

Joseph Ratzinger's Approach to Ecumenism

約瑟·拉辛格對基督徒合一的態度

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[ABSTRACT] This article seeks to review Joseph Ratzinger's writings on the ecumenical situation with a consideration for his familiarity with Lutheran churches. It proposes a practical and broader approach to ecumenism in view of the fact that Christianity is a minority religion, existing among ancient and diverse religious traditions in the Asian continent. Pastoral involvement in the lives of the faithful is particularly urgent in Asia where the majority of people live in poverty and lack the basic necessities. While agreeing with Ratzinger that ethos without logos cannot endure, ecumenical efforts must not be too dogmatic and abstract but must be directed to the welfare of people. We will first examine Ratzinger's negative assessment of the ecumenical situation and the various ecumenical paradigms that have been adopted.

[摘要] 本文探討約瑟·拉辛格在熟悉信義宗的情況下有關基督教合一的著作。鑑於基督教在亞洲多種古老的宗教傳統中，是一種非主流的宗教，本文提出了一種實用而廣泛的合一途徑。在亞洲，因為大多數人民生活貧困，缺乏基本必須品，所以牧民參與信徒的日常生活便有其迫切性。

作者雖然同意拉辛格，認為純粹靠情感而不理邏輯的傳道站不住腳，但合一的努力不能過於教條和抽象，而必須針對人們的福祉。本文會檢視拉辛格對基督徒合一情況的負面評價以及已經採用的各種合一典範。

Introduction

Joseph Ratzinger's theological approach to ecumenism is closely tied to his fundamental ecclesiology. In his writings on Christian unity, Ratzinger has maintained a certain consistency in his attitude towards other churches: that the Catholic faith is superior to other paths. Explicitly or implicitly, he has always upheld that the way towards the fullness of salvation is to be found only in the Roman Catholic Church.¹ For Ratzinger, the ultimate aim of Catholic ecumenical endeavour is the transformation of the separated Christian churches into authentic, particular churches in communion with Rome.

In ecumenical endeavours, while he was still Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's preference was for a slow, "realistic and theologically attentive, approach." As a result, he was very critical of shortcuts towards unity. In recent years, Ratzinger has been frequently associated with "ecumenical winter."² Critical of the various

¹ Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 139.

² *Ibid.*, 140. In taking a cautious and critical approach to ecumenism, Joseph Ratzinger is actually following the precedent of previous popes. Pius XI's encyclical of 1928, *Mortalium animos*, criticised the ecumenical movement and accused it of "seeking to reach unity by too easy compromise and by focussing too exclusively on service." In 1896, Leo XIII also "expressed similar sentiments" in *Satis Cognitum*. It was taken for granted that the ecumenical movement was a "Protestant affair." There was no need for Catholics to search for Christian unity because unity was already established in the Chair of Peter in Rome in the Mystical Body of Christ. There was

approaches to ecumenism that relied on sociological or political models, Ratzinger believed it was unlikely that full Christian unity would happen in the near future. However, as Pope Benedict XVI, he has confirmed his commitment to Christian unity as a priority in his pontificate.

Ratzinger's understanding of ecumenism is based on his insistence on the priority of logos over ethos and the priority of the universal church over particular churches, and it is conditioned by his critical attitudes towards relativism. He is concerned that contemporary relativism has manifested itself, not only in modern philosophy and world politics, but also in Catholic theology coming out of Asia, from writers such as Peter Phan, Jacques Dupuis and Tissa Balasuriya. Under the guise of pluralism and adaptation, it has affected the faith and relativized the truth about Jesus Christ as the only saviour of the world. Ratzinger became acutely aware that under the name of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, Catholic understanding of Christology and Christian anthropology were being altered and weakened. Thus, Ratzinger thinks that it is very important to restate the true meaning of Christian revelation as found in Jesus Christ.

Such a concern is perfectly acceptable and as it should be for a church leader like Joseph Ratzinger. However, he tends to equate

also a fear that the ecumenical movement could "threaten the doctrine of the identity and nature of the Catholic Church." It was only in 1939 that Pius XII's encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, expressed "friendliness toward Protestants, acknowledging their goodwill." However, the "return" of "separated brethren" remained the aim of dialogue. Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., Eamon McManus, Ann Riggs, *Introduction to Ecumenism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 29. This article appears as a chapter in Ambrose Mong, *Dialogue Derailed: Joseph Ratzinger's War Against Pluralist Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick/ Wipf and Stock Publications, 2015) and Ambrose Mong, *Are Non-Christian Saved?: Joseph Ratzinger's Thoughts on Religious Pluralism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015).

religious pluralism with relativism, which he thinks is destructive. This is the reason why he has such a negative attitude towards theologies coming from the Asian continent. In fact pluralism does imply a variety of viewpoints and perspectives concerning the same reality, but it is not relativism.

Ratzinger's approach to Christian ecumenism is also influenced by his concern over the decline of Christianity in Europe. However, as we shall see, the situation in Asia is different in many ways.

Ecumenism from Below

The positive feeling about ecumenical effort, generated by Vatican II, did not last long once its resultant initiatives had been translated into official forms. Ratzinger thus remarks that "very soon after the initial conciliar enthusiasm had waned, the alternative model of 'grass-roots ecumenism' cropped up, which tried to bring about unity 'from below' if it could not be obtained 'from above.'"³ This kind of approach had the unfortunate consequence of splitting the church into a "grass-roots church" and an "official church." Ratzinger claims that in spite of its popularity, "grass-roots ecumenism" eventually divides congregations. This kind of politically motivated ecumenical activity that seeks to replace traditional ecclesiastical divisions with progressive Christianity would only contribute to more divisions and splinter groups, each recruiting members for its own party.⁴

"Grass-roots ecumenism" or "ecumenism from below" believes that authorities should be left out of ecumenical activity

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 133.

