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<i>JOURNAL</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>frequency</i>	<i>circulation</i>	<i>subject</i>	<i>type</i>	*
TESTATA	data	periodicità	diffusione	argomento	tipo	*
National Catholic Reporter	16/05/08	weekly	100.000	Balzan Symposium: S. Blackburn	reportage	*
National Catholic Reporter	19/05/08	weekly	100.000	Balzan Symposium: G. Vermes	reportage	*
Inquirer.net	20/05/08	internet		Balzan Symposium: S.Blackburn	article	*
NCR Conversation Cafe	26/05/08	internet		Sanchez Sorondo and G. Cottier	reportage	*
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SVEZIA - SWEDEN

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1/4

Atheist scholar is ally (with reservations) in Benedict's fight against relativism

Posted on May 16, 2008 11:21am CST

.All Things Catholic by John L. Allen, Jr

Ever since his famous warning about a "dictatorship of relativism" shortly before his election three years ago, Pope Benedict XVI has been trying to kick-start a global conversation about truth. In particular, Benedict yearns for a new look at truth within the Western secular academy, that exotic region where Jacques Derrida's relativist maxim "there is nothing outside the text" has, ironically, achieved the status of a near-absolute.

This weekend, in the enchanting Alpine setting of Lugano, Switzerland, a cross-section of prominent Western intellectuals is taking up the papal challenge. Organized by the **Balzan Foundation**, which each year awards the Swiss-Italian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, this unique gathering of scientists, philosophers, and eggheads of all stripes, most of them without any specific religious conviction, is titled, simply, "The Truth."

I'm in Lugano covering the event. In effect, the two-day summit represents the most intriguing test to date of how Benedict's effort to restore confidence in truth is playing among secular makers of opinion.

The guest list features a constellation of intellectual heavy-hitters: Simon Blackburn, an atheist philosopher from Cambridge, who literally wrote the book on truth -- 2005's best-selling *Truth: A Guide*; Geza Vermes, a New Testament exegete born to Jewish parents in Hungary, sometimes called the greatest Jesus scholar of his day; Dominique Schnapper, a French sociologist and the daughter of famed French philosopher Raymond Aron; Bengt Gustafsson, a Swedish astronomer and a popular writer on matters of science and faith; and Emanuele Severino, Italy's most famous living philosopher, described somewhat colorfully as a "neo-Parmenidian." The Vatican is represented by Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, former theologian of the papal household, and Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, an Argentine who serves as chancellor of the Pontifical Academies of Science and of Social Sciences.

Despite the presence of two prelates, this is definitely not an "orthodox" crowd. Severino, for example, was fired back in 1970 by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, following an investigation by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of his belief in "the eternity of all being" -- which, among other consequences, renders the idea of a Creator God obsolete. Vermes is a former Catholic priest who left the church in 1957. His scholarship, while widely respected, wouldn't pass Vatican muster either. In his latest book, Vermes speculates that Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead, but rather his followers had visions that account for the resurrection narratives in the New Testament.

As for Blackburn, he regards religion as a delusion. He actually wrote a paper three years ago defending his refusal to put on a yarmulke when invited by a Jewish friend to Friday dinner, on the grounds that it would express a respect for religion he doesn't feel. (He complained about "respect creep," saying that he's willing to tolerate religious believers, but that doesn't mean he's obligated to treat their beliefs as anything other than nonsense.)

Yet philosophy, a bit like politics, tends to make strange bedfellows. At least on the subject of truth, Benedict and many of the luminaries in Lugano seem to have some common ground.

Blackburn offers an interesting case in point. In his book *Truth*, Blackburn acidly denounced "something diabolical in the region of relativism, multiculturalism or postmodernism, something which corrodes and corrupts the universities and the public culture, that sweeps away moral standards, lays waste young people's minds, and rots our precious civilization from within."

It's language that, in another context, easily might have flowed from the papal pen.

In his keynote address this morning, Blackburn returned to the theme.

"Relativism attracts suspicion and hostility for a good reason," he said. "Suppose I voice an honest and heartfelt opinion about anything, from mathematics to aesthetics. The conversation stopping remark 'that's just your opinion' is not only beside the point, but more importantly dehumanising. It signals that your words do not deserve to be taken seriously, but only taken as symptoms, like signs of a disease."

"It is not only the conservative half of each of us who cannot stand this patronage," Blackburn said. "It is each of us *in toto*, agents attempting to reason our way through the practical problems with which life tries to trip us up.

On the other hand, Blackburn was not ready to sign up for Benedict XVI's muscular sense of absolute truth, and certainly not truth rooted in a personal deity. Instead, he advocated a position known in the philosophical guild as "deflationism."

In essence, deflationism declares the "truth wars" over on the grounds that there's nothing to fight about in the first place. Both relativism and "realism," the belief in absolute standards of truth, presume that truth is a substantial property that either exists or not. In reality, deflationists say, it's no such thing.

