

GAUDIUM ET SPES AND THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY: THE END OF THE DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD?

The impact of John XXIII's call for an *aggiornamento* of the Christian faith and the catholic church is perhaps best reflected in the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, about the dialogue between the church and the contemporary world. In December 1962, the Belgian Cardinal Suenens proposed to divide the conciliar reflection on the church into two parts: one considering the questions of the church *ad intra*, leading to the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, the other reflecting on the place and tasks of the church *ad extra*, resulting in *Gaudium et spes*. Several times afterwards Cardinal Suenens stressed that his proposal was an expression of the wish of pope John XXIII.

In *Gaudium et spes* the conciliar fathers wished to enter the dialogue with the world of their time, interpreting the signs of the time in the light of the Gospel (GS 4). They in fact sketched the guidelines of such a dialogue, e.g. by defining the created nature as an autonomous world (GS 36, 57); they provided several analyses of the world and its ambiguities (a.o. GS 4-10, 56, 63), and formulated the help the church can deliver (GS 40-43). At the same time they pointed to the opportunities the world offers the church: the dialogue with culture could open up new ways for proclaiming the Christian truth (GS 44, 57).

The dialogue partner of the church in this Constitution was the modern world: a world finding itself in the dynamics of modernity, responding to the key-words of modernity such as emancipation, progress, technological development, economic growth, worldwide unity: humankind on its way to freedom, equal rights and happiness for all – in short, modernity as the project of the progressive realization of full humanity.

Considering the dialogue, the Council saw three major tasks for the church, which are reflected in the pastoral Constitution. First of all, the church wanted to acknowledge the fruits of modernity and critically evaluate the strong and weak points of the modern dynamics (GS 4-10, 41-42). Secondly, the church sought to link the modern project to the Christian story: well-understood modern progress was part of the fulfillment of God's plan. In so doing the church has situated the modern project in the horizon of ultimate meaning (GS 23-24, 33-34, 38, 43). Thirdly, the

church has proposed concrete solutions to some urgent problems accompanying the realization of the modern projects (GS part II).

Concerning the second task the Council focused on the concept of the human person, his/her integrity, autonomy and responsibility – concepts borrowed from personalistic philosophy, all of which the depth only becomes clear if situated in relation to God and God's plan of salvation for the world. Indeed the ambiguities of modernity have been connected to the existence of sin, the misuse of the personal freedom, which is at the same time the refusal to acknowledge God. So the criticism of the ambiguities of modernity has been theologically motivated. Also in the modern world the struggle against the powers of darkness had to continue (GS 13, 25, 37, 41).

Nevertheless, modern striving for progress and emancipation, for the realization of full humanity, was acknowledged by the church. According to the Council the modern projects indeed fitted in God's plan, although they could only find their perfection and fulfillment in God (GS 38-39). Through the dialogue, i.e., by carrying out these three tasks, the church could offer its specific support to the world's effort to realize full humanity, or theologically speaking, the effort to work along God's plan of salvation (GS 40-45).

Yet today, in our so-called postmodern world, modernity's projects of progress and emancipation have lost their plausibility; in 1979 the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard indicated that the master-stories of modernity have ended¹. The postmodern condition no longer offers all-encompassing stories pretending absolute, universal and cognitive validity: there are no master-stories describing the world as it really is, or as it should be in the end, telling us what project is inherent to the dynamics of the world and what has to be done to realize it. All of them broke down on counter-examples. In the early eighties Lyotard wrote: "In the course of the past fifty years, each grand narrative of emancipation [...] has, as it were, had its principles invalidated. *All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real*: 'Auschwitz' refutes the speculative doctrine. At least this crime, which is real, is not rational. *All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian*: 'Berlin 1953', 'Budapest 1956', 'Czechoslovakia 1968', 'Poland 1980' (to name but a few) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. *All that is democratic is by the people and for the people, and vice versa*: 'May 1968' refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. Every-day society brings the representative institution to a halt. *Everything that*

