

Exclusive to the Register, we publish below the first English translation of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's letter to the militant Italian atheist, Piergiorgio Odifreddi.

In September, the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* printed extracts of the letter whose **full contents** were published in Italian on Nov. 23 by the German-language agency Kath.net.

The Pope Emeritus sent the letter in **response** to a book Odifreddi wrote in 2011 entitled *Dear Pope, I'm Writing to You*. The work was a critique of certain arguments and lines of thought found in Benedict's theological writings, beginning with his 1967 volume *Introduction to Christianity*, and including his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, which he wrote as pope.

Distinguished Professor Odifreddi,

First, I must apologize for the fact that I am only thanking you today for sending me your book, *Caro Papa, ti scrivo*, and for the kind words which you addressed to me at the time through Archbishop Gänswein. However I did not wish to write before having read your book, and since various tasks still weigh upon me, I have finished reading it only now.

Today, therefore, I would at last like to thank you for having sought in great detail to confront my book, and thus also my faith. This in large part was precisely what I intended in my address to the Roman Curia at Christmas 2009. I must also thank you for the faithful manner in which you dealt with my text, earnestly seeking to do it justice.

My opinion of your book as a whole, however, is rather mixed. I read some parts of it with enjoyment and profit. In other parts, however, I was surprised by a certain aggressiveness and rashness of argumentation.

I would like to respond chapter by chapter, but unfortunately I do not have sufficient strength for this. I shall therefore choose a few points that I think are particularly important.

I.

First, I marvel that on pages 25 and following you interpret my choice to go beyond the perception of the senses in order to perceive reality in its grandeur as "an explicit denial of the principle of reality" or as "mystical psychosis." In fact, I intended to maintain precisely the position you yourself expound on page 29 and following concerning the method of the natural sciences "which transcends the limitations of the human senses."

Thus I fully agree with what you write on page 40: "...mathematics has a deep affinity with religion." On this point, then, I see no real contrast between your approach and mine. If on page 49 you explain that "true religiosity ... today is to be found more in science than in philosophy," you are making a statement which is certainly open to discussion; however, I am glad that you intend to present your work here as "true religiosity." Here, as again on page 65, and then again in the chapter entitled "His Creed and mine," you emphasize that true religiosity would be constituted by the renunciation

of the "anthropomorphism" of a God understood as a person, and by the veneration of rationality. Accordingly, on page 182 of your book, you quite drastically say that "math and science are the only true religion, the rest is superstition."

Now, I can certainly understand that you consider the conception of the primordial and creative Reason as a Person with its own "I" to be an anthropomorphism; this seems to be a reduction of the grandeur, for us inconceivable, of the Logos. The Trinitarian faith of the Church whose presentation in my book you recount objectively, to some extent also expresses the totally different, mysterious aspect of God, which we may intuit only from afar. Here I would like to recall the statement of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, as he is called, who once said that philosophical minds certainly experience a kind of revulsion before biblical anthropomorphisms since they consider them inadequate.

However, these enlightened persons run the risk of taking their own philosophical conceptions of God as adequate and of forgetting that their own philosophical ideas are also infinitely far from the reality of the "totally Other." Thus these anthropomorphisms are needed in order to overcome the arrogance of thought; indeed, it must be said that, in some respects, anthropomorphism more closely approaches the reality of God than mere concepts. Moreover, what the Fourth Lateran Council said in 1215 still applies, i.e. that every concept of God can only be analogical and that dissimilarity with the true God is always infinitely greater than likeness.

That said, it must still be maintained that a divine Logos also must be conscious and, in this sense, a Subject and a Person. An objective reason always presupposes a subject, a reason which is conscious of itself.

On page 53 of your book you say that this distinction, which in 1968 could still seem justified, is no longer tenable faced with today's reality of artificial intelligence. On this point you do not convince me at all. Artificial intelligence, in fact, is obviously an intelligence transmitted by conscious subjects, an intelligence placed in equipment. It has a clear origin, in fact, in the intelligence of the human creators of such equipment.

Lastly, I cannot follow you at all, if from the start you do not write *Logos* with a capital 'L' but rather the mathematical *logos* in lower case (page 85). The *Logos* that stands at the beginning of all things is a *Logos* above all *logoi*.

Of course, the transition from the *logoi* to the *Logos* made by the Christian faith together with the great Greek philosophers is a leap that cannot be simply demonstrated: It leads from empiricism to metaphysics and with this to another level of thought and reality. But this leap is at least as logical as your dispute against it. I also think that whoever cannot make this leap should yet regard it as a serious question. This is the crucial point in my conversation with you, a point to which I will return again at the end: I would expect someone who is seriously searching at least to admit the possibility of that "perhaps" of which, following Martin Buber, I spoke at the beginning of my book. Both parties to the discussion should continue their search. It seems to me, however, that you interrupt the quest in a dogmatic way and no longer ask, but rather claim to teach me.