⁴ *Ibid.*

because eventual reunion of churches would only strengthen the hierarchy's traditional position and thus, prevent the development of the popular church.⁵ Ratzinger is critical of such an approach because it seeks to bypass the ordained leadership and appeal directly to the laity. Besides, the church authorities would be forced to accommodate the wishes of the people. There is also the danger that the hierarchy and the faithful would be divided and thus, ecumenism from below would violate the notion of communion.

Ecumenism from below also has the tendency to focus on praxis at the expense of doctrine. Ratzinger believes that a Christianity that defines itself in terms of social involvement is not able to produce long-term unity and an established church life. People remain in the Church, not because of social or political commitment, but because they think that the Church can give them answers about the meaning of life here and hereafter. Ratzinger argues that "religion still enters into people's lives, especially when the things that neither they nor anyone else can control intrude on their lives, and then the only thing that can help is an answer that comes from the One who is himself beyond us".⁶ This means that neither the popular church nor the official church, acting in isolation, can bring about effective ecumenical action.

Furthermore, Ratzinger does not believe that the ecumenical unity of the church can be built on a sociological model inspired by neo-Marxism: "it is no longer just a question of institutional ecumenism against 'base' ecumenism but of the ecumenism of a Church man can construct against that of a Church founded and given by the Holy Spirit."⁷ Such a perception suggests that Ratzinger

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 303.

has a Platonic cast of mind – his “typical impulse is to see meaning as already given and fixed” and he is also reluctant to accept new interpretations or viewpoints.⁸

Ecumenism from Above

Another ecumenical strategy that Ratzinger criticises is the Fries-Rahner project. This model suggests that once church authority has decided on closer relationships with other Christians, Catholics would just follow, given the tradition and structure of the Catholic Church. This “ecumenism from above” calls on church leaders to dispense with normal criteria for entry into the Catholic Church. Such a dispensation would allow new members to gradually integrate into the life of the church and their initial reservations about Catholicism would disappear. Surprisingly Ratzinger thinks that such a strategy, as advocated by Karl Rahner is too dependent on a gross exaggeration of papal power and episcopal authority. He is doubtful that such official ecumenism will work in the Catholic and Protestant churches because it does not correspond with their understanding of the church.⁹

The “ecumenism from above” proposed by H. Fries and Karl Rahner in Ratzinger’s opinion, is “a forced ride to unity.”It is impossible to direct the various Christian denominations towards unity like a military exercise where the importance lies in the marching together and “individual thought is of lesser importance”.¹⁰

⁸ Thomas P. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to His Theological Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 45.

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 134. According to Aidan Nichols, “Such ecumenism from above is a caricature of the Catholic view of the ministerial priesthood, just as ecumenism from below is a caricature of the Protestant view of the priesthood of the laity.”Aidan Nichols OP, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), 192.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

In the Fries-Rahner project, ecumenical effort implies building a bridge to all denominations, especially to those Christian communities that were established after the Reformation. Ratzinger is particularly against Rahner's thesis of "epistemological tolerance" which is fundamental to this official ecumenism.¹¹ This model implies that "in no particular Church may any proposition be rejected and excised from the profession of faith which is a binding dogma in some other particular Church."¹² The fundamental weakness of this formula is that it avoids the question of the truth of the faith. For Ratzinger, church unity should be based on "the unity of fundamental decisions and fundamental convictions" and not on "unity in action."¹³ However, this does not mean that unity in action is unimportant. In fact, it is one of the crucial tasks in our endeavour to promote Christian unity as I shall be discussing later in this chapter on practical ecumenism.

Ecumenism from the Side

Consensus ecumenism is also criticised by Ratzinger because it inverts the relationship between consensus and truth: instead of truth creating consensus, now it is consensus that creates truth. The confession of faith becomes an "achievement of consensus." Praxis creates truth and thus, action becomes the "actual hermeneutic of unity."¹⁴ Ecumenism also transcends the limits of Christian churches

¹¹ Ibid., 123.

¹² Quoted in Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 202.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 260. Edward Schillebeckx, however, believes that dogma should be understood as "a proclamation of the historical realization of the salvific promise, and essentially includes an openness to *new* future historical realization." This means that our act of interpretation should lead us to action, "that orthodoxy becomes orthopraxis: the future is not an object of contemplation but a task, an engagement of life to be undertaken in the spirit of *hope*." Pavel Rebernik, "Reflections on the Philosophical Presuppositions

and becomes an “ecumenism of religions.” Since praxis is given prominence, Christianity and other religions are judged by their contribution to the liberation of human beings, justice and peace, as well as ecological concerns. Hence, these ends become the core of religious belief.¹⁵ This approach goes against Ratzinger’s belief in the priority of orthodoxy over praxis.

Connected to its stress on praxis, consensus ecumenism also focuses on the Kingdom of God in place of Christology and ecclesiology. Consensus ecumenism leaves open the question of God, as the emphasis is now on the “primacy of action.” Ratzinger argues that this means that the doctrine of God’s nature is no longer primary. It is a pluralistic understanding of religions that disregards the difference, for example, between Christian trinitarian belief and Buddhist nirvana. Ratzinger is critical of this kind of religious pluralism that treats all religions as equally valid paths towards salvation. He thinks that such pluralist theology deprives religious beliefs of their contents. Ecumenism, in this sense, is concerned, not so much with convergence, as with the coexistence of Christians and adherents of other religions.¹⁶ This emphasis on action rather than on the truth of the faith worries Ratzinger because he is primarily concerned with orthodoxy.

of the Pluralist Theology of Religions,” in Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali, eds., *Catholic Engagement with World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 354.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 261. Defending *Dominus Iesus*, the Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Ratzinger says that its teaching is “intended to transform the indifference with which all churches are regarded as different but equally valid.” If all churches are equally valid, the validity of the faith “disappears into scepticism.” This means that when everything is regarded as valid, then nothing is important. Here we see Ratzinger criticising relativism and pluralism. It is not about tolerance, he argues, but it is about the truth that we must suffer for it. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 241.

