

# Conversion and Cognitive Dissonance: Evaluating the Theological-Ecclesial Program of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI

LIEVEN BOEVE  
*Catholic University of Leuven*

*In this article, the concept of “cognitive dissonance” is used to explain why Pope Benedict XVI resigned, indicating that a massive clash occurred between the theological ideas Joseph Ratzinger holds and the actual situation in which both the Christian faith and the church find themselves. For Ratzinger, the Christian faith is in the first instance about conversion, and the church is called to be a beacon of light and truth, inviting the fallen modern world to conversion. The same church, however, has been weakened by scandals. In the analysis presented in this article, it is precisely because the church closed in on itself to protect itself from a world perceived as inimical that it forgot that it itself is in need of conversion before it can call the world to convert.*

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, cognitive dissonance, conversion, dialogue, modernity

## Introduction

ON February 11, 2013, Pope Benedict XVI announced that he would lay down his papal office at the end of the same month. In the meantime a conclave was held and a new pope was elected, the Argentinean Jesuit Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who surprisingly choose the name Francis. Although it is too early to evaluate this new papacy in depth, the least one can say is that the tone and style have changed, and quite a bit of enthusiasm has grown, as if the Spirit were set free once again in a church that had gotten used to protecting its borders *ad extra* and its discipline *ad intra*. Indeed, these were the ways of coping

*Lieven Boeve is Professor of Fundamental Theology and Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium). His research concerns theological epistemology, philosophical theology, truth in faith and theology, Christian faith and contemporary culture, tradition development and hermeneutics, and theological anthropology.*

with the challenges that seemed to threaten not only the Christian faith as such but also the whole church. The outside world was perceived to be inimical to the core truths of Christianity, and the church was called on both to protect these truths against the world and to proclaim them to the world. In order to do so, moreover, internal unity and discipline were enforced. Both strategies, however, progressively seemed to fail: in many countries the church's public discourse is no longer received, and the emblematic illustration of the internal crisis of the church is the pedophilia scandal, which became apparent in all levels of the church's hierarchy.

Viewed from a distance, there appears to be a good deal of tragedy in this, a situation that must have caused great distress to and maybe even despair on the part of Pope Benedict. He who wished the church to be not only a beacon of light and truth in a world diagnosed with egoism and relativism, but also the protector of real humanity, saw the church undermined from within by the pedophilia crisis, which damaged the church's credibility in moral and other matters, both inside and outside the church.

Since February 11, 2013, there has been much speculation regarding the reason for the pope's resignation. One reason that is hardly mentioned in this regard is "cognitive dissonance." The pope indeed had become old and tired, overwhelmed by his inability to manage the Roman Curia and its lobbies and saddened by the moral and financial crises within the church, by incidents such as "Vatileaks," and so on. However, at the same time, one should not underestimate the way in which all of this challenged Benedict's—or rather, Joseph Ratzinger's—personal theological convictions. As a theologian, a bishop, a prefect, and a pope, Joseph Ratzinger has had a strong influence on the way the church has developed over the last fifty years, in matters of faith and morals, in organization, and through episcopal nominations. At the end of his papacy, he may have felt that it just had not worked: his desire for the church to uphold the highest standards of truth and morals over against the modern world of egoism and relativism had resulted in a church ethically crumbling down from within, losing its credibility on the public scene at a steady pace not only in Europe, but to a growing degree elsewhere as well. Instituted as a divine reality, the church has proven to be only too human. It has become all the more difficult to argue in a credible way that it is not the church but only its members who are sinful, and thus responsible for the pitiful present state of affairs.

What do we mean by "cognitive dissonance"? The concept stems from social psychology and is defined as follows: cognitive dissonance "refers to a situation involving *conflicting attitudes*, beliefs or behaviors. This produces a *feeling of discomfort* leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or

behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance etc.”<sup>1</sup> In social psychology this concept helps to explain that people change their belief systems, behavior, and so on because they wish their cognitions and beliefs to be consonant with the reality they experience. The so-called principle of cognitive consistency, then, thrives on “dissonance reduction.” The concept of cognitive dissonance was introduced by Leon Festinger when he investigated what happened to people who expected an impending apocalypse that ultimately did not occur.<sup>2</sup> Instead of giving up their beliefs (because they had been proven false), the more convinced among them provided new arguments to uphold their beliefs and to explain why the apocalypse did not occur. “According to Festinger, we hold many cognitions about the world and ourselves; when they clash, a discrepancy is evoked, resulting in a state of tension known as cognitive dissonance. As the experience of dissonance is unpleasant, we are motivated to reduce or eliminate it, and achieve consonance (i.e. agreement).”<sup>3</sup>