1. J.-F. LYOTARD, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, 1979 (trans.: *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, MN, 1984).

promotes the free flow of supply and demand is good for general prosperity, and vice versa: the ‘crises of 1911 and 1929’ refute the doctrine of economic liberalism, and the ‘crisis of 1974-79’ refutes the post-Keynesian modification of that doctrine”². This list can be further completed by considering the final obliteration of (East-European) communism in 1989, the life-endangering environmental crises as a result of technological development, the seemingly incurable and growing gap between the Third and the First World in spite of Worldbank and IMF policies, the reemergence of nationalistic ideologies, and so on. The least one can say is that the results of the dynamics of modernity have shown themselves very ambiguous.

If this postmodern analysis is true, then the significance of *Gaudium et spes*, as an attempt to reconcile Christianity and the modern world, is undoubtedly in real danger. Did this pastoral Constitution not lose its validity with the breakdown of modern master-stories, its very dialogue partners? Is not the attempt to dialogue with modern culture and society illusive, precisely because of factors inherent to modernity itself? And finally, considering this failure, is not the concept of ‘dialogue’ itself a threat for the identity of Christianity, in other words, is the relevance of Christianity not bound to the irreducible difference, the unsurmountable gulf between faith and world?

These questions become grave today, especially when one considers the problematic of the reception of *Gaudium et spes*. Almost no one affirms that the document has completely lost its validity, but nevertheless some theologians, belonging to the so-called neo-conservative theological tendencies, claim that the true reception of the pastoral Constitution has yet to begin. In their opinion, only now – after the breakdown of modernity – its reception can proceed in the right way.

THE NEO-CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUE OF (THE RECEPTION OF) *GAUDIUM ET SPES*

Neo-conservative theologians have not been very much upset about the crisis of modernity. In fact, this crisis has not surprised them at all. The projects of modernity, which were methodically atheistic, or at least agnostic, had to fail because they were based on human *hybris*, i.e., the attempt by humankind to build a perfect world without God. The modern world wanted to create its own salvation instead of expecting it from

2. J.-F. LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982-85*, Minneapolis, MN – London, 1988, pp. 28-29.

God. As a remedy, these theologians maintain that only a restoration of the former theocentric worldview can resolve the crisis of modernity. They regard the fall of modern master-stories as the final proof for the validity of their position.

In their opinion only now a fruitful reception of the Second Vatican Council, and especially of *Gaudium et spes*, can take place. The efforts of reconciling the modern world with Christian faith, as carried out by progressive Christians and theologians who claimed to be the real heirs of Vatican II, have proved themselves illusory: modernity did not succeed in keeping its promises of freedom, welfare, happiness for all. *Gaudium et spes* may not be considered as the starting point for an ongoing prosperous dialogue with the world, but must instead be recognized as a limit and warning.

One of the pre-eminent representatives of this so-called neo-conservative tendency is Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith³. According to Ratzinger, progressive theologians surrender Christian faith to modernity: they reduce the Christian story to a legitimating structure of the various modern master-stories and abandon the identity and specificity of Christianity.

Already in his reports and reflections on the developments about Scheme XIII, the preparatory text of *Gaudium et spes*, Ratzinger pointed out the dangers of an exaggerated overture to the modern world⁴. One of the major problems in the discussions consisted in the evaluation of modern technological development and its promises for humankind. Inspired by the work of Teilhard de Chardin, a number of the conciliar fathers identified Christian hope with modern belief in the progress of humanity: for them, there was no difference any more between the process of

3. Ratzinger's bibliography since 1981, the year John Paul II appointed him as Prefect, shows that he remained (and remains) active as theologian. In the scope of this contribution we limit ourselves to his personal theological reflections; we do not examine the documents and statements he has published in his capacity as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For a more extended evaluation of Ratzinger's theology, see L. BOEVE, *Kerk, theologie en heilswaarde: de klare visie van Joseph Ratzinger*, in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 33 (1993) 139-165 (with summary in English).

4. Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Sentire ecclesiam*, in *Geist und Leben* 36 (1963) 321-326; *Ergebnisse und Probleme der dritten Konzilsperiode*, Köln, 1965, pp. 38-39; *Die letzte Sitzungsperiode des Konzils*, Köln, 1966, pp. 25-58; *Angesichts der Welt von heute. Überlegungen zur Konfrontation mit der Kirche im Schema XIII*, in *Wort und Wahrheit* 20 (1965) 493-504 (enlarged and changed in *Dogma und Verkündigung*, München, 1973, 183-204). He has also written the commentary accompanying the first chapter of Part 1 of *Gaudium et spes* in the edition of *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Konstitutionen, Dekrete und Erklärungen. Kommentare*, Teil 3, Freiburg – Basel – Wien, 1968, pp. 313-354.

hominization and the process of 'christification' towards the point 'omega'; the reconciliation of Christianity and modernity was complete. In Scheme XIII, Ratzinger noticed a kind of the same naive optimism about technological development and a dangerous confusion of technological progress and Christian hope. In specifying the relation between Christ and the technical world, the Scheme tended to consider christology as a sacralization of technological evolution, instead of applying it to the level of the passion of human life and of human love. In the final text, the recognition of the fruits of technology has been accompanied by a warning not to untie the bonds between technology and the primacy of the human person and the broader horizon of meaning opened up in Christian revelation⁵.

In general, Ratzinger was afraid that the turn towards the modern world and the positive assessment of modern hopes would, theologically speaking, stress too much the dynamics of incarnation (God becomes flesh in this world), forgetting the mystery of the cross (Christian faith is not of this world). *Aggiornamento*, as Ratzinger wrote in *Angesichts der Welt von heute*, does not consist in a simple adjustment of Christian faith to the modern world. The 'yes to the world' of the Christian is always a critical 'yes': the modern world can not only be identified with the progress toward more humanity but is also always characterized by an illegitimate 'will to absolute autonomy', the will to live without God, modern *hybris*. Dialogue with the world can only proceed when (through this dialogue) the world is purified⁶, or, as he wrote in the 1973 enlarged version of this article: when the world is 'exorcised'⁷. In the same later version Ratzinger added some sections to relativize the optimism engendered by the Council and the pastoral Constitution, e.g.: "The tragic one-sidedness of the last conciliar debates consisted in the fact that they were dominated by the trauma of backwardness and a pathos to catch up with modernity, a pathos which remained blind for the inherent ambiguity of today's world". "Now, in the post-conciliar church, we have to endure with difficulty that what did not find expression in the conciliar debates"⁸.

5. Cf. W. KLEIN, *Teilhard de Chardin und das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Ein Vergleich der Pastoral-Konstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute mit Aspekten der Weltschau Pierre Teilhards de Chardin* (Abhandlungen zur Sozialethik, 8), München – Paderborn – Wien, 1975, esp. pp. 138-145.

6. Cf. *Angesichts der Welt von heute*, in *Wort und Wahrheit* (n. 4), pp. 502-503.

7. *Angesichts der Welt von heute*, in *Dogma und Verkündigung* (n. 4), p. 201.

8. "Die tragische Einseitigkeit der letzten konziliaren Debatten bestand darin, daß sie vom Trauma der Rückständigkeit und von einem Pathos nachgeholter Modernität beherrscht waren, das blind blieb für die innere Zweispältigkeit der heutigen Welt". "Was in der konziliaren Debatte nicht zum Austrag kam, muß daher mühsam nun in der nachkonziliären Kirche durchgestanden werden" (*ibid.*, pp. 199-200).