II.

The point just set forth constitutes for me the central point of a true dialogue between your "scientific" faith and the faith of Christians. All the rest is secondary by comparison. So you will allow me to be more concise with regard to evolution. First I would like to point out that no serious theologian will dispute that the entire "tree of life" is in a living internal relationship, which the word evolution fittingly describes. Likewise, no serious theologian will be of the opinion that God, the Creator, repeatedly at intermediate levels had to intervene almost manually in the process of development. In this sense, many attacks on theology regarding evolution are unfounded. However, it would be useful for the advancement of knowledge if those who represent the natural sciences would also show themselves more openly aware of the issues and if they would say more clearly what questions still remain open.

In this regard, I have always considered exemplary the work of Jacques Monod, who clearly recognizes that, ultimately, we do not know how new DNA full of meaning is formed time and time again. I contest your thesis on page 129 according to which the four typologies developed by Darwin would perfectly explain all that regards the evolution of plants and animals, including man. On the other hand, I would not omit the fact that in this field there is a lot of science fiction, I will speak of it elsewhere. Moreover, in his book *Prinzip Menschlichkeit* (Hamburg 2007), the medical scientist Joachim Bauer of Freiburg impressively illustrated the problems of social Darwinism; this too should not be passed over in silence.

The result of the "Longterm-evolution experiment" of which you speak on page 121 is by no means comprehensive. The attempted contraction of time in the final analysis is fictitious, and mutations achieved are of a modest scope. But most of all, man as the demiurge must constantly intervene with his contribution — precisely what evolution seeks to exclude. Furthermore, I find it very important that you still, even in your "religion," recognize three "mysteries": the question regarding the origin of the universe, that regarding the emergence of life and that regarding the origin of consciousness of the most highly developed living beings. Of course, also here you see man as one of the species of ape and thereby substantively cast doubt on the dignity of man; however, the emergence of consciousness remains an open question for you (page 182).

III.

You pointed out to me several times that theology would be science fiction. In this respect, I marvel that you still consider my book worthy of such detailed discussion. Allow me to propose four points on the issue:

It is correct to say that only mathematics is "science" in the strictest sense of the word, though I learned from you that here, too, it is necessary to make a further distinction between arithmetic and geometry. In all the specific areas, the scientific character of the discipline has its own form according to the particularity of its object. What is essential is that you apply a verifiable method, that you exclude arbitrariness and that you ensure rationality in their respective and various modalities.

You should at least recognize that, within the context of history and philosophical thought, theology has produced lasting results.

An important function of theology is to keep religion tied to reason and reason to religion. Both roles are of essential importance for humanity. In my dialogue with Habermas, I have shown that there are pathologies of religion and — no less dangerous — pathologies of reason. They both need each other, and keeping them constantly connected is an important task of theology.

Science fiction exists, however, in the context of many sciences. What you set forth on the theories about the beginning and the end of the world in Heisenberg, Schrödinger, etc. I would designate as science fiction in the best sense: they are visions and anticipations, by which we seek to attain a true knowledge, but in fact, they are only imaginations whereby we seek to draw near to the reality. Even within the theory of evolution, a great style of science fiction exists. Richard Dawkins' selfish gene is a classic example of science fiction. The great Jacques Monod wrote sentences that he himself would certainly have inserted in his work just as science fiction. I quote: "The emergence of tetrapod vertebrates ... derives its origin from the fact that a primitive fish 'chose' to go and explore the land, on which, however, he was unable to move except by hopping awkwardly and thus creating, as a result of behavioral modification, the selective pressure thanks to which the sturdy limbs of tetrapods would have developed. Among the descendants of this daring explorer, of this Magellan of evolution, some can run at a speed of more than 70 miles per hour ..." (quoted according to the Italian edition *Chance and Necessity*, Milan 2001, p. 117ff) .

IV.

All the issues I have discussed thus far have been part of a serious dialogue, for which, as I've said repeatedly, I am grateful. The situation is quite different in the chapter on the priest and on Catholic morality, and even more different in the chapter on Jesus. As for what you say about the moral abuse of minors by priests, I can, as you know, only note it with deep dismay. I have never tried to hide these things. That the power of evil penetrates even to this point in the interior life of the faith is, for us, a suffering which, on the one hand, we must endure, while on the other hand, we must at the same time do everything possible so that cases such as these never occur again. Nor is it a reason for comfort to know that, according to the research of sociologists, the percentage of priests guilty of these crimes is not higher than in those found in other similar professions. In any case, this deviant behaviour should not be ostensibly presented as a filthy crime which only exists in the Catholic Church.