I want to argue that the way in which Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI conceives of conversion, and how this feeds into his fundamental-theological intuitions about divine truth, the church, and the world, may have resulted in too much cognitive dissonance.<sup>4</sup> Such a state of cognitive dissonance discredited his theological-ecclesial program altogether, and no doubt caused great distress, so that most probably an escape (in prayer) was the only solution left, this seemingly being the only way to effectuate “dissonance reduction.” Would it be too far-fetched to interpret Benedict’s statement of resignation in this way when he said: “In today’s world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me”?<sup>5</sup>

In order to explain this point, I will first shed some light on the role that conversion (*metanoia*) plays in the framework of Joseph Ratzinger’s theology.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Saul A. McLeod, “Cognitive Dissonance Theory,” *Simply Psychology* (2008), <http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html> (emphasis in the original).

<sup>2</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); see also Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, “Cognitive Dissonance Theory.”

<sup>4</sup> The first version of this text was delivered at the 2013 Catholic Theological Society of America convention in Miami, which was dedicated to the theme of conversion.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20130211\\_declaratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130211_declaratio_en.html).

Afterward, I will develop how this has influenced the way in which he has dealt with the challenges of the modern world for Christian faith. Finally, I will argue that this strategy has not been successful, and that other ways to approach the world may prove to be more fruitful in the long run.

### **I. *Metanoia*: A Radical Turning Away from Human Hubris toward a More Fundamental Relationship That Precedes Us**

For Ratzinger, the most fundamental structure of the Christian faith (and at the same time the Christian answer to the human quest for salvation) is *metanoia*, the conversion of the believer from egocentrism to a more fundamental relationship that precedes the human being. In almost all of his writings from the 1960s to the 1980s this theme surfaces over and over again: for example, in his more prominent books, *Einführung in das Christentum (Introduction to Christianity)* and *Theologische Prinzipienlehre (Principles of Catholic Faith)*,<sup>6</sup> as well as in many articles that he published in the *Communio: Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift*, the journal he founded in 1972 with Hans-Urs von Balthasar. I will summarize his argument in seven steps.

1. True *metanoia*, for Ratzinger, is characterized by a radical change in the subject. The “ego” no longer is an autonomous being, standing on its own, but is joined into a new subject. The latter not only reveals the ego’s limits to itself but also enables it to touch the ground of existence.<sup>7</sup> One is freed from what is visible, from what can be grasped and made one’s own. “Belief is the conversion in which man [*sic*] discovers that he is following an illusion if he devotes himself only to the tangible. . . . Only in a lifelong conversion can we become aware of what it means to say ‘I believe’. . . . Belief has always had something of an adventurous break or leap about it, because in every age it represents the risky enterprise of accepting what plainly cannot be seen as the truly real and fundamental.”<sup>8</sup>
2. *Metanoia* is definitely not something one enacts oneself. We do not create our new subjectivity; on the contrary, it is given to us. The change in

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum: Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1968); English translation: *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Communio Books, 2004); *Theologische Prinzipienlehre: Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie* (Munich: Wewel, 1982); English translation: *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Theologie und Kirche,” *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* 15 (1986): 515–33, at 519.

<sup>8</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 51–52.

subject is characterized by a constitutive passive moment. "Because conversion breaks the boundaries open between the I and the not-I, it can be given to oneself by the not-I, and it can never be accomplished within the mere intimacy of one's own decision-making."<sup>9</sup> The gift character of *metanoia*, which can be seen from within God's offer of love, also implies an assignment to the subject. Faith and obedience are synonyms for *metanoia*.<sup>10</sup> "Conversion is an act of obedience to what precedes me, and what does not come from me."<sup>11</sup> Real *metanoia* has personal and internal, as well as communal and external, consequences.

