of one happening in the great sea of history?

Moreover, "history" now means for so many in the West what is accessible through the historical-critical method. The results of that method can be nugatory indeed and can then tempt the theologian once again to abandon the particular for the universal and thus to find meaning exclusively there. Positivist historians can see only the facts of history, Hegelians only the universal meaning that those facts illustrate or exemplify: "The dilemma of the two courses—on the one hand, that of transposing or reducing Christology to history and, on the other, that of escaping history completely and abandoning it, as irrelevant to faith—could be quite accurately summarized in the two alternatives by which modern theology is vexed: Jesus or Christ?"

For his own schematic purposes, Ratzinger takes Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann as the two representatives of each fork of the dilemma. Harnack wanted to strip Christianity of any philosophical overlay to reach the Jesus of history—but his failure led, perhaps inevitably, to Bultmann's insistence that the only historically important fact about Jesus is that he existed and died on the cross; everything else comes from faith in the preached Christ. In each case, the move seemed liberating. In Harnack's case, the liberation was from religious division: "Where faith in the Son had divided people—Christians from non-Christians, Christians of different denominations from one another—knowledge of the Father can unite." In Bultmann's case, faith is now immune to the ups and downs of historical research, which is endlessly revising its conclusions on the basis of new evidence or new considerations of old evidence.

As the later history of theology proved, neither approach worked: Harnack saw only his own bourgeois image in Jesus, and Bultmann tied the believer not to Jesus but to a verbal event coming from the pulpit. But this shuttlecock movement from Jesus to Christ and back to Jesus again (Bultmann's own students came to reject his radical skepticism and launched the so-called Second Quest for the historical Jesus) can itself be illuminating for Christology (just as the tension between Antiochene and Alexandrian Christologies illustrates the same point): "I believe that [this example of Harnack and Bultmann] can become a very useful pointer to something," says Ratzinger, "namely, to the fact that the one (Jesus) cannot exist without the other (Christ), that, on the contrary, one is bound to be continually pushed from one to the other because in reality Jesus only subsists as the Christ and the Christ only subsists in the shape of Jesus." Of course, history cannot prove this mutual interplay and internal subsistence; it can only show the consequences of its denial. Ratzinger insists that the interplay must be made true by the action of God, specifically God's involvement in the cross.

In a fascinating passage, Ratzinger admits that Jesus never called himself Messiah (Christ, King) in any unequivocal way; the title was explicitly imposed on him (during his life) by, ironically, Pontius Pilate. But by virtue of Jesus' mission from his Father, God made him the true King and in doing so overthrew all our worldly categories of kingship:

Jesus did not call himself unequivocally the Messiah (Christ); the man who gave him this name was Pilate. . . . This execution notice ["Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews"], the death sentence of history, became *with paradoxical unity* the "profession of faith," the real starting point and taproot of the Christian faith, which holds Jesus to be the Christ: as the crucified criminal, this Jesus is the Christ, the King. His crucifixion is his coronation, his kingship is his surrender of himself to men, the identification of word, mission, and existence in the yielding up of this very existence. His existence is thus his word. He is word because he is love. From the Cross faith understands in increasing measure that this Jesus did not just do and say something; that *in him message and person are identical*, that he is all along what he says.

Of course, Ratzinger does not make these assertions about the meaning of the cross in isolation. They must be theologically established by looking at God's involvement in Christ's descent into hell and in raising him from the dead. Like Hans Urs von Balthasar, he will have important things to say about Holy Saturday, that notoriously

difficult theologoumenon, a difficulty he fully concedes: "Probably no article of the Creed is so far from present-day attitudes of mind as this one. Together with the belief in the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary and that in the Ascension of the Lord, it seems to call most of all for demythologization: a process that in this case looks devoid of danger and unlikely to provoke opposition."

Ratzinger counters this neglect by pointing out that the mystery of Christ's descent into hell has perhaps never been more meaningful than today and calls it "particularly close" to the experience of the 20th century:

On Good Friday our gaze remains fixed on the crucified Christ, but Holy Saturday is the day of the "death of God," the day that expresses the unparalleled experience of our age, anticipating the fact that God is simply absent, that the grave hides him, that he no longer awakes, no longer speaks, so that one no longer needs to deny him but can simply ignore him. "God is dead and we have killed him." This saying of Nietzsche's belongs linguistically to the tradition of Christian Passiontide piety; it expresses the content of Holy Saturday, "descended into hell."