Orthopraxis and Orthodoxy

The emphasis on praxis in religions, Ratzinger believes, has become a dominant ideology that cannot last long: "Ethos without logos cannot endure; that much the collapse of the socialist world ... should have taught us."¹⁷ He also admits that in the sphere of pluralism, some elements of unity are possible while division still exists. Although Ratzinger rejects the priority given to praxis over logos, he acknowledges the need to work for a better world. Thus, the important subject matter of ecumenical dialogues is to determine what the commandment of love means, in practice, at this present time.¹⁸

Commenting on the path of ecumenism today, Ratzinger warns of the danger of pluralism and relativism regarding Christian doctrine. He writes: "Whenever the distinction between the personal, revealed God, on whom we can call, and the non-personal, inconceivable mystery disappears, then the distinction between God and the gods, between worship and idolatry, likewise disappears."¹⁹ We cannot work out an ethic without logos because without a standard of judgment, we end up in an "ideological moralizing." The neglect of what is distinctively Christian and the internal conflict of churches, lead to new oppositions that can be violent. Ratzinger thinks that the disregard for religious content for the sake of unity, would actually lead to more sectarianism and syncretistic tendencies.²⁰ To avoid this situation, ecumenism must always seek unity in belief and not just work for unity of action.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 262.

¹⁸ Ibid., 263.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 264.

²¹ Ibid., 265.

Ratzinger believes that theological dialogues must continue in a much more relaxed way and be less oriented towards success: “it is enough if many and varied forms of witnessing to belief thus develop, through which everyone can learn a little more of the wealth of the message that unites us.” We must be ready to face a “multiplicity of forms” without developing “self-sufficiency.” We do not make the church: it is shaped by Christ in word and sacrament.²² Ecumenism is “really nothing other than living at present in an eschatological light, in the light of Christ who is coming again.” This means that our ecumenical efforts are only provisional and it is only in Christ that we are journeying toward unity.²³

Ratzinger proposes an ecumenism that involves the people’s experience of faith, the study by theologians and the doctrinal teaching by bishops. It is a process where interpenetration and maturity of insight will gradually enable Christians to unite at a deeper level. Theological unity as found in John 17 is the work of the Holy Spirit and not the result of human negotiating skills. Ratzinger argues that even joint theological statements remain on the level of human understanding and do not pertain to the act of faith. If we recognise the limits of “ecumenical negotiations” then we will not be disappointed. The most we can achieve is a good relationship in some areas but not unity itself. Ratzinger laments that the success of ecumenical efforts just after the Council, has made many people understand ecumenism only in political terms as in diplomacy.²⁴

In summation, Ratzinger rejects the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy because truth is compromised and consensus determines what is valid. Thus, praxis becomes the criteria of what is true. He

²² Ibid., 266.

²³ Ibid., 269.

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 134.

suggests that we should learn "praxeological patience," which means we must accept the necessity of division.²⁵ Ultimately, this can be overcome, only through the conversion of everyone to the truth that is in Christ.

Question of Truth

The question of truth is fundamental to Joseph Ratzinger's theology, as he insists that "ecumenical" does not mean concealing the truth so as not to offend others.²⁶ He believes that "full truth is part of full love." This means that Catholics must not look upon other Christians as opponents against whom they must defend themselves, but must recognise them as brothers and sisters with whom they can speak and from whom they can also learn. Ecumenical means that we give proper attention to the truth that others hold. It means to consider the whole and not to single out some aspects for condemnation or correction. We have to present the "inner totality of our faith" in order to let other Christians know that "Catholicism clearly contains all that is truly Christian." For Ratzinger, to be Catholic "is not to become entangled in separatism, but to be open to the fullness of Christianity."²⁷

The real differences between churches concern the confession of faith, the creed and the understanding of the sacraments. The other differences do not really matter because they do not divide the core of the Church. However, division within the central sphere threatens the Church's existence and its very being. In this regard, Ratzinger distinguishes between human and theological divides. Human

²⁵ Quoted in Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 440.

²⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

division is the “silent divinization” of our own ideas and works – it is a widespread temptation of human beings. In most religious schisms, such divinization of human thinking plays an important role in the conflict. Ecumenism requires us to liberate ourselves from such subtle distortions. Ratzinger believes that differences between different Christian communities can remain, but they should not distract themselves from the nature of the church.²⁸

While Ratzinger recognises that we can tolerate differences, he insists that we must not be indifferent to the truth. It is thus important to distinguish between human tradition and divine truth.²⁹ Hence, the first task of ecumenism, according to him, is to recognise what is variable and what cannot be changed because it forms the heart of the church. Theological reflection alone does not bring about reconciliation and at the same time it is the non-theological factors that produce division. The worst scenario is when those who defend their own ideas present them as coming from God himself.³⁰

Truth cannot be determined by majority vote: either something is true or not. Ratzinger is opposed to consensus ecumenism: “it is not consensus that offers a basis for the truth, but the truth that offers one for consensus.”³¹ This means that authority comes from truth, not from agreement by many people. The Anglican, John Macquarrie, however, has argued that “truth is not something at which one arrives, but more of an ongoing process, involving the interplay of different views which sometimes agree, sometimes conflict, sometimes correct each other, but which defy all attempts to subsume them into a single

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 255. Aidan Nichols defines schism as “the crystallization of orthodox dissent.” For a detailed account of the concept of schism, see Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Rome and the Eastern Churches* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 27 – 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

truth."³² This means that the fullness of truth belongs only to God and we can share this fullness, only at the end of time. Joseph Ratzinger, on the other hand, believes that the church already possesses the authority to teach the truth.

We will now examine Ratzinger's writings concerning the Lutheran church that serve to highlight the differences between them and the Roman Catholic Church and the difficulties in achieving unity.