3. Conversion is therefore in the first place the letting go of egocentrism, the retreat from the gravity of egoism and self-interest, in order to make the transition to the gravity field of truth and love.<sup>12</sup> The fundamental action in *metanoia*, therefore, is "confession" (*Bekennntnis*), and this in a double way: confessing one's guilt, and confessing oneself to Christ as the Savior, from whom one wishes to receive forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> Guilt is what the human being experiences when he or she acknowledges what he or she could have been but has not become. Guilt makes the breach in the human person perceivable and stands in between the human being and his or her ability to be united with him- or herself and all there is. Guilt is the result of the alienation of the human being and his or her essence.
4. Confessing oneself to Christ as Savior, then, is the letting go of the principle of "one's own truth," and turning oneself to Christ as the truth. It is through recognizing this truth and entering this field of gravity that the alienation of the human being from his or her essence can be overcome. It is only the truth of God that can set human beings free. The question of truth is indeed a soteriological question: truth concerns the fundamental insight that the human person is already constituted by an original and fundamental relationship.
5. This objective, salvific truth was definitively revealed in Jesus Christ, as personal love beyond death, and is articulated in the Christian tradition, which is entrusted to the church as the subject of faith. The church safeguards and preserves this truth to ensure that its constancy and continued presence are not lost in the flow of time.

<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, "Theologie und Kirche," 520 (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger, "Theologie und Kirche," 524 (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Kirchenverfassung und Umkehr: Fragen an Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* 13 (1984): 444–57, at 445.

6. Conversion is fundamentally both an ecclesial and a sacramental given. It is in the sacraments, and more accurately in the sacramental structure of reality, that the unity of salvation and truth is expressed and realized. The structure of conversion is evident especially in baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of penance. *Metanoia* expresses itself in authentic confession and active penance.<sup>14</sup>
7. Finally, this fundamental structure of faith is, according to Ratzinger, sublimely expressed in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, when he wrote: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20a). This expression "describes this distinctive feature of Christianity both as a radical personal experience and as an objective reality."<sup>15</sup> It is dying to sin, and rising with Christ to new life.

## II. Within a Neoplatonic Framework

Conversion is thus defined as the radical turning away from human autonomy to the recognition of a more basic relationship that precedes and thus also constitutes real human subjectivity. This definition must be understood from within Ratzinger's fundamentally Christian-Neoplatonic view on truth and reality, informed by his early work on Augustine and Bonaventure, and conceived of as the result of the providential marriage between Jewish-Christian faith and Hellenistic culture.<sup>16</sup> According to this view, reality is characterized by a polar, dyadic structure that is essentially asymmetrical and hierarchical: the visible world is an imitation of a more real, invisible, and intelligible reality beyond. For Ratzinger this is framed theologically from within Augustine's distinction between the worldly and the heavenly city. The *civitas terrena* is autonomous and really at home in the world; the love that is characteristic of this world is the *cupido*. The *civitas dei*, on the other hand, comes from God, is alien to this world, and strives for what is beyond what the world can offer. It is here that *caritas* reigns.<sup>17</sup> Regarding

<sup>14</sup> For the sacrament of penance, see, e.g., Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, 67; and Ratzinger, "Kirchenverfassung und Umkehr," 449–50.

<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger, "Theologie und Kirche," 518 (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> As a matter of fact, both the prominence of the themes of conversion and truth and the major attention to the productive encounter of biblical faith and Hellenistic thought (and especially Augustine in this regard) in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* clearly reveal that Pope Emeritus Benedict still held the pen of Pope Francis's first encyclical on faith. The same holds true for the antagonism toward modernity that the encyclical displays already from its very beginning (LF 2–3).

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (Munich: Zink, 1954), 16. Cf. Aidan Nichols, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: An Introductory Study* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 27 ff.

the concept of salvific truth, Ratzinger learned from Bonaventure that “the explication of faith adds to faith, but never changes its essence; in the same way the changing of times determines the faith without changing it.”<sup>18</sup> For Ratzinger, this statement confirms his Augustinian-Neoplatonic intuitions. History is the field where the faith is explained, but not made or (co-)constituted. Truth belongs to the domain of the eternal. Incarnation implies that the eternal nests within the temporal, not that the temporal is taken on in the eternal.

### III. Ratzinger and the Opposition to the World

It is here, according to Ratzinger, that we touch on the fundamental conflict between the Christian faith and the modern world: the lack of *metanoia* is the real problem in the world of today. The world is no longer able to accept that there is an original truth prior to the autonomy of the human person—a truth that, despite all cultural mediations, always remains true because it is (objectively) true. In modernity, truth has taken on a historical nature and thus become radically relativized. In such a context, it is up to the church to defend the truth, even if that is not fashionable. This is the church’s mission within the world of today. In order to carry out this mission, the church should be wary of adapting itself to modernity, because then it no longer will be able to perform this task.