On several occasions after the Council Ratzinger has further reflected on the post-conciliar reception of the overture to the modern world, as practiced by *Gaudium et spes* in an exemplary manner⁹. Through the years his evaluation of this openness has become more and more negative, especially when he noticed that progressive theologians (such as Edward Schillebeeckx and especially Johann Baptist Metz in his political theology) claimed to follow the spirit of Vatican II when they introduced neo-marxist schemes in their theological reflection. For in Ratzinger's opinion, one cannot appreciate *Gaudium et spes* as a plea for an ongoing progressivism, a never-ending process of adjustment to modernity. On the contrary, the pastoral Constitution was not meant as a starting point for an unrestricted dialogue, but rather determined its limits. Ratzinger's critique has culminated in the so-called *Ratzinger Report* of 1985, published right before the extraordinary synod on the reception of Vatican II thirty years after its closing. In the second chapter – about the necessity of a rediscovering the Second Vatican Council – Ratzinger has even completely repudiated the openness exercised by the Council with regard to the modern world. The inherent ambiguities of the modern world, which have become more and more apparent at the end of the 20th century, in fact prevent the church from dialoguing any longer with it. According to Ratzinger, the modern world stands in direct opposition to the church when she proclaims the truth about God, Christ, the world, sin and grace. In the end, the real Christian is a non-conformist. The time has come, in Ratzinger's opinion, that the Christian rediscovers the consciousness that s/he belongs to a minority which is often opposed to 'the spirit of the world'; s/he must rediscover the courage of non-conformism, the capacity to reject to euphoric post-conciliar solidarity with the world.

In his later writings Ratzinger has stuck to this position. In 1991, for instance, he published a collection of articles concerning the situation of

9. See *Der Katholizismus nach dem Konzil – Katholische Sicht*, in *Auf Dein Wort hin*. 81. Deutscher Katholikentag, Paderborn, 1966, 245-266 (enlarged in *Das neue Volk Gottes. Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie*, Düsseldorf, 1969, 302-321); *Weltoffene Kirche? Überlegungen zur Struktur des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, in T. FILTHAUT (ed.), *Umkehr und Erneuerung. Kirche nach dem Konzil*, Mainz, 1966, 273-291 (= *Das neue Volk Gottes*, 281-301); *Glaube und Zukunft*, München, 1970, pp. 93-106; *Zehn Jahre nach Konzilsbeginn – Wo stehen wir?*, in *Dogma und Verkündigung*, München, 1973, 439-447; *Der Weltendienst der Kirche. Auswirkungen von Gaudium et spes im letzten Jahrzehnt*, in *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 4 (1975) 439-454 (= *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie*, München, 1982, 395-411); *Bilanz der Nachkonzilszeit – Mißerfolge, Aufgaben, Hoffnungen*, in *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, 383-395; J. RATZINGER and V. MESSORI, *Rapporto sulla fede*, Torino, 1985 (transl.: *The Ratzinger Report. An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, San Francisco, 1986), esp. the second chapter about the 'rediscovering of the Council'.

Europe after 1989 and the possible role that faith and the church can play in Europe, entitled *Wendezeit für Europa? Diagnosen und Prognosen zur Lage von Kirche und Welt*¹⁰. According to Ratzinger, Europe, or more in general the modern world which is deeply affected by the master-stories of progress and emancipation, has forgotten what the specificity of humanity is – i.e., what real truth and real freedom are. For truth is not something that is self-made, created, that is discussed in terms of majority and minority. Nor is freedom something empty, the freedom to do whatever one likes ('Anything goes' – Feyerabend). The result of the modern abolition of 'humanity' has been the contemporary culture of death¹¹, becoming significantly apparent in the major fatal diseases of our time: aids, drugs, terrorism, abortion, suicide, collective violence, ecological disasters, rising nationalism, and also some new forms of religiosity and esoteria (New Age), all of which have come forth from a fundamental misunderstanding of the ground and roots of real humanity, real truth, real freedom. A civilization where truth is something one creates and decides on, and where freedom is something empty, leads to irrationalism and amorality, and to nihilism and relativism. For Ratzinger, truth and freedom are not self-made but given, they are not empty, but bound to an instance independent of human activity: God and God's revelation¹². The truth about humanity has been revealed in the anthropological and ethical vision of Christianity, which, Ratzinger contends, can be considered as a synthesis of the major ethical intuitions of humankind¹³. God revealed the salvific and liberating truth in Scripture and tradition to the church, which has to guard and proclaim it. In as much as the church reminds this to the contemporary world, it can offer a way out of the modern culture of death.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *GAUDIUM ET SPES* IN POSTMODERN TIMES