Ratzinger highlights what he perceives to be the weaknesses and untenable positions of the Lutheran churches. Their lack of central authority makes it difficult for them to discuss issues with the Catholic Church on behalf of the entire church. Their refusal to be in communion with the universal church weakens their identity and power to exercise their authority. Besides, as already mentioned, these Protestant churches regard as traditions, only those creeds and dogmas that existed before the Reformation. This means that they place their faith only in the old texts and are, thus, cut off from the living voice of the church that has continued since the sixteenth century.

Lutheranism

Joseph Ratzinger's focus on the Lutheran tradition reflects his own German background. Half of the German population are Lutherans. He is also close to the Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. Ratzinger thinks that as with the Anglicans, the lack of central doctrinal authority in Lutheran communities makes it difficult for ecumenical cooperation between Catholics and Lutherans. When

³² John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1975), 34.

asked about the prospects for unity with the Lutheran church, Ratzinger replied, “As soon as there is a Lutheran church, we can discuss it.” Nonetheless, Ratzinger has great admiration for Martin Luther as the writer of a catechism and hymns and as the promoter of liturgical reform. At the same time he criticizes Luther’s theology that diminishes the role of the church in the economy of salvation.³³

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) is an outstanding accomplishment of the ecumenical movement, a landmark on the way towards full and visible unity among Christians. The most important declaration is this: “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”³⁴ Joseph Ratzinger is credited with forging this agreement between Catholics and Lutherans. First, he agrees that the goal of the ecumenical process is “unity in diversity, and not structural reintegration.” Second, Ratzinger fully recognizes the authority of the Lutheran World Federation to sign an agreement with the Vatican. Third, Ratzinger acknowledges that Christians are obliged to do good works to be justified, but the final judgment depends on God’s gracious will.³⁵

However, Ratzinger has no illusions about a quick and easy reunion with the Lutheran church. He explains that Luther, not only rejected the papacy, but also considered the celebration of the mass to be idolatrous, a return into the law and therefore a denial of the gospel. Thus, it was not just a misunderstanding, as some historians view the Reformation in the sixteenth century, but rather a serious and decisive break. To view it as a misunderstanding, according to

³³ John L. Allen, *Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 231.

³⁴ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

³⁵ John L. Allen, *Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 234.

Ratzinger, is "a form of rationalistic arrogance that cannot do any justice to the impassioned struggle of those men or to the importance of the realities in question." As such, unity between the Catholic and Lutheran churches demands innovation in order to go beyond the position of the past. It cannot be a political manoeuvring. Ratzinger insists that there are serious differences in religious insights that cannot be solved by discussion on doctrine alone. We need spiritual help and strength.³⁶

Unity in the field of scholarly research is tentative and revisable. Luther had separated the teaching of the church from theology.³⁷ Luther regarded himself, rather than the magisterium of the church, as the interpreter of scripture. Ratzinger stresses that unity of churches must be based on the content of the faith. Theological pluralism and individual reading of scripture can only unite us temporarily because "there is inherent in pluralism the inability ultimately to become a basis for unity."³⁸ This reflection is consistent with Ratzinger's negative attitude towards religious or theological pluralism. He sees it as a threat to the doctrine of the faith and fears that it might lead to relativism. For Ratzinger, the guidance of the church in safeguarding orthodoxy is the basis of unity.

Ratzinger admits that agreement among Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars can help in overcoming old differences that are now seen as of secondary importance. These exegetes can also help in fostering dialogue on scripture, tradition, the Petrine office, the eucharist, etc., but we must go beyond agreements amongst scholars to achieve a unity that is assured. This means that we cannot dissociate the Bible from the church as Luther did. Ratzinger writes:

³⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 105.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

“... wherever a total dissociation of Church and exegesis develops, both become endangered: exegesis turns into mere literary analysis, and the Church loses her spiritual underpinnings. That is why the interconnection between Church and theology is the real issue: wherever this unity comes to an end, any other kind of unity will necessarily lose its roots.”³⁹ Thus, in Ratzinger’s opinion, Luther’s separation of exegesis from church teaching is an obstacle that must be overcome if any unity is to be forged.

Joseph Ratzinger highlights the 1979 Catholic-Lutheran document concerning the eucharist as revealing many unresolved issues, in spite of the many important agreements it contains. He cautions against a “forced ride to unity.”⁴⁰ Although unity exists in parts, it could be strengthened further. This is because “the roots had remained united despite the separation during the sixteenth century.” Quoting Cardinal Volk, Ratzinger asks whether the roots belong to a potato or an apple tree: “is everything, with the exception of the roots, merely leaves, or is it the tree that grew from the roots that is important? How deep does the difference really go?”⁴¹

Luther was convinced that the act of faith, as taught by Catholic tradition, is based on the Law and thus contrary to what the gospel says. For Luther, faith means “liberation from the Law” but the Catholic version of it appeared to him to be upholding the Law. Luther was convinced that he had to follow St. Paul’s fight against the “Judaizers” in the Letter to the Galatians, by fighting against Rome and the Catholic tradition. Thus, a fundamental aspect of Luther’s life is his identification with St Paul. Although it is popular among scholars to think that there are no more controversies concerning the teaching on justification, Ratzinger believes that there

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁴¹ Ibid., 109.

are still unresolved differences. He also claims that some of Luther's views would seem foreign to modern Christians, especially his consciousness of sinfulness and fear of hell as well as the terror he felt in relation to divine mercy and his cry for mercy.⁴²

The Council of Trent's teaching on justification and the emphasis on grace is so strong that if the texts had been available, the Reformation would have taken a "different course," according to Harnack.⁴³ However, Ratzinger argues that Luther's insistence on his own version of justification is the fundamental difference between the Catholic Church and the other Reformed churches. The cause of the separation was due, not only to differences in theological ideas, but also to new experience needed to start a new religious movement assisted by a "total configuration of an epoch." According to Ratzinger, Luther was so struck by his own sinfulness "that God appeared to him *sub contrario*, as the opposite of God himself, that is, as the devil who wants to destroy man."⁴⁴