Take any propositional statement, such as "water is formed by hydrogen and oxygen." It contributes nothing to the content of that statement, deflationists say, to rephrase it as "*it is true that* water is formed by hydrogen and oxygen." Truth is "invisible," or "transparent" -- it is not a lofty Platonic form, but rather a simple generalization about individual statements that are supported by convincing evidence.

Deflationism thereby refutes relativism, because it holds that statements can be either right or wrong -- not "for you" or "for now," but right or wrong, period. It breaks with more robust forms of realism, however, in rejecting the need for an abstract metaphysical theory to support that position. "Truth" is nothing more than a linguistic label given to accurate claims -- not a property or a "meta-reality."

Thus Blackburn's advice is to forget the debate between realism and relativism, and just get on with analysis of specific questions. He offers the example of capital punishment: "If we hammer this out, and decide that it should be [abolished], then we do not increase the theoretical temperature by adding 'what's more, that's true.' "

Blackburn is aware that the deflationist position is likely to seem a bit, well, deflating for realists such as Benedict XVI -- a thin gruel, compared to the meaty stew of absolutes which the pope likes to dish up.

Yet Benedict may take comfort that even someone like Blackburn, obviously worlds away from Catholic thought on most matters, is nevertheless on his side in opposing a "dictatorship of relativism." Many thinkers here seem to share a similar sense; after all, they have spent lifetimes arguing passionately for particular views of the world, and don't appreciate the suggestion that their conclusions are the result of nothing more than chemical processes in the brain, or psychological and cultural forces. While many aren't persuaded by the content of the Catholic catechism, they nevertheless grudgingly admire Benedict's defense of truth. Indeed, it may be the first papal cause in a while some of them even noticed, let alone endorsed.

Improbably enough, therefore, the conversations unfolding this weekend in Lugano could betoken a new chapter in the oft-strained relationship between church and culture. Stimulating reflection on truth, in a way that softens the normal divide between theists and secularists, could turn out to be Benedict XVI's most important legacy in the realm of Western intellectual life.

What's more, that's true!

* * *

I had the opportunity to sit down with Blackburn on the margins of the Lugano symposium this morning. The following are excerpts from our conversation.

Are you familiar with the writings of the pope on truth?

I'm afraid that I don't follow the pope's pronouncements very much. Of course, I do mention him in my paper this morning. I am aware of his views on relativism, the danger of relativism.

You're referring to his warning about a "dictatorship of relativism."

Yes. Myself, I'm not sure that I share that diagnosis of the modern condition. That is, people may say they're relativists, but nature is too strong for them. They actually have opinions, quite passionate ones. My own sense of things, at least as far as morality goes, is that there's as much passion and commitment as there ever was, even in Western Europe. Of course, it not necessarily passion and commitment in the direction the pope approves, but that's another matter. As far as people being able to take a stand goes, I don't see that sort of failing in the modern world. I think people find it quite easy to take a stand.

Yet in your book on truth, you wrote rather acidly about relativism corroding public morality and laying waste to young minds.

I think I got the rhetoric of that passage slightly wrong, because somebody else challenged me on it. I intended it as a quotation of a line of thought, rather than words from my own mouth.

Still, I got the impression that you feel some sympathy with that view.

Oh, yes. I think it's a real danger. I think in that regard the pope struck a chord, which is why we're talking about his words now. In a slightly Aristotelian sense -- and that too is a name we can share -- you've got to be very careful how you educate people. There is a way of educating people in the West, which I don't approve of, and which allows a certain corrosiveness, a certain extreme skepticism about values, to become part of the discourse. It's the 'whatever' of the British teenager, who just shrugs his shoulders and turns his back on everything the older generation stands for. When the message is reinforced by television, by the media, by popular idols and celebrities and so on, you see them living careless and foolish lifestyles which are held up as goals, then I am conservative enough to worry about whether there's something toxic in the body politic.

To that extent, I'm on Aristotle's side, if not directly that of the church. People have to practice a sensible discussion of values, sensible realizations that values matter, a sensible realization that public discourse about values is as necessary in their generation as it is in every generation.

Pope Benedict's desire is to stimulate a broad cultural conversation about truth. Is he succeeding?

I do think there's a movement which he must approve of, though he might not always approve the particular directions it takes. It seems to me that ten years ago, what goes loosely under the name of post-modernism was much more an "item" in the general cultural conversation. That is, people like Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida in France, some aspects of Heidegger, had led people in academic and semi-academic conversation to doubt authority and to doubt even their own judgment, to become, as it were, sort of paralyzed because of familiar thoughts about plurality of opinions, the difficulty of proof, cultural relativism. I think it's fair to say that in the discourse of intellectuals, that was a major wave.

I think its heyday was in the '80s and '90s. It's sometimes said that as far as America goes, it was killed off by the events of September 11. I suspect there's some truth in that. You know, there comes a time to be serious. The playful, ironic, "anything goes" sort of attitude may have suited the '90s, but not anymore.

We see that movement in Europe today even on the left, where there's a strong rethinking of the limits of multiculturalism. The growing sense is that the values of the Enlightenment have to be defended.