Today theologians who are involved in the dialogue with modernity perceive a so-called 'unholy alliance' between postmodern and neo-con-

10. Einsiedeln – Freiburg, 1991, ²1992. See also *Jesus Christus heute*, in *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 19 (1990) 56-70; *Die Bedeutung religiöser und sittlicher Werte in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, *ibid.* 21 (1992) 500-512.

11. Cf. *Wendezeit für Europa?* (n. 10), p. 92.

12. Only in this perspective Ratzinger's paradoxical statements that, firstly, in the master-stories of emancipation humankind tries to liberate itself from its real freedom, and, secondly, it seeks to annihilate the Absolute (God) in order to create the Absolute (the perfect society), can be possibly understood (cf. *ibid.*, p. 99).

13. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

servative philosophers and theologians. According to them, both post-moderns and neo-conservatives are abandoning the accomplishments of modernity¹⁴.

Indeed, if one more carefully examines the evaluations concerning the reception of *Gaudium et spes* which are characteristic for the so-called neo-conservative tendencies in the church and society, one must admit that the neo-conservative analysis of the crisis of modernity closely resembles the theories of specific postmodern authors such as Jean-François Lyotard and Wolfgang Iser¹⁵, at least as concerns the description of our contemporary time. As already mentioned, postmodern philosophers also point at the fundamental ambiguities and the contra-productivity of the modern master-stories. Lyotard evaluates these master-stories as hegemonic and repressive because of their universalistic and cognitive pretensions. Master-stories lack the ability of being challenged by irreducible alterity and exclude everything that cannot be integrated into themselves.

But, although the diagnosis seems to be almost the same, the respective remedies proposed by neo-conservative and postmodern authors differ completely. Neo-conservative thinkers hope to reestablish the theoretical framework of pre-modern times, going back before modernity and trying to forget about modernity. Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, suggest new ways of coping with the acknowledged and irreducible ambiguity of modernity.

If the post-modern and neo-conservative critiques of modernity are pertinent, the question arises whether *Gaudium et spes* and its dialogue with the modern world must not be buried with modernity. Can the theologian be satisfied when s/he renounces the dialogue with modern culture and society, and returns, as neo-conservative tendencies urge, to a kind of pre-modern master-story? Or does one have to cling to the modern stories, as late-modern theologians suggest, although they have lost their plausibility? Or can postmodern criticism of modernity provide new perspectives for the dialogue between faith and contemporary culture and society? In our opinion, the *Gaudium et spes* document itself contains elements to cope with the serious questions raised by the crisis of modernity regarding the dialogue with the (modern) world as proposed by the Council.

14. Cf., e.g., H.D. Mutschler who, in the introduction of a compilation about the life and work of Karl Rahner, considering the anti-modern tendencies, made mention of "eine unheilige Allianz zwischen Erzkonservativen und postmodern-Progressiven, sobald es gegen die aufgeklärte Vernunft geht, an der Rahner, wie jeder große katholische Theologe, festhält". H.D. MUTSCHLER (ed.), *Gott neu buchstabieren. Zur Person und Theologie Karl Rahners*, Würzburg, 1994, p. 10.

15. See, e.g., *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim, 1987.

Theologians who want to relegate the pastoral Constitution concerning the dialogue with the modern world forget two important things. Firstly: although the specific content of *Gaudium et spes* can be questioned because of the crisis of modernity, it remains valuable to preserve the method manifested in *Gaudium et spes*. For our purpose, the question, “What does *Gaudium et spes* do?” is far more important than the question, “What does the text of *Gaudium et spes* say?”. In addressing the first question, one observes that the Constitution did not favor the modern world of the early sixties as such, but allied itself with the contemporary critical consciousness, present in the contemporary philosophy of personalism. Herein the human person is goal and measure of modern (technical) developments. By adopting this contemporary critical consciousness, *Gaudium et spes* succeeded in incarnating Christian faith in the modern world of the sixties, so that Christian faith itself acquired the ability to function as a critical consciousness¹⁶.