Luther considered that his redemption was realised the moment faith liberated itself from the demands of self-justification. This means that faith appeared to Luther to be a personal assurance of redemption, the hallmark of his teaching. It implies that the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity underwent a significant transformation. Faith and hope became identical.⁴⁵ However, the Catholic Church maintains the difference as before: the certainty of faith refers to what God has done for us, to which the church bears witness and the certainty of hope refers to the salvation of individuals, including oneself. But for Luther, it is the salvation of oneself alone, nothing else matters. Thus, Luther discounted the importance of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 109 – 110.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

charity in his radical interpretation of Paul's letter to the Galatians and insisted on "by faith alone." Love is thus excluded from the question of salvation; it belongs to work which is "profane."⁴⁶ This core teaching of Luther's on justification by faith alone clearly goes against Ratzinger's own understanding of salvation. His first encyclical as Pope Benedict XVI was *Deus caritas est* which reiterated this.

It is this approach which separates Luther's teaching from that of the Catholic Church. For Luther, faith is no longer, as it is for the Catholics, "the communal belief of the entire Church." Besides, Luther did not think that the church could guarantee personal salvation or even decide on matters of the faith. Ratzinger, however, teaches that the Catholic Church itself "is contained within the inmost movement of the act of faith" and "only by communal belief do I partake of the certainty on which I can base my life." It also corresponds to the Catholic understanding that the Church and scripture cannot be separated. On the other hand, Luther believed that scripture is independent of the church and tradition. According to Ratzinger, this, in turn, affects the issue of unity and canonicity of the scriptures.⁴⁷

The unity of the Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, was replaced by Luther with the "dialectic of Law and Gospel" as found in St Paul. This dialectic was sharpened by two concepts of the New Testament – the gospels and the Pauline letters – from which Luther only adopted the latter. Ratzinger says that the "dialectic of Law and Gospel expresses most stringently Luther's new experience and that it illustrates most concisely the contradiction with the Catholic concepts of faith, salvation, Scripture and Church."⁴⁸ The point of

⁴⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

separation in Luther's doctrine of justification is consequently reduced to the Gospel versus the Law.

Joseph Ratzinger claims that Luther had not intended to establish a Lutheran Church because Luther understood the concept of the church, as centred only in the congregation. Beyond the congregation, everything in the church was organised according to sociological or political structures. Since 1918, the Lutheran church has retained its regional structure and formed church associations. Conditioned by historical events, the Lutheran concept of church has, thus far, assumed a different meaning when compared to the Catholic Church. For Ratzinger, "regional churches are not the 'Church' in a theological sense but are, rather, ways in which Christian congregations organize themselves."⁴⁹ Although useful and necessary, Ratzinger thinks that these Christian communities change according to circumstances. He argues that Luther was able to transfer the church structure to the principalities because they were not integral to the concept of the church.⁵⁰ The Catholic Church, on the other hand, established by Jesus Christ himself, is the communion of bishops together with the Pope. As such, the Catholic Church "cannot be interchanged or replaced." The "visible sacramental structure" is central to an understanding of the Catholic

⁴⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁰ According to Ratzinger, the creation of established churches in the nation states destroyed the universal or "catholic" church. He argues that even these established churches are not *ecclesia* in the theological sense. They were "incidental political structures" that were cut off from the universal church and thus, did not have a "spiritual character" that could be constituted *ecclesia* since they lost communion with the universal church. These communities can provide only an institutional and organizational framework. Ratzinger writes that for Luther, this development was not due to "adverse political conditions," it was the "expression of a theological concept." Luther regarded the universal church as so corrupted by Roman and papist ideology that it was no longer a church. He could no longer acknowledge the concrete universal church as a "spiritual entity" to be retained. Thus, in Luther's translation of the Bible, the word "church" was eliminated and replaced by "community" which better expressed his ecclesiology. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Principle of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 306 – 307.

Church. As a symbol of unity, the Catholic Church transcends “the various political and cultural realms in the communion of the *Body* of Christ.” This is translated into “the communion of his body in the corporeal reality of the community of bishops of all places and times.”⁵¹

Thus, Ratzinger asserts that the plurality of local churches that together make up the Catholic Church is very different from the pluralism of denominational churches. These Protestant churches have “diverse institutional forms” as well as a different theological understanding of the reality of the church.⁵² As Catholics and Lutherans have a very different understanding of ecclesiology, they have a long way to go in their ecumenical journey.

Aware of the painful history that exists in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the other Christian communities, Ratzinger maintains a cautious and realistic attitude towards the prospect of unity in the near future. Rejecting the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, he stresses the importance of truth in our search for common ground in ecumenical endeavours. In spite of scepticism towards various models of ecumenism, Ratzinger acknowledges that plurality of churches has a legitimate existence within Christianity. This means that he is ready to accept the

⁵¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 114.

⁵² *Ibid.* Following Martin Luther, Ratzinger regards Protestant churches as communities, but not as churches in the Catholic tradition. For Luther, the word “church” in the catholic tradition expressed all that he wanted to oppose. In Luther’s translation of the Old Testament, the word ‘church’ refers to a pagan shrine. Quoting G. Gloege, Ratzinger says that we must regard the “community as the central situs of the basic doctrines and philosophical structures of the Reformation.” The shift of terminology from “church” to “community” reveals the inner process of the “Reformation’s transposition of the structures of faith.” Luther rejected the church as *successio* and as the unity of binding tradition. He considered the church, at best, as an organization, and at worst, as the instrument of the anti-Christ. Ratzinger says at this point that Luther’s reference to gospel is confined to the message of justification as the central concept of the Bible. According to this gospel of Luther, all that is theologically true is the individual community coming together to proclaim the word. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Principle of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 291.

multiplicity of churches provided they are united under one universal church.