Exactly right. The problem with "anything goes" is that some fairly nasty characters who come in under that rubric, with some nasty opinions and nasty, threatening ideologies that will take root and fill the vacuum.

Let me ask a politically incorrect question. Prior to 9/11, the cultural fault line in the West was between Western theists and Western secularists. Is it easier post-9/11 for Western theists and secularists to see themselves as having more in common with one another, meaning commitment to a basic set of Western values, then with those who don't share those values -- in a special way today, some currents in Islam?

Yes, I do think it is. We share a history. There have been various degrees of rapprochement between the churches and the world of the Enlightenment. I think a lot of people from both secular and religious backgrounds are nervous about seeing an awful lot of that tradition coming under attack, from people who either don't respect that tradition or actively wish to destroy it. The extent to which those people represent an "ism" is, I think, tricky. The disaffected terrorist or anarchist, the chap with the bomb, may have his head full of ideas, but the extent to which they form a coherent system is very doubtful, I think.

They don't need a coherent system to do a lot of harm.

That's right. The criminals have to be criminalized, they're dangerous and we have to do what we can to keep ourselves secure from them. I fully share that government concern. On the other hand, it seems to me that we thinkers can fight our own "war against terror" in a different way. In just the last couple of months, I've had two e-mails that have pleased me more than almost anything else in my academic career. One was from Syria, from an Arab who wanted to translate my little book *Think*, which is a resolutely secular introduction to philosophy, into Arabic, because he thought it would do a lot of good on the Arab street. Another was from a lonely student in Iraq, who wanted to read some of my books on truth and such matters. I take great pride in that. It seems to me that this is my little contribution to fighting the battle on behalf of the West.

That's precisely my point. We're living in a new world, in which there is a much more clear recognition of the need to fight a battle on behalf of the West, which at least on that canon of issues puts you and the pope in the same boat.

Yes, that's right. I don't mind at all finding myself talking alongside representatives of the Church of England or the Roman Catholic church if that's the message we're trying to convey. I've often put it slightly mischievously by saying, "Even Christians are human!" I think there are a lot of values that humanity needs to defend. I'd just have to listen to exactly what they say.

Would you as a secular intellectual with no particular affinity for religious systems nevertheless be prepared to say that it's helpful to have someone with the cultural standing of the pope making this argument?

It could be, yes. I think it's important. The defense of values is something that has to be done again and again and again. You can never rest. Insofar as he's defending what I would recognize as Enlightenment values, then of course I'm very pleased to hear it. Naturally, as a non-religious and certainly non-Catholic thinker, I'd be worried about whether some of the values he's defending are ones I can't subscribe to.

The pope has written that ultimately, it is only truth that sets limits to power. If there aren't objective truths about human dignity, for example, what we can and cannot do to other people, then you can justify absolutely anything.

I think that's a very good argument. Whether it requires a high-powered notion of truth, I don't know. It certainly requires a value, that's for sure. It requires that you think of other people in a certain way, acknowledge boundaries to what you can do to them. It requires a commitment of you. Whether that commitment in turn requires a more heavyweight notion of truth is another question, it seems to me.

Now, of course, governments are extremely unlikely to acknowledge that there are limits to what you can do to people. The United States threw that over in the last five years. I don't think any government, or any religion for that matter, has an unblemished record of respecting the boundaries to what you may do to other people.

But truth does play this role of setting boundaries?

I don't see it as "truth" that does so. It seems to me that it takes a value to make a value. The value of respect for people, boundaries to what we may do to other people, has to be established by thinking about the conditions of living together, the way in which the vulnerable are to be treated, and so on. You can get an awful long way thinking about those things without thinking about truth.

Nonetheless, acknowledging at least the possibility of establishing such values does play the role of protecting us from ourselves?

It does indeed.

In your book, you write about the potential mischief in even seemingly innocuous religious beliefs. Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, you wrote, can dispose Catholics to also see Satan in other people and hence feel license to destroy them. In a similar vein, Benedict has written that "the pathology of religion is the most dangerous sickness of the human spirit." Do you at least admire that commitment to rationality on his part?

Yes, very much so. I think one thing the Catholic church has always had going for it, and I say this as, I guess, a "Protestant secularist," is a very strong sense of the number of ways in which the unaided human heart can go wrong. That I think is salutary and very healthy. All credit to the pope, especially if he's also capable of confronting ways in which Christianity has gone wrong. ... For myself, I take a pessimistic view not just of [Christianity's] past but also its present. Because of the decline in temporal power of religious authority, things feel much better in the West, but I don't think that can be put down to progress.

From your own point of view, is a form of theism with a principled commitment to reason preferable to one without it?

Yes, it is. I think that it was G.K. Chesterton, who was of course Catholic, who said that the trouble with atheists is not that they believe nothing, but that they'll believe anything. One has to be very careful about that. But by "reason," I'm going to mean not the reason of St. Thomas or the apologetic tradition, but the commitment to discourse that you get in the town hall and the town square ... the ability to find common ground and so on. These are values I hope I share with the pope, but he goes an extra yard or two which I won't follow.

journal	date	frequency	circulation	subject	type
National Catholic Reporter	19/05/08	weekly	100.000	Balzan Symposium: G. Vermes	reportage

* note: also published online: www.ncronline.org

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Bible scholar rips pope's book, warns of chilling effect

Posted on May 19, 2008 01:40am CST.