If we may not remain silent about evil in the Church, then neither should we keep silent about the great shining path of goodness and purity which the Christian faith has traced out over the course of the centuries. We need to remember the great and pure figures which the faith has produced — from Benedict of Nursia and his sister Scholastica, to Francis and Claire of Assisi, to Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, to the great saints of charity like Vincent de Paul and Camillo de Lellis, to Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the great and noble figures of nineteenth century Turin. It is also true today that faith moves many people to selfless love, to service to others, to sincerity and to justice. You cannot know how many forms of selfless assistance to the suffering are realized through the service of the Church and its faithful. If you were to take away everything that is done from these motives, it would cause a far-reaching social collapse. Lastly, neither should one keep silent regarding the artistic beauty which the faith has given to the world: nowhere is it better seen than in Italy. Think also of the music which has been inspired

by faith, from Gregorian chant to Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Bruckner, Brahms, and so on.

V.

What you say about the person of Jesus is not worthy of your scientific standing. If you are posing the question as if, in the end you knew nothing about Jesus and as though nothing were ascertainable about Him as a historic figure, then I could only firmly invite you to become a little more competent from an historical point of view. For this, I recommend especially the four volumes which Martin Hengel (an exegete of the Protestant Theological Faculty of Tübingen) published together with Maria Schwemer: it is an excellent example of historical precision and of the broadest historical knowledge. Compared with this, what you say about Jesus is rash talk that should not be repeated.

It is an incontestable fact that many things of little seriousness have been written within the field of exegesis. The American seminar on Jesus you cite on pages 105 and following only confirms again what Albert Schweitzer had noted about the "Leben-Jesu-Forschung" (Research on the life of Jesus), i.e. that the so-called "historical Jesus" is for the most part a reflection of the authors' ideas. These botched forms of historical work, however, do not compromise at all the importance of serious historical research, which has brought us true and certain knowledge about the proclamation [of the Gospel] and the figure of Jesus.

On page 104 you go so far as to ask the question if Jesus was perhaps even one of the many charlatans who seduced innocent people with spells and tricks. And even if this is only expressed in the form of a question and, thank God, does not appear as a thesis, respect for what others hold as a sacred reality should restrain you from such insults (cf. the expression "silly charlatanism" on page 104).

I must also forcefully reject your assertion (p. 126) that I have portrayed historical-critical exegesis as an instrument of the Antichrist. Treating the account of Jesus' temptations, I have only taken up Soloviev's thesis that historical-critical exegesis can also be used by the antichrist — which is an incontestable fact. At the same time, however — and especially in the preface to the first volume of my book on Jesus of Nazareth — I have always explained clearly that historical-critical exegesis is necessary for a faith that does not propose myths with historical images, but that it demands genuine historicity and therefore must present the historical reality of its claims in a scientific manner. For this reason, neither is it correct for you to tell me that I would be interested only in meta-history: On the contrary, all my efforts are aimed at showing that the Jesus described in the Gospels is also the real historical Jesus, that it is history which actually occurred.

At this point, I would also like to note that your exposition of the *crede ut intellegas* does not agree with the Augustinian mode of thinking which guides me: for Augustine *crede ut intellegas* and *intellege ut credas*, in their own specific ways, are inseparably joined. In this regard, I would refer you to the article *crede ut intellegas* by Eugene TeSelle in the "Augustinus-Lexikon" (ed. C. Mayer, vol. 2 Basel from 1996 to 2002, coll. 116-119).

Allow me then to observe that, regarding the scientific nature of theology and its sources, you should move more cautiously when it comes to historical statements. I shall

mention just one example. On page 109, you tell us that the changing of water into wine at the Wedding at Cana in John's Gospel corresponds to the account of the changing of the Nile into blood (Exodus 7:17ff). This, of course, is nonsense. The transformation of the Nile into blood was a scourge that, for some time, took the vital resource of water from men in order to soften Pharaoh's heart. The changing of water into wine at Cana, however, is the gift of nuptial joy which God offers in abundance to men. It is a reference to the changing of the water of the Torah into the exquisite wine of the Gospel. In John's Gospel, yes, the typology of Moses is present, but not in this passage.

VI.

In Chapter 19 of your book, we return to the positive aspects of your dialogue with my book. First, however, allow me to correct another small mistake on your part. In my book I did not base myself on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the text of which, to your praise, you communicate to the reader, but rather on the "Apostle's Creed" as it is called. Its core is founded on the City of Rome's profession of faith and then, beginning from the third century, it increasingly spread in the West with several slight variations. Since the fourth century, it has been considered as compiled by the Apostles themselves. In the East, however, it has remained unknown.

But now let us turn to chapter 19 of your book: Even if your interpretation of John 1:1 is very far from what the evangelist intended, there is still an important convergence. If, however, you wish to replace God with "Nature," the question remains as to who or