The second important thing theologians too easily overlook is the positive other side of postmodern criticisms of the modern master-stories. Neo-conservative (e.g. P. Koslowski) and late-modern philosophers and theologians (J. Habermas, J.B. Metz and E. Schillebeeckx) identify the postmodern condition almost exclusively with a-political aestheticism, ethical relativism and irrationalistic superficiality; or, as Habermas describes it, with “neue Unübersichtlichkeit”¹⁷. They forget that (at least some) postmodern authors suggest a new way of dealing with the fall-down of the master-stories. Authors such as Lyotard are convinced that the crisis of modernity cannot be mastered anymore by old (restored pre-modern) nor by new or renewed (late-modern) master-stories – master-stories

16. Cf. D.R. CAMPION, *The Church Today*, in W.M. ABBOTT (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York, 1966, 183-198, p. 185; E. McDONAGH, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, in A. HASTINGS (ed.), *Modern Catholicism. Vatican II and After*, London – New York, 1991, 96-112, p. 102; see also D.L. CHRISTIE about the similarities between *Gaudium et spes* and the personalism of Louis Janssens (influenced by the French personalist philosopher E. Mounier) in *Adequately Considered. An American Perspective on Louis Janssens' Personalist Morals* (LTPM, 4), Louvain, 1990 (pp. 101-106: “The Methodology of Vatican II”).

17. See, e.g., the conception which holds that the postmodern defense of radical cultural particularity of truth and ethics implies that from whatever is today considered as true and good, in some other time the opposite can be as valid (D. SCHELTENS, *Het postmodernisme*, in *Sacerdos* 61, 1994, 211-219). Even more outspoken are the words of F. Centore, quoted by P. Vandeveld, meant as an illustration of the postmodern condition: “postmodernism includes change in morality such as the fact that now a man abandoning his wife and children for a younger woman is regarded with envy and shows an everlasting virility”. P. VANDEVELDE, *The Notions of ‘Discourse’ and ‘Text’ in Postmodernism: Some Historical Roots*, in *Philosophy and Theology* 6 (1992) 181-200, p. 181.

always are hegemonic, repressive, and in the end contraproductive. This, however, does not necessarily imply that all story-telling is over, that indeed only insurmountable chaos and obscure, diffuse plurality remain. Also in postmodern times the story-telling continues. But the specific postmodern way of dealing with the plural end-situation of modernity, after the decline of the master-stories, is no longer the mode of the master-story, but the mode of the 'open story'. While master-stories are hegemonic and repressive to alterity, open stories, on the contrary, try to be non-hegemonic by welcoming alterity as both challenge and limit to their own story-telling. Open stories no longer want to master otherness, but rather consider themselves questioned by the other. Standing under the judgment of the other, they seek to lay down the unjust pretensions of universalistic and cognitive validity and try to respect the claim of the other by bearing witness to the other. In this perspective, each 'open story' develops the self-consciousness of being a particular and temporary witnessing to the un-masterable other, always bound to a particular time and place, and never to be taken as an absolute¹⁸.

These two often forgotten points allow us to sketch a possible new step in the reception of *Gaudium et spes*. In our opinion, the pastoral Constitution has a future when one remembers what it really did, how it entered into the dialogue with the critical consciousness of the early sixties. With the crisis of modernity this particular critical consciousness has also lost its plausibility. Neo-conservative theologians are convinced that the only way out this crisis is a retreat, as if our time could not have its own critical consciousness, which, in our opinion, should be located in the specific postmodern mode of 'open story'-telling. When Christian faith confronts itself with postmodern critical consciousness, it will have to lay down the specific modern features it incorporated from the dialogue with modernity, but it will also find a challenging dialogue partner providing an excellent opportunity for Christian faith to incarnate itself another time – an incarnation which will be valid as long as the present critical consciousness remains plausible.