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Lugano, Switzerland

A leading New Testament scholar, and former Catholic priest, has criticized Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 book on the Gospels, *Jesus of Nazareth*, saying that its insistence on identifying the historical Jesus with the Christ of traditional Christian faith has "turned back the clock" on modern scholarship.

The comments from Geza Vermes, author of the acclaimed book *Jesus the Jew* and a longtime professor at Oxford, came during a summit of leading Western intellectuals May 16-17 in Lugano, Switzerland, devoted to the theme of "truth." The gathering was sponsored by the **Balzan Foundation**, which awards the Swiss-Italian equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

Vermes spoke as part of a panel on religious approaches to truth that also included Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, former theologian of the Papal Household under Pope John Paul II.

Vermes devoted his presentation to arguing that on the basis of the New Testament, the image of Jesus that emerges is that of a charismatic, wonder-working Jewish holy man, and thus not the divine Son of God claimed by later Christian tradition.

The Greek-influenced version of Christianity developed by St. Paul and elaborated across centuries of Christian theological reflection, Vermes said, "would have perplexed Jesus the Jew."

In that connection he criticized the pope's book, warning that it could have a chilling effect on Catholic Biblical scholarship.

"In *Jesus of Nazareth*, published under the alias of Joseph Ratzinger, the pope declares that the Gospels' Christ of faith is the historical Jesus, thus turning the clock back by several centuries," Vermes said.

"Pope Benedict bravely invites fellow scholars to contradict him, if they feel so inclined, but the big question is whether Catholic Biblical experts will have the courage to join Ratzinger's independent critics," he said.

Cottier did not directly respond to Vermes' critique, though during his own remarks at the Lugano symposium Cottier said that some scholars have pushed the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith "to an extreme degree," and said these issues were laid out in the "beautiful book" of Benedict XVI.

Cottier's presentation was largely devoted to the Christian understanding of truth as grounded in the person of Christ, based on Cottier's reading of the prologue to the Gospel of John.

During a later question-and-answer session, Vermes pointedly asked Cottier if he had even used the word "Jesus" during his speech – implicitly suggesting that the presentation was an example of dislodging the historical Jesus in favor of the Christ of faith.

Cottier replied that he referred to "Christ" because that's the language of John's Gospel, and that he did not intend to downplay the historical person of Jesus.

Vermes is a former Catholic priest. Born in Hungary to Jewish parents, his family converted when he was seven to evade rising anti-Semitism in pre-war Europe. Vermes lost both parents to the Holocaust, and after the war was ordained in the Order of Sion. He left the priesthood and the church in 1957 and returned to his Jewish roots, and later became the first professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford.

In the field of Biblical scholarship, Vermes is usually seen as a leading exponent of a movement that began to crest in the 1970s, seeing Jesus not in terms of the Greco-Roman religious context of late antiquity but rather in terms of first century Judaism in Palestine. Vermes was among the first scholars to write a doctoral dissertation on the Dead Sea Scrolls, which he completed in 1953 at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

I spoke with Vermees May 17 on the margins of the Lugano symposium.

In a nutshell, what's your objection to the pope's book?

I reviewed the book in the *Times* of London, where I called it "pre-Copernican." It's the way he approaches the problem. He claims to be following the historical method, but when it takes him somewhere he doesn't want to go, it's no good. He even criticizes Catholic New Testament experts.

He's obviously fond of the work of the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner, who seems to believe that the historical Jesus understood himself to be more or less what Christians think of as the Christ of faith.

Jacob Neusner is a very old friend of mine. We're bosom pals. My impression, however, is that when it comes to the Gospels, Neusner is pulling our legs. Suddenly he becomes almost a fundamentalist Christian in the interpretation of the New Testament, only in order to disagree with it at the end. But it's a very useful argument for the pope, because here's this unbelieving Jew who's acknowledging what the pope really thinks.

Would you give the pope credit at least for being conversant with modern Biblical scholarship?

As far as I can see, he's conversant with the kind of scholarship he studied as a student. Apart from Neusner, however, he doesn't seem aware of any scholarship that dates from after 1970. Of course, the pope was never trained as an exegete. I'm not sure how well he knows the languages involved. There are a few funny bits in the book that experts in Judaism at the time of Jesus wouldn't say.

Can you give an example?

At one point the pope refers to Joachim Jeremias on the word *talya*, which means "lamb." What Jeremias said was quite correct, but the pope misquotes him. He has Jeremias saying the word is Hebrew, when in fact it's Aramaic. It doesn't seem to me that he's had any serious training in this area. I'm sure he had some Biblical Hebrew, because it was compulsory in German seminary training of his day.