Unity through Diversity

According to Joseph Ratzinger, diversity is healthy and even desirable once the "poison of hostility" has been removed. Studying Augustine's interpretation of the Pauline statement, "there must be factions" (1 Cor 11:19), Ratzinger argues that even though divisions and factions are human realities, they are also part of "divine arrangement." We do all we can, through penance and sacrifice, to heal the divisions, but it is God who will ultimately draw all people to himself.⁵³ By this, he means that partitions and factions are a divine necessity in order to yield a greater good, through purification. Eventually, in God's time, this division will disappear, resulting in a more profound unity.

Not adverse to plurality and diversity, Ratzinger has personally experienced how Catholics and Protestants can live together peacefully, in his homeland. In Germany there is a healthy and fruitful coexistence between Protestants and Catholics. Initially, there had been great hostility between the two churches, but gradually they developed into "a positive factor for the faith on both sides." This may explain why St Paul speaks about the necessity of factions. Ratzinger questions: "Could anyone really imagine an exclusively Protestant world? Is not Protestantism instead, in all its declarations, precisely as a protest, so completely connected with Catholicism that it would be scarcely imaginable without it?"⁵⁴ Lamentably, Ratzinger does not argue that the converse is true: Catholicism needs

⁵³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 135.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

Protestantism to remind itself of the need for constant reformation and purification based on the Word of God.

According to Ratzinger, the Catholic understanding of plurality is different from the Protestant idea of independent national churches like the Anglican church, or a federation of churches like the Lutheran church. In fact, from the beginning, Catholic theology has recognised the plurality of churches. This means the acceptance of a multiplicity of churches existing within the framework of one visible Church of God. These particular churches are in close communion with one another as they help to build up the one Church. The unity is born of a “vigorous multiplicity.” Thus, there exists a church of God in Athens, in Corinth, in Rome: the members of each local community assembled together, with the bishop presiding over the Eucharistic celebration. All these churches in different localities partake of the “essence of the Church,” and is truly a “Church.” For Ratzinger, one essential element of being a church is that it must not exist in isolation, but must be in communion with the other churches, and together they form the one church.⁵⁵

Plurality of churches had a legitimate existence within the church, but unfortunately, in the course of history, this plurality eventually disappeared, taken over by a centralised system. In the process, the local church of Rome began to absorb all the other local churches so that unity became uniformity.⁵⁶ This plurality of churches had “no room *within* the Church” and “was developed *outside* of it in the form of autonomous separate Churches.”⁵⁷ The Catholic Church, since Vatican II, has tried to remedy this situation with its ecumenical endeavours.

⁵⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 111.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

Ratzinger admits that the Catholic Church is not yet prepared to accept the phenomenon of multiplicity in unity. It is a renewal that involves a process of opening up which takes time.⁵⁸ He asserts that there is the one Church that is identified with the historical continuity of the Catholic Church. Although Catholics cannot demand that all the other churches be absorbed into Catholicism, they can hope that "the hour will come when 'the churches' that exist outside 'the Church' will enter into its unity."⁵⁹ Ratzinger also says that they must remain "in existence as *Churches*" changing only those features that unity demands.⁶⁰

The Catholic Church considers itself the Church of Christ, in spite of its "historic deficiency." It also recognises the plurality of churches that should exist within it, but today, this plurality can only exist outside.⁶¹ As we have seen, Ratzinger recognises the valid existence of the plurality of churches under one universal church, but he is opposed to the present plurality of denominational churches, which is a particular characteristic of Protestantism. Ratzinger is also realistic enough to accept that division among churches does not simply represent evil tendency in human beings but can also be a divine necessity. This is because separation is necessary for our purification. "Unity in diversity" or "a reconciled diversity" is thus an acceptable formula for Joseph Ratzinger, in our ecumenical endeavours.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid., 113 – 114.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 114 –115.

⁶¹ Ibid., 115.

⁶² Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 258. See also Joseph Ratzinger, "What Unites and Divides Denominations? Ecumenical Reflections" in Pope Benedict XVI, *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio: Volume 1, The Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 1 – 9.

Fruitful Pluralism

Unity is not to be identified with uniformity in ecumenical dialogue. It is the duty of Christians to defend the legitimate interests of pluralism against the forces of uniformity. However, maintaining a healthy pluralism in unity is a complex process. There is always this tension existing between unity and division. Paul Tillich has observed:

... neither the ecumenical nor any future movement can conquer the ambiguity of unity and division in the churches' historical existence. Even if it were able to produce the United Churches of the World, and even if all latent churches were converted to this unity, new divisions would appear. The dynamics of life, the tendency to preserve the holy even when it has become obsolete, the ambiguities implied in the sociological existence of the churches, and above all, the prophetic criticism and demand for reformation would bring about new and, in many cases, Spiritually justified divisions. The unity of the churches, similar to their holiness, has a paradoxical character. It is the divided church which is the united church.⁶³

Joseph Ratzinger supports the idea of a “fruitful pluralism” and acknowledges the positive aspect of division. Thus he says that the way to promote unity through diversity is not to impose on the other party anything that threatens his or her core identity as a Christian. This means that Catholics should not try to force Protestants to

⁶³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 169 – 170.

recognise papal authority, the sacraments, etc., and Protestants should not pressure the Catholic Church to allow intercommunion based on Protestant understanding of the eucharist. Such respect for the "otherness" of the other, which is inherent in the division, would not delay unity but rather, is a prerequisite for it.⁶⁴

Ratzinger rightly says that this kind of tolerance and acceptance can produce charity and closeness, whereas urgent insistence can only create tension and aversion. Ultimately, we must leave God to do what is actually His business – Christian unity.⁶⁵ While I agree with Ratzinger's cautious approach towards ecumenism in the Western context, in Asia we need to engage in practical or secular ecumenism as the situation requires Christians to respond urgently to the social and economic needs of the people.