As *Gaudium et spes* states: "The church has the duty *in every age* of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner *appropriate to each generation*

18. Cf. L. BOEVE, *Theologie na het christelijke grote verhaal. In het spoor van Jean-François Lyotard*, in *Bijdragen* 55 (1994) 269-295 (with summary in English).

replies to the continual human questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and how they are related" (GS 4)¹⁹.

Ratzinger feared that *Gaudium et spes* encouraged the dynamics of incarnation too much and forgot about the mystery of the cross. In his opinion, the crisis of modernity has made clear that the cross, the non-conformity of the Christian to the world, comes first. In this article we have tried to argue that Christian faith, the Christian church, need not cease the dynamics of incarnation but must explore the contemporary critical consciousness. Through the dialogue with postmodern critical consciousness, Christian faith can discover anew and reformulate the Christian critical consciousness witnessed in the mystery of the cross. Indeed, there is no incarnation without the cross, but there is likewise no cross without the incarnation.

ILLUSTRATION: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NEO-CONSERVATIVE AND POSTMODERN CONCEPTION OF THE CLAIM OF HETERONOMY

The different ways in which neo-conservative and postmodern theologians cope with the crisis of modernity become manifest in the way the correction of the autonomy of the modern subject is perceived. In their analyses both neo-conservative and postmodern authors critique the primacy and absolutized autonomy of the modern 'strong' subject where world, history and society are subject-centered. In their critiques they stress the fact that the identity of the subject does not exist as such, as a point of departure, but is always bound to a founding alterity. So identity, as truth and freedom, are not creations nor accomplishments of the strong subject, but are always necessarily related to otherness, transcendence. Autonomy need not contradict heteronomy but is relative to it. To become a subject implies coping with the claim, the demanding challenge, of what always transcends the subject and can never be mastered by the subject; it implies coping with that which escapes all attempts to grasp it.

Neo-conservatives such as Ratzinger, for whom the restoration of a pre-modern master-story is the only remedy, identify this heteronomy ("das Sollen")²⁰ with the given historical shape of the Christian tradition. In the Christian tradition, the Truth is revealed by God and the conditions for real freedom are given. It is the task of the church, more explicitly of

19. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today*, in N.P. TANNER (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. Vol. Two: *Trent to Vatican II*, London – Washington, 1990, 1069-1135, p. 1070.

20. Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Wendezeit für Europa?* (n. 10), pp. 25-26.

the magisterium, to guard and proclaim this Truth. For such neo-conservatives, one lives in the Truth and is free when one conforms oneself to the Christian tradition as it is put forward by the magisterium.

Postmodern theologians, however, evaluate this neo-conservative remedy as the construction of a new but old master-story which is hegemonic and in the end repressive, because the Other, the Transcendent, is fully known, is mastered. Postmoderns certainly do not deny that Truth is involved in the Christian tradition, but they refuse to simply identify the Truth with the given particular Christian story. In their opinion, the Christian tradition bears witness to the Truth, stays in relationship with the Truth, but does not, even cannot, fully exhaust it, if one respects the always particular and historical condition in which a tradition acquires shape. So postmodern theologians do not merely situate the Christian tradition on the side of the heteronomy, of the Transcendent; in their opinion, the tradition too stands under the judgement of the Transcendent. Living in the Truth is not a matter of possessing the Truth, but rather of relating oneself to the Truth. The historical shape of this particular relationship will differ from time to time, from place to place, from context to context. Postmodern theologians seek to respect the otherness of the Other, its claims, its challenges by establishing an 'open Christian story', of which the own critical consciousness – gained in the dialogue with postmodern critical consciousness – prevents that it absolutizes itself.

Platte-Lostraat 592
B-3010 Kessel-Lo

Lieven BOEVE