We have to remember that the pope's area is dogmatic theology and the church Fathers, not the interpretation of the New Testament from a historical point of view. ... Another example is his identification of the author of the fourth gospel with the apostle John, which is something most scholars today wouldn't accept. It's important for the pope's argument, however, because he wants to claim direct apostolic witness for that gospel.

The pope wants to reconcile traditional doctrinal beliefs about Christ with what we find in the New Testament. Are you saying that's just not possible?

It's possible, if you follow the reasoning. Historical scholars distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. If you admit this distinction, you can then argue that the Christ of faith is an interpretation of the historical Jesus. You can hold this point of view, as long as it can be argued in a rational way.

But you don't think the pope succeeds?

He seems to claim that the Christ of faith simply *is* the historical Jesus. Even most Catholic Biblical scholars, however, admit that Jesus himself did not make many of the claims that later Christian interpretation would make about his person and his teaching.

You also asserted that the pope's book will have a 'chilling effect' on Catholic Biblical scholarship, despite his invitation to criticize his work.

I think that must be the case, though I would be very pleased to be proved wrong.

Have you seen any evidence of such a chilling effect?

Well, I haven't seen any Catholic Biblical scholars making critical pronouncements about the book. Maybe it's too soon, but this is what I fear. I wonder if the bishops would consider it proper to allow their theologians to contradict the pope, even with the pope's permission.

journal	date	frequency	circulation	subject	type	*
Inquirer.net	20/05/08	internet		Balzan Symposium: S.Blackburn	article	*

* **note:** a comment upon John Allen's article published in National Catholic Reporter on May 16

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Inquirer Opinion / Columns

<http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view/20080520-137625/The-Pope-and-the-atheist>

NEWSSTAND

Newsstand : The Pope and the atheist

By John Nery
Philippine Daily Inquirer

Posted date: May 20, 2008

MANILA, Philippines—If everything is opinion, is discourse still possible?

The Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn, addressing a conference in Lugano, Switzerland last weekend on "Truth in Science, Humanities and Religion," phrased the problem in familiar terms. "Suppose I voice an honest and heartfelt opinion about anything, from mathematics to aesthetics. The conversation-stopping remark 'That's just your opinion' is not only beside the point, but more importantly dehumanizing. It signals that your words do not deserve to be taken seriously, but only taken as symptoms, like signs of a disease."

Perhaps this explains why, in the so-called blogosphere where opinion is the coin of the realm, there is so much incivility. The diseased are conversing, through a fog of symptoms. (I confess I have been sometimes snide myself, in my own blog.) But the dehumanizing tendency is present in other media too, and indeed even or especially in our un-mediated experiences. Perhaps out of an excess of good will, of fellow-feeling, we often act as though one opinion is as good as any other.

Blackburn was taking part in an "international symposium" convened by the International Balzan Foundation—something many of us wouldn't have heard about had John Allen not reported from Lugano.

I've written about John Allen before, the National Catholic Reporter mainstay and a peerless guide to Vatican news. (Two quick notes. One, Vatican spokesperson Federico Lombardi had occasion to acknowledge Allen's preeminence, when he chose Allen to ask the first question during Pope Benedict XVI's news conference en route to the United States. The transcript is available on the NCR website. And two, it was the Pope's decision to highlight the sexual abuse issue on his US visit—questions from journalists had been submitted beforehand, so Allen's raising of the issue was not only expected but part of the plan.)

Allen frames the Lugano conference as a response to a "papal challenge." His report begins: "Ever since his famous warning about a 'dictatorship of relativism' shortly before his election three years ago, Pope Benedict XVI has been trying to kick-start a global conversation about truth."

The conceit in Allen's report is that high-profile thinkers, even a happy atheist like Blackburn, have turned up in Lugano to rev up the engine of conversation. His report includes an interview with Blackburn, who after some initial hemming-and-hawing admits that: "There is a way of educating people in the West, which I don't approve of, and which allows a certain corrosiveness, a certain extreme skepticism about values, to become part of the discourse. It's the 'whatever' of the British teenager, who just shrugs his shoulders and turns his back on everything the older generation stands for." (Read the rest of the provocative interview at <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1824>)

It is important to remember that the attack on the dictatorship of relativism was in the context of a homily; the pope-to-be was talking to fellow cardinals about the meaning of scripture. In particular, he spoke about maturing in the faith.

"More precisely, in accordance with the Greek text, we should speak of the 'measure of the fullness of Christ' that we are called to attain if we are to be true adults in the faith. We must not remain children in faith, in the condition of minors. And what does it mean to be children in faith? St Paul answers: it means being 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine' (Eph 4: 14). This description is very timely!"

"How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,' seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."