Practical Ecumenism

Asia is a vast and diverse continent where various religious beliefs, including different branches of Christianity, continue to flourish. In spite of modernization and rapid economic development, Asia is steeped in religious traditions. At the same time, the gap between the rich and poor is growing rapidly, and many people are struggling because of a lack of basic necessities in many parts of the continent. Hence, a practical or secular ecumenical approach that strives for the common good, amid religious pluralism, is more appropriate and meaningful here. For example, Christians from different denominations, including Roman Catholics, can co-operate in charitable and social work.

⁶⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 137.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

Practical ecumenism implies “a unity with true existential foundations, rather than one that has come about as the blueprint devised by a high-powered ecclesiastical commission.”⁶⁶ Thus, it is not ecumenism from above. Although Joseph Ratzinger insists that ethos without logos is not sustainable, as evidenced by the collapse of socialism, he has admitted that an ecumenism of praxis has value in that it fulfils Christ’s commandment to love. However, focussing on practical ecumenism does not imply that we are indifferent to the truth. In fact, we uphold the truth as defined in Mathew 25: 31- 46.

Given the present situation where impasse in ecumenical dialogue is inevitable, practical ecumenism also has the advantage of setting “realistic intermediate goals” in keeping with what Ratzinger has suggested. While doctrinal or liturgical differences may be intractable, charitable works, as a means of witnessing the gospel, can be readily organised by different churches in harmony with one another. Likewise, Ratzinger also insists that the different churches can jointly address the “great moral questions of our time.” This can be done through joint testimonies of faith before a world torn by doubts and fears. These small efforts should emphasise the common features of Christian living which exist despite divisions. Working together in these modest projects shows that separation no longer equates to opposition, as Ratzinger has pointed out.⁶⁷ Christians will be challenged to understand and accept members of other churches as brothers and sisters in Christ.

⁶⁶ John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1975), 23. According to Kathryn Tanner, theology is often identified with the writings of scholars and clergy “in which conceptual precision and logical coherence are at a premium.” But Christian theology has to do “with the meaning dimension of Christian practices, the theological aspect of all socially significant Christian action.” See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Cultures* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 69 – 70

⁶⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 119.

Ecumenical effort aimed at fostering unity among Christian communities is meaningful when churches are willing to work together on the practical tasks of helping the poor, visiting prisoners, alleviating poverty and suffering, etc. In short, Christians should be united in the building of a better world. John Macquarrie argues that the basis of this practical ecumenism "is not a nicely worked out ecclesiology or even a doctrine of redemption but simply that natural morality which is common to all men by virtue of their humanity."⁶⁸ This means that we do not have to force adherents of other faiths to be baptized or call them "anonymous Christians." It is enough that they have "the law written on their hearts" (Rom 2:15). Macquarrie rightly asserts that this non-exclusive practical or "secular" ecumenism is "the recognition that all humanity is the creation of God" and "has a share in that image of God that is perfectly expressed in Christ."⁶⁹

Practical or secular ecumenism first seeks the unity of humankind rather than the unity of the churches. It reminds Christians that what will remain at the end of time will not be the church, but the Kingdom of God – the "gathering up both church and world in an eschatological unity." Therefore our primary aim should not simply be ecclesiastical unity, but a more inclusive and all-encompassing unity of the world. Once we focus on the unity of the world, the unity of the church may come more quickly as a "provisional stage on the way."⁷⁰ Augustin Cardinal Bea writes that the Church as it is, is a society which is also perfectly human, "feels itself intimately linked with all mankind, and co-operates in the

⁶⁸ John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1975), 24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

achieving of unity for mankind.”⁷¹

Similarly, Konrad Raiser, former general secretary of the World Council of Churches, stresses social concerns above doctrinal issues. He indicates that ecumenical effort should be directed to addressing social problems like economic inequality, sexism and other injustices rather than debating theological issues and ministry. Raiser thinks that previous ecumenical efforts were too philosophical and theological.⁷² At the same time he fears that this newer ecumenical model, which seeks to bring Christians from different confessions together, could lead to a denial of Christ’s divinity and his unique salvific role. This is also Joseph Ratzinger’s concern. However, there is no concrete evidence to show that Christians would deny the salvific efficacy of Christ or his divinity just because they are too involved in charitable and social work.

Practical ecumenism safeguards the diversity of churches. Ratzinger is right to be cautious about ecumenical efforts and rushing towards unity because of his worries over serious doctrinal

⁷¹ Augustine Cardinal Bea, *Unity in Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), 214. K. H. Ting claims that “The Christ who rose and now sits at the right hand of God is not only the Lord of the churches but also the Lord of the secular World. The secular movements of the people have an important significance. What man achieves in history is not finally to be negated or destroyed but, in the new heaven and new earth, will be received in Christ and transfigured.” Kim Yong Bock, “Human Rights and the Structures of Injustice,” in Ninan Koshy, ed., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, Volume II, (Hong Kong: World Student Christian Federation, Asia-Pacific Region, Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCA, Christian Conference of Asia, 2004), 296.

⁷² Christopher Ruddy, *The Local Church: Tillard and the future of Catholic Ecclesiology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 155. Konrad Raiser writes: “a Christian congregation can only become a parable of shared life to the extent that it shares the goodness of God’s creation with all human beings. In the course of the discussions in recent years there have been many stormy disputes as to whether sharing proves itself principally in fellowship and solidarity between Christians and churches or in solidarity with the poor in the struggle for justice and human dignity....” Quoted in Ans Van der Bent, *Commitment to God’s World: A Concise Critical Survey of Ecumenical Social Thought* (Geneva: WCC Publications 1995), 153. See also Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991).

differences. Therefore I think it is appropriate that various churches begin by coming together to work on common social projects for alleviating the sufferings of the poor and marginalized. This would be a step towards ecclesiastical unity. It is also important to understand ecumenism as "the science of bridge-building, a science of dialogue across different groups." This means that eventually, ecumenism will include, not just Christians, but people of other faiths and even those who have none.⁷³

Ans Van der Bent rightly insists that there must be dialogue between the church and the world; though the church is not of the world, it is in the world to serve and minister to it. He stresses "service within the world". While the Church is discovering the world, it should also help the world to discover the Church.⁷⁴ The church must re-evaluate its structure with a view to dealing with problems such as secularisation, poverty, the environmental crisis and threats to justice and peace. Facing the same problems in the world draws churches closer together. This will help them to deepen their theological investigation and work out a plan that allows common action.⁷⁵ Quoting José Miguez Bonino, Ans Van der Bent writes:

The churches cannot address society as if they were outside it, untouched by its struggles, unspotted by its sins and injustices, exempt from responsibility. The churches can only be *credible* if they recognize their involvement and, in the necessary reforms that they demand for society, endeavour to make the corresponding reforms in themselves. By recognizing

⁷³ Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 135.