Ratzinger even joins Lutheran exegete Ernst Käsemann in describing Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) as a prayer sent up from hell and draws this meaning from that exegesis: "After this, do we still need to ask what worship must be in our hour of darkness? Can it be anything else but the cry from the depths in company with the Lord who 'has descended into hell' and who has established the nearness of God in the midst of abandonment by God?"

In other words, Ratzinger is quite explicit in linking the mystery of Holy Saturday with the atonement, and this is true throughout his entire career. In *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* he speaks even more explicitly than he does in *Introduction to Christianity*:

The true Bodhisattva, Christ, descends into Hell and *suffers it in all its emptiness*. . . . While the real quality of evil and its consequences become quite palpable here, the question arises . . . whether in this event we are not in touch with a divine response able to draw freedom precisely as freedom to itself. The answer lies hidden in Jesus' descent into Sheol, in the night of the soul which he suffered, a night which no one can observe except by entering this darkness in suffering faith. Thus . . . in John of the Cross, in Carmelite piety in general, and in

that of Thérèse of Lisieux in particular, "Hell" has taken on a completely new meaning and form. For the saints, "Hell" is not so much a threat to be hurled at other people but a challenge to oneself. It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. *One draws near to the Lord's radiance by sharing his darkness.* One serves the salvation of the world by leaving one's own salvation behind for the sake of the others.

A further implication of this approach is that hell, as traditionally understood as the place of eternal damnation for the reprobate, comes into being only by Christ's descent into the underworld. On the basis of both exegesis of the Bible and a philological study of the Latin of the Apostles' Creed, Ratzinger comes to this conclusion (in *The Sabbath of History*):

In reality, the "*infern*" [lower regions] of the Creed, [which] in German as first translated by *hell* [*Hölle*] and more recently by kingdom of the dead [*das Reich des Todes*], is simply the Latin equivalent of the Hebrew word *sheol*, which indicates a realm of the dead that can be imagined as a kind of shadowy existence, existence and non-existence at the same time. It is very similar to the image of *hades* we have inherited from Homer that coincides rather with the view of the dead of the Ancient Near East.

In other words, until Christ arrived there, the underworld was more or less undifferentiated, both vaguely conceived and hovering in uncertainty and darkness. This changes with Christ's descent into that underworld, for only in reaction to him can a definitive yes or no be made to God. Such, at any rate, is Ratzinger's exegesis.

But Ratzinger does not stop at exegesis. In fact, he is one of the first theologians to see how the question of religious pluralism must be solved from an eschatological viewpoint, whereas the more "horizontal" solutions sought on the level of interreligious dialogue will never bear the fruit it expects without the contribution of the new perspective on eschatology offered up by recent theology. In *Truth and Tolerance*, written just two years before his election to the papacy, he explains how the Christian concept of salvation forms the basis for authentic interreligious dialogue, the common ground that all can agree on without abandoning the particulars of their respective faiths:

When people talk about the significance of religions for salvation, it is quite astonishing that they for the most part think only that all of them make eternal life possible; and when they think like that, the concept of eternal life is neutralized, since everyone gets there in any case. But that sells the question of salvation short, in [a] most inappropriate fashion. Heaven begins on earth. . . . We have to ask what heaven is and how it comes upon earth. Future salvation must make its mark in a way of life that makes a person "human" here and thus capable of relating to God. That in turn means that when we are concerned with the question of salvation, we must look beyond religions themselves and that this involves standards of right living that one cannot just relativize at will. . . . That means that salvation does not lie in religions as such, but it is connected to them, inasmuch as, and to the extent that, they lead man toward the one good, toward the search for God, for truth, and for love. The question of salvation therefore always carries within it an element of the criticism of religion, just as, contrariwise, it can build a positive relationship to religions. It has in any case to do with the unity of the good, with the unity of what is true—with the unity of God and man.

In other words, unless the teaching on the unity of God and man most splendidly realized in Jesus Christ, incarnate Son of God, is maintained, the very coherence of the one world we live in will be threatened.

This essay is excerpted from Edward T. Oakes's book *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology*, just published by Eerdmans.