That the Pope's representatives took part in a symposium on truth with the likes of Blackburn is an encouraging sign. To be sure, I think Cardinal Ratzinger in April 2005 was talking about a religious truth, in the sense that religion is fundamentally about what it means to be human. But his words became a catchphrase because relativism has become almost absolute.

journal	date	frequency	circulation	subject	type	*
NCR Conversation Cafe	26/05/08	internet		Sanchez Sorondo and G. Cottier	reportage	*

* **note:** John Allen talks with Sanchez Sorondo and Cottier about a possible dialogue between Christianity and Secularism 1/3

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A three-point platform for détente with secularism

By John L. Allen Jr Daily

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

New York

For centuries, Catholicism and secularism in the West have circled one another warily – occasionally in open conflict, more often smoldering in a sort of Cold War-era sense of mutual suspicion and uneasy détente.

Recently, however, both sides have taken tentative steps towards the other. Some secularists have come to regard Catholicism as a bulwark against several currents they regard as worrisome: a frivolous relativism that makes any truth claims suspect; a fundamentalist brand of Christianity that continually surprises secularists with its social capital, for example in clashes between evolution and creationism; and the sudden rise of Islam across much of Europe.

On the Catholic side, gestures of reconciliation can also be heard. At a recent symposium of Western intellectuals in Lugano, Switzerland, gathered under the auspices of the Balzan Foundation, two senior Vatican officials presented what might be described as the church's "peace platform" with regard to the secular academy.

Weaving together bits and pieces from presentations by Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, former Theologian of the Papal Household under Pope John Paul II, and Argentine Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academies of Science and of Social Science, that platform could be said to consist of three points:

- Respect for freedom of conscience
- Good fences make good neighbors
- The rationality of faith

Freedom of conscience

Cottier acknowledged that Christianity's emphasis on absolute truth over has bred concerns the centuries about intolerance. He insisted, however, that truth and tolerance are not incompatible.

"We need full respect for other forms of knowledge, and other ways of belief," Cottier said. "This is actually an intrinsic requirement of our theology."

"Fanaticism is the idea that we possess the absolute truth, and therefore we can act violently towards other people," Cottier said. "An act of faith, on the other hand, must be a free act. A believer is someone who is free to act and to choose. Imposition is not belief, which requires tolerance and dialogue."

On the basis of this distinction, Cottier praised what he called the "great intuition" of Pope John Paul II to ask Christians to apologize for their historical failures, especially times when they used force in defense of the truth.

“In Christian thought, there is always this idea of questioning oneself about past and present faults,” Cottier said. “We cannot promote and implement the truth at any price.”

“Truth only imposes itself through its own force,” he said, “which is at once a soft and yet powerful force.”

“Real faith,” Cottier said, “entails believing in this intrinsic power of the truth.”

Good fences make good neighbors

In his presentation, Sánchez quoted Kant’s famous line about the two things that filled his spirit with veneration: “the starry sky above me and the moral law inside me.”

In effect, Sánchez argued, these two “spectacles,” as Kant called them, represent two different realms of reality: the observable, external world, as measured and understood by natural science; and the subjective, interior realm, as probed by philosophy and theology.

The external and the internal, Sánchez said, intersect in the human person.

These two zones of reality can achieve “reconciliation” and “pacification,” he said, so long as “positivist ideology does not claim the right to abolish the border between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man, and to annex the latter to the former.”

With that in mind, Sánchez said, it’s possible to bring peace to one of the most contentious flashpoints in recent debates between science and religion – the theory of evolution.

Noting that the science of heredity was actually discovered by an Augustinian monk, Gregor Mendel, Sánchez said that Christian theology has no objection to the idea that genetic mutations and natural selection drive biological development.

“No external limit can be imposed on the hypothesis according to which random variations, given changes, have been established and reinforced in order to ensure the survival of a species, and thus of the human species as well,” he said. “Of course recently this [view], to quote John Paul II, has become ‘more than a hypothesis,’ and we have historical evidence of it, even if we do not have proof at the level of physics and biology.”

What’s important in this discussion, Sánchez said, is to avoid confusion between two different senses of the word “origin” when talking about the origin of species, and thus of humanity: “origin” in the sense of genetic derivation, and “origin” in the sense of ontological foundation.

Though Sánchez did not quite tease out the conclusion himself, what he clearly implied is that as long as scientists remain vigilant that their conclusions do not trespass into the latter domain, there’s no reason why evolutionary theory and religious belief ought to be at odds.

In an interview on the margins of the Lugano symposium, Sánchez confirmed that view.

“Naturally, it can happen that science presents its magnificent discoveries as the only truth,” he said. “Truth becomes only that which can be discovered in the scientific sense. There’s a tendency to limit the truth to nature.”

“Yet,” Sánchez added, “I would say that for the most part, that’s not the case. The great scientists that I’ve known in my experience of ten years at the Academy all have an openness to transcendence, meaning to a truth that’s different from the truth one discovers in nature, even if it’s grounded in that truth.”

The rationality of faith

The heart of Cottier's argument was not so much that Christianity is true – something, perhaps, he saw as a conversation for another time – but rather that it's rational. That is to say, he was aiming to convince secularists not so much to agree with Christianity, but rather not to exile it altogether from the sphere of reasonable positions.

"The experience of the believer has its own legitimacy," Cottier said.

The 86-year-old Dominican cardinal conceded that faith involves acceptance of a mystery that remains impenetrable for the human mind, which is the "transcendence" and "infinitude" of God. Nonetheless, Cottier said, acceptance of this mystery is a reasonable act based upon the "faithfulness" of the available evidence.

"Our heart aspires to this evidence," Cottier said. "We can reach a degree of probability, so that faith becomes a plausible hypothesis."

In other words, Cottier said, religious faith is not necessarily a matter of credulousness, meaning a willingness to believe almost anything – a stance he described as "offensive to reason."

Instead, Cottier said, human beings are obliged to ask themselves the same questions they would ask about any hypothesis: Are the elements of proof we have enough? Is it reasonable to believe?

Cottier argued that one confirmation faith is rational is the way it activates the mind.

"Faith carries you into the mystery," he said. "It's not a matter of setting reason aside, but rather it's the origin of a new vitality for reason." Quoting Augustine, Cottier said that faith sheds light on both "the limits and the elan of reason."

"In the light of faith, reason becomes the search for the divine *logos*," Cottier said. "It stimulates a new intellectual awakening."

"Theology corresponds to the natural need of human intelligence to believe," Cottier said.

In his interview, Sánchez expressed a similar position.

"I believe that the human being includes within itself the experience of personal liberty, the moral law, and so on. On that basis, we can reach reasonable conclusions in the realm of religion – which religious claims seem to bear the stamp of truth, and which don't."

"From there," Sánchez said, "it's possible to elevate one's horizons to God."

Sánchez struck a note of openness in terms of the church's willingness to meet secularity half-way.

"The goal is to break down the separations, the isolation, between different environments and zones of knowledge in order to put them into contact with one another," he said. "Today, across the various generations – the young, the elderly, and those of middle age – there seems to be a desire for synthesis, each one understanding that in his or her own way."

"There are obviously many different approaches to whether there's a God, if nature is all there is, or if there's some truth about the human person that goes deeper than nature. It's good that those who have the professional responsibility for studying these things themselves are seeing to build bridges in order to open up new horizons, which are not just critical but that seek a space in which the various disciplines converge upon one another."

journal	date	frequency	circulation	subject	type	*
Weblogs.law.harvard	28/05/08	internet		NCR reportage on Symposium	article	*

* **note:** comment upon John Allen's Article concerning S. Blackburn's speech in the official blog of Harvard Law School

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May 28th, 2008

Via [New Advent](#)'s news feed: John Allen, of the [National Catholic Reporter](#), reports on a [recent conference](#) in Lugano, Switzerland on the topic of truth. Here's how Allen begins:

Ever since his famous warning about a "dictatorship of relativism" shortly before his election three years ago, Pope Benedict XVI has been trying to kick-start a global conversation about truth. In particular, Benedict yearns for a new look at truth within the Western secular academy, that exotic region where Jacques Derrida's relativist maxim "there is nothing outside the text" has, ironically, achieved the status of a near-absolute.

This weekend, in the enchanting Alpine setting of Lugano, Switzerland, a cross-section of prominent Western intellectuals is taking up the papal challenge. Organized by the Balzan Foundation, which each year awards the Swiss-Italian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, this unique gathering of scientists, philosophers, and eggheads of all stripes, most of them without any specific religious conviction, is titled, simply, "The Truth."

I'm in Lugano covering the event. In effect, the two-day summit represents the most intriguing test to date of how Benedict's effort to restore confidence in truth is playing among secular makers of opinion.

What makes this conference of interest for those who study analytic philosophy is the presence of [Simon Blackburn](#) at the conference. Blackburn, an atheist, seems a strange bedfellow among the many "religious" presenters at this conference. Yet, Blackburn's book, [Truth: A Guide](#), challenges relativism, and there are points where he agrees with some — though not all — of the Pope's positions on truth, some of which comes out in the interview between him and Allen at the end of the article.

It's quite an interesting read, especially for those interested in topics like truth.

Follow-up: After writing the original post, I found this follow-up article by Allen, "[A three-point platform for détente with secularism](#)." I'm curious to know what my readers think of these articles.

journal	date	frequency	circulation	subject	type
Medicinsk Access	05 - 2008	8 / year	20.000	Balzan Symposium	article

1/2

Diskussionen drogs kanske till sin spets när världens kanske bästa kännare av Jesus, Geza Vermes, gav vissa bevis för att den historiske personen Jesus var en människa av kött och blod till skillnad från t ex Påven som dogmatiskt och auktoritärt ser på Jesus som Kristus d v s Guds son, som dog för människor på korset, och återuppstod.



Sanning inom humaniora, vetenskap och religion

– var det något pretentiösa temat för en oerhört intressant konferens som nyligen genomfördes i Lugano, Schweiz.

Organisationen bakom konferensen var International Balzan Foundation, skapad av dottern Angela Lina Balzan till minne av sin far, den mycket framstående italienske journalisten Eugenio Balzan, som var ägare av den italienska dagstidningen "Corriere della Sera" och dog 1953.