⁷⁴ Ans Van der Bent, *Commitment to God's World: A Concise Critical Survey of Ecumenical Social Thought* (Geneva: WCC Publications 1995), 171.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

their mutual accountability, this need for internal purification can be a part of the ecumenical dialogue and praxis.⁷⁶

There is already enough ecumenical, doctrinal and ethical consensus among most of the churches to deal with problems like torture, the foreign debt of developing countries, refugees, etc.⁷⁷ It would, therefore, seem appropriate to start from this common basis, namely, our social commitment to the world. Practice cannot be separated from doctrine. According Ans Van der Bent, “only a deep solidarity with the threatened and broken world will reveal how narrowly the social teachings of the churches are still defined.”⁷⁸ Our churches are still so caught up with doctrinal purity and ecclesiastical rectitude that they are neglecting Christ’s command to serve the poor and the oppressed. Critical of the Roman Catholic claim that the sole church of Christ “subsists” in the Roman Catholic Church, Ans Van der Bent thinks that this implies that other churches do not have the authority to produce valid social teaching.⁷⁹ For him, ‘the fullness of the church subsists in its manifestation of Christ’s redemption of the entire human race.’⁸⁰ His interpretation maintains that the main ecumenical work for all churches is to be actively involved in the pastoral task of bringing about a better world for all.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 173. See also Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren, “Crossing the Ethical-Practical Bridge: Paul’s Knitter’s Regnocentrism in Asian Perspective,” *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 63, no. 2, July 2011, 187 – 188.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 175.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 176.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Concern for Europe and Asian Realities

In spite of the many criticisms of Ratzinger's approach to ecumenism, there are those who interpret his writings on these issues as openness to other Christians and non-Christians. These supporters acknowledge Ratzinger's consistent commitment to ecumenism and his positive evaluation of other faiths, suggesting that his critics are not sharp enough to understand his nuanced statements and critical stance.⁸¹ A good example is Ratzinger's Regensburg Lecture in which he addressed the interdependency of faith and reason, but which many misconstrued as a speech against Islam. He has been critical of the various ecumenical models, but he is also committed to promoting Christian unity in a gradual manner. He is willing to enter into dialogue with Protestant theology:

Catholic theology requires that there be, despite all divisions and antithesis, a common theological motive; that, whether they accept or reject each other's view, the two sides be sensitive and responsive to each other. Second, it should likewise be clear that Catholic theology must not regard its role in this dialogue to be that of trying to agree with whatever is currently the strongest position of the other side but must rather look, in its own way, for whatever common ground there may be and, in doing so, not be afraid to learn from its partner.⁸²

Ratzinger rightly advocates a search for a common ground and a willingness to learn and be corrected by the other.

⁸¹ Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 144.

⁸² Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 180 – 181.

Be that as it may, Ratzinger's ecumenical approach is influenced by his concern for the decline of Christianity and his hope for a united Christian Church to combat the threat of aggressive secularism in Europe. Ratzinger believes that for Europe to build a humane society, it must return to its original Greek roots and Christian heritage. This means that Europe must rediscover the objective and eternal values that stand above politics, and must stress the rule of law. In view of this, he emphasises the Greek concept of *eunomia* – the enactment of good laws and the maintenance of civil order.⁸³ Ratzinger thinks that Christian values can help to halt the decline of European civilization. Thus, with a view to rebuilding Europe, Christian unity can play a significant role.

This ecumenical concern of Ratzinger's may be justifiable and timely given the present situation in Europe. However, the challenge for the churches in Asia is to be united in their fight against poverty and oppression, and promote justice and peace as part of witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ratzinger reflects on the true and the good. Such reflections, however, always take place in a particular culture. John Paul II called for a dialogue between faith and culture, and the Second Vatican Council recognised the need for "accommodated preaching," but to Ratzinger this suggests relativism.

Although Christianity in Europe has slowly been made irrelevant by the surge of secularism, the West continues to exercise authority and control over the churches of Asia. In the Catholic Church, the papacy and the Magisterium maintain strict control over the local churches in Asia. In the various Protestant denominational churches in Asia, economic support from mother churches in the

⁸³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 216.

West is still crucial for their functioning and even, for their survival. Thus K.M. George rightly says: "while the spiritual vitality of the Western churches is probably drying up, their institutional power over the churches of the South is still going strong."⁸⁴

Asian theologians from both Catholic and Protestant churches have been calling for a rediscovery of Asian Christian identity. To achieve this, the churches in Asia must shed their Western trappings. There is an obvious gap between the "theological understanding of identity and the ecclesiastical-institutional reality of our churches." This poses an obstacle to Asian ecumenism.⁸⁵ Perhaps a more appropriate approach to ecumenical endeavour in Asia lies in the various branches of Christianity coming together, putting aside their doctrinal differences, and making a concerted effort to deal with the problems related to poverty, justice, peace and ecological issues. Christian churches also need to unite in a major push to preach the gospel in the face of aggressive secularism.

⁸⁴ K.M. George, "Ecumenism in Asia: Some Theological Consideration" in *Windows into Ecumenism: Essays in Honour of Ahn Jae Woong* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2005), 123.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

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