This opinion became very evident in the series of interviews Cardinal Ratzinger gave while serving as the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Ratzinger Report* (1985) and *Salt of the Earth* (1996), as well as in his books about Europe, such as *Wendezeit für Europa?* (1991) and *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs* (2005).<sup>19</sup> The modern world, with

<sup>18</sup> Bonaventura, *In III Sent.*, d. 24, a. 1, q. 3, c: “Explicatio accedit fidei nec mutat essentiam fidei, sic et variatio temporis determinat, non variat fidem”; as quoted in Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, 188 (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985); Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium—An Interview with Peter Seewald*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997); Joseph Ratzinger, *Wendezeit für Europa? Diagnosen und Prognosen zur Lage von Kirche und Welt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1991); English translation: *A Turning Point for Europe?: The Church in the Modern World: Assessment and Forecast*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); Joseph Ratzinger, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs: Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005); English translation: *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2006).

Europe as the example par excellence, has alienated itself from this salvific truth and has fallen into a culture of increasing relativism, amorality, and irrationalism. In 2005 Ratzinger even spoke about a clash of two opposite cultures.<sup>20</sup> Only a radical return to the roots of what it is to be human can save human civilization.

Christians, therefore, should strive for the conversion of the world rather than dialogue with the world. First of all, the world has become so alienated from the church that any dialogue has become very problematic, as the world stands at odds with Christian salvific truth. Secondly, such dialogue, especially when it would pertain to the Christian truth itself, endangers the integrity of this truth. Only when speaking from a firm identity can the church challenge today's world, calling it to conversion and to recognizing again the fundamental relationship to God, which underlies all human rationality, subjectivity, and community building.

#### IV. Consequences for the Church and Theology

Conversion, therefore, guides not only Ratzinger's theology of the individual believer, but also his theology of the world. This provides a reading key for understanding both his theological and his ecclesial approach to dealing with the contemporary situation of the Christian faith.

This asymmetric-hierarchical view of reality, and its consequences for thinking about Christian truth and the dialogue with the world, have indeed had an impact on the way in which the Christian faith and the church have been conceived of in today's context. Within this theological, and thus also ecclesiological, paradigm, for example, this asymmetry leads to a subordination of the historical to the eternal, the human to the divine, nature to grace. This results in what we have come to define as a high Christology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology, all of which accentuate dialectics rather than dialogue, opposition rather than mediation. It is never from history, nature, reason, or the human that one can come to understand revelation, grace, faith, or the divine, but the other way around. It is the divine that makes the human turn away from the all-too-human to face its eternal destiny. It is the church, as the guardian of divine truth and the gathering of the people of God in the Body of Christ, that presents itself—especially in the alienated world of today—as the alternative to the world.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Europe in the Crisis of Cultures," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (2005): 345–56; for a discussion of Ratzinger's view on modernity and Europe, see Lieven Boeve, "Europe in Crisis: A Question of Belief or Unbelief? Perspectives from the Vatican," *Modern Theology* 23 (2007): 205–27.



What this means became very evident in Cardinal Ratzinger's initial criticism of the *mea culpa* that Pope John Paul II confessed on behalf of the church on the occasion of the transition to the third millennium on March 13, 2000. For Ratzinger, it is not the church that makes mistakes, but rather individuals within the church, for whom the church asks for God's forgiveness. If the church apologized for 2,000 years of mistakes, would it still be regarded as the beacon of light and truth in a world of sin and sorrow?

The opposition to the modern world, and the need to present the Christian faith as proclaimed by the church as the alternative, have led to the profiling of Christian identity against the world. First of all, this has resulted in the borders of faith and the church *ad extra* being made more stringent. In relation to modern culture, to other Christian denominations, and to other religions, ecclesial documents have been promulgated in which the identity of the church's position has been confirmed and often profiled against more dialogical positions. If the church is to engage in conversation with modern culture, other denominations, other religions, and so forth, it is always on the basis of a firm identity that is never subject to the process of dialogue but instead constitutes both the dialogue's starting point and its endpoint. On several occasions, documents from the Second Vatican Council that open up more room for dialogue in this regard have been interpreted in stricter ways (e.g., the restriction of the meaning of *subsistit in* in *Lumen Gentium* 8; *Dominus Jesus*, the document on the unicity and universality of Jesus Christ and the church; and the postsynodal exhortation on revelation, *Verbum Domini*<sup>21</sup>). Some issues have even reached the status of highly symbolic identity markers in this opposition, blocking any discussion and reconsideration *ad intra*: sexual-relational and biomedical-ethical issues, for example, seem to have served to strengthen the church's identity and authority against the world, rather than sincerely striving, together with the world, to serve the cause of love in human partnership and the integrity of human life. Other expressions of this attitude are the preference for an ecumenical rapprochement with the Orthodox churches and the attempts to reconcile with the Lefebvrist Pius X community (paradoxically allowing for internal division with the reallowance of the Tridentine liturgy<sup>22</sup>) rather than with