International Balzan Foundation delar varje år ut ett antal priser till framstående forskare och akademiker. Varje år väljer man ut nya forskningsområden och kan på detta sätt också lyfta fram forskning som är föga känd. Man sponsrar även interdisciplinära konferenser och symposier inom ve-

tenskap och samhällsvetenskap, historia, filosofi, religion m m.

Sanningen

Vid den senaste konferensen som hölls under två dagar i maj 2008 presenterade ledande europeiska forskare föreläsningar som hade som tema "San-

“En intellektuellt stimulerande konferens som man kanske kan sammanfatta med skämtet: Fortfarande förvirrad, men på en högre nivå.”

ning” inom deras forskningsämne. Den engelske filosofen, *David Blackburn*, känd för bl a sina böcker talade om ”Sanning” från ett filosofiskt perspektiv. Blackburn skiljde bl a mellan vetenskaplig kritik, skepticism, där skeptikern söker efter en sanning och relativismen, som förnekar bl a att det finns någon absolut sanning.

Men elektronen har samma laddning i hela världen och det tog forskare lång tid och möda att bevisa att så är fallet. För Blackburn är detta argumentet som kan ställas upp mot relativismen.

– Vetenskapen med dess kriterier av bevis och experimentella resultat är mycket närmare sanning än andra inriktningar, som religion, som inte grundar sig på dessa kriterier. Vi måste använda våra omdömen för att bedöma sanningshalten hos olika uttåg, sade David Blackburn.

Vägen till sanningen

Bengt Gustafsson, professor i astronomi, gav en strålande föreläsning om vägen till att finna Sanningen när det gäller energi, quarkar och The Big Bang. I alla dessa tre forskningsområden spelade vissa experiment avgörande roll för att bekräfta teorier.

– Varför finns det sådan konsensus inom t ex astrofysiken, frågade Bengt Gustafsson och gav flera olika svarsalternativ, bl a att forskare tycker om symmetriska teorier. Det är endast genom alltmer förfinade mätmetoder som man kommer närmare Sanningen inom kosmologin, sade Gustafsson

Yuri Manin, ledande matematiker, gav exempel på att sanningar inom ma-

tematiken lever oftast inte längre än ett årtionde. Matematiken lyder inte under någon auktoritet, av vad majoriteten tycker eller av marknaden. Den är inte ett demokratiskt värde utan bygger på bättre eller sämre modeller/teorier/metaforer som antingen kan bevisas eller inte. De som kan bevisas överlever och de som inte kan bevisas dör.

Detta tema fortsattes av *Robert McCredie May* (Lord May) teoretisk fysiker och f d president för Australiens Royal Society. May skiljde mellan tre olika sanningar: matematiska som är mentala konstruktioner, vetenskapliga som bygger på experiment och bevis och religiösa värderingar. May visade att dessa olika sanningar går in i och påverkar eller försöker påverka varandra. Vetenskapens plikt är att ge klara ramar för samhällsdebatten när det gäller globala ämnen som t ex klimatförändringar där bevisbördan för att människan verkligen orsakar klimatkraftförändringar är ovedersägliga. Medan forskning kan peka på både osäkerheten liksom bevisbördan för olika perspektiv så bestäms politiken till syvende och sist av värderingar och tro.

Historiska trosföreställningar

Inom forskningsämnet historia finns en ständig fråga om hur väl man kan förstå människor som levde förr. Det kommer alltid att finnas med en osäkerhet i analyserna eftersom det inte finns objektiva data som bestämmer ett visst synsätt.

– Vi gör oss själva en otjänst om vi bedömer vissa historiska trosföreställningar och värderingar som falska, sade

historieprofessor *Quentin Skinner*.

Han förespråkade att vi istället försöker förstå att historiska personer kan ha haft tidsenliga goda skäl för att ha vissa föreställningar som för oss verkar helt främmande.

Denna diskussion drogs kanske till sin spets när världens kanske bästa kännare av Jesus, *Geza Vermes*, gav vissa bevis för att den historiske personen Jesus var en människa av kött och blod till skillnad från t ex Påven som dogmatiskt och auktoritärt ser på Jesus som Kristus d v s Guds son, som dog för människor på korset, och återuppstod.

Vermes skiljer mellan den historiske Jesus och apostlarnas Jesus som hade intresse av att skapa en ny religion med alla dess myter och trosföreställningar.

Konferensen om Sanning var verkligen interdisciplinär med mycket framstående europeiska forskare som både gav utomordentligt intressanta föreläsningar på hög nivå och lyssnade på andra forskningsområden. En intellektuellt stimulerande konferens som man kanske kan sammanfatta med skämtet: ”Fortfarande förvirrad, men på en högre nivå”.

Med tanke på att vetenskapens själ är ständig osäkerhet och ständigt sanningssökande, så är detta ett mycket högt betyg för konferensen.

Zvi Wirschubsky

Referenser:

- International Balzan Foundation <http://www.balzan.it/default.aspx?lang=en>
- Symposiet ”Sanning i vetenskap och religion” <http://www.balzan.it/news.aspx?lang=en&ID=4183&fromI=6&Codice=6>