<sup>21</sup> See Reimund Bieringer's remarks about the way in which *Dei Verbum* is quoted in *Verbum Domini* "Openbaring, Schrift en interpretatie: Een bijbels-theologisch perspectief", in *Vaticanum II: Geschiedenis of interpretatie? Theologische opstellen over het tweede Vaticaans concilie*, ed. Mathijs Lamberigts and Leo Kenis (Antwerp: Halewijn, 2013), 33–63.

<sup>22</sup> It would even seem that the many efforts by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI to bring more unity to the church in fact have resulted in more division. This holds true not only for the reallowance of the Tridentine liturgy, but also for other initiatives, such as

post-Reformation Christianity. From a fundamental-theological perspective, this has weighed on the historical-dynamical and dialogical concept of revelation that Vatican II proposed in *Dei Verbum*.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it has prevented the church and its theologians from further developing this concept. On the contrary, it would seem that, once again, a more ahistorical and propositionalist concept of revelation, legitimized and protected by the authority of the magisterium, has come to occupy the room made by this council.<sup>24</sup>

As already mentioned, there are also consequences for the discipline and conversation *ad intra*. A church that strives to present itself as the alternative to the world and to uphold an unchangeable truth in times of relativism can allow neither internal division nor discussion of this truth. Nominations of bishops, the negation of the theological authority of episcopal conferences,<sup>25</sup> the prohibition of discussions about revising the criteria for ordained ministry, the formal restriction of the theological vocation,<sup>26</sup> the investigations and condemnations of theologians,<sup>27</sup> the publication of compendia and catechisms—all these policies in one way or another foster the image of a church that strives to close its ranks and prevent internal discussion and division.

With regard to *Dei Verbum*, it would seem that time and again the historical-dynamic and dialogical understanding of revelation has been disregarded and that the possible renewing—or interrupting—impact of such dialogue is limited, in order to reduce the risk of adapting or renewing the Christian faith as a result of such historical and dialogical dynamics. The tension that accompanies such dialogue is then lifted too early, and the church threatens to withdraw into its own certainties. This pertains not only to *Dei Verbum* but also to

the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham for Anglicans joining the Roman Catholic Church, and the new English translation of the Roman Missal.

<sup>23</sup> For an elaboration of this point, see Lieven Boeve, “Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II’s Constitution *Dei verbum* for Contemporary Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13 (2011): 416–33.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Boeve, “Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition,” 430, in reference to Helmut Hoping, “*Dei verbum*,” in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Jochen Hilberath (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 3:695–831, at 809 (with further references).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Scopi e metodi del Sinodo dei vescovi,” in *Il Sinodo dei vescovi: Natura—metodi—prospettiva*, ed. Josef Tomko (Vatican City: Libreria ed. Vaticana, 1985), 45–58.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (Donum Veritatis)*, May 24, 1990, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19900524\\_theologian-vocation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html).

<sup>27</sup> See Bradford E. Hinze, “A Decade of Disciplining Theologians,” in *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today’s Church*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 3–39.

the reception of the Second Vatican Council as a whole. It would seem that the opening of the church to the world, realized through the combined efforts of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, has become the main problem. Not only does the modern world no longer appear to be an appropriate dialogue partner, but the principle of dialogue itself is also contested.<sup>28</sup>

### V. Cognitive Dissonance

In short, Ratzinger's theological framework and its asymmetric, hierarchical, and oppositional setup have resulted in a theology and church that have profited themselves as guardians of truth in an inimical world. We have already pointed out the consequences for the church *ad extra* and *ad intra*. It is at this stage, I would contend, that Ratzinger/Benedict became caught in a paradoxical situation, causing the cognitive dissonance referred to at the beginning of this article.<sup>29</sup> In fighting the hubris of the modern autonomous subject, which cannot live up to its own standards and thus is fallen, the policy of Ratzinger appears to have developed a church that has fallen victim to its own hubris—namely, speaking from on high on behalf of God to a world it despises. Both the massive loss of worldwide recognition of the church's public discourse and the scandals within the church illustrate the latter point. The church that is called to be a beacon of light and truth has turned out to have been invaded by lies and darkness. The church as guardian of the divine truth could not live up to its calling, to the truth it wanted to present as an alternative to the world. The church, in the end, seems to be no better than the world it wanted to convert. This must have created a massive cognitive dissonance in Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, a consciousness that the current crisis is the product of an immense lack within the church of what he perceived to be the most fundamental structure of the Christian faith: *metanoia*.

Here, I think, we touch on the basic issue: because of its opposition to the world, and in calling for the conversion of this world, the church lost

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ratzinger and Messori, *The Ratzinger Report*, chap. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Others have made similar remarks; see Anthony J. Godzieba in his editorial in *Horizons* 40.1 (2013): v: "One reason for Benedict's resignation, I am convinced, is the failure of his 'ordered' and ethereal Neo-Platonic/Augustinian worldview: it eventually collided with the plurality of truths outside the Vatican and the almost willful disorder and corrupt behavior within the Vatican, and could not 'solve' (*solvere*, unravel) any of it or put it into any order. A similar view has been voiced by Leonardo Boff (the 'collapse' of Ratzinger's theology) and by Martin Drobinski, writing in Munich's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of the current repudiation of Ratzinger's 'hermetic' view of the Church as a little ship tossed about on a stormy 'relativist' sea, forced to batten down the hatches and pull in the sails."

sight of its own need for conversion. A church that refuses dialogue in order to call the world to convert closes in on itself and loses its resources to foster its own continuously needed *metanoia*. Such a church forgets about the historical-dynamic and dialogical nature of its truth, a truth stemming from the dialogue of God with humanity in history. This truth is not the church's possession; but it is lost when claimed as one's own. It is within history, within conversation and dialogue, that truth is revealed as God's gift to the church. And it is only through a humble and open dialogue and conversation that this truth can be traced, time and again. Blocking the conversation in the church both *ad extra* and *ad intra*, therefore, makes it all the more difficult to discover where God challenges both the church and the world today and calls them to conversion. Moreover, it should be clear that, in this regard, conversion is both a subjective and a communal affair not only for the individual believer, but also for the church community as such. Furthering the historical-dynamic and dialogical understanding of revelation necessarily will lead to a more historical-dynamic and dialogical understanding of the church.

### **By Way of Conclusion: Dissonance Reduction**

The theory of cognitive dissonance holds not only that such a situation causes serious discomfort, grief, and embarrassment, but also that it compels individuals to strive for dissonance reduction. Stepping down as pope is of course a dramatic way of realizing dissonance reduction on the personal level, handing over the dreadful situation to God by withdrawing in a life of prayer. Although this would not seem to be very effective, and rather an escape from the difficult situation, at the communal level it might have been the right way to commence with dissonance reduction, making way for a church opening itself up for *metanoia*.

It would seem that Pope Francis, at least in these first months, is cognizant of the church's difficult situation; he calls the church itself to be poor, to be humble, and sets such an example in person. The church is no longer a safe bastion against the world, but as vulnerable as it is, it hopes in dialogue and conversation to trace God's truth in history. And this dialogue and conversation are directed *ad extra* to non-Christians,<sup>30</sup> as well as *ad intra*—for

<sup>30</sup> His symbolic gestures in particular are very telling in this regard: e.g., his washing of the feet of Muslim women on Holy Thursday (March 28, 2013), his statement that unbelievers too can be saved when they live a good life (May 22, 2013), and his visit to the detention camps for illegal immigrants in Lampedusa (July 8, 2013).

example, in fostering new ways of collegiality.<sup>31</sup> Maybe a poorer and more humble church will be more effective in bringing about the conversion of the world. The least one can say is that it will commence with its own conversion. And most certainly this is the best strategy to realize the dissonance reduction the church needs. In this regard, as perhaps Vatican II also attempted to accomplish,<sup>32</sup> the best way to convert the world to God is to convert the church to God's world.

<sup>31</sup> Illustrative of this are the primary identification of the pope as the bishop of Rome, the intended reform of the Curia, and the appointment of a "crown council" of eight cardinals to assist the pope in his governing the church (April 13, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Very significant might be the announcement on July 5, 2013, of the canonization of Pope John XXIII without need of a second miracle (and this in conjunction with the canonization of Pope John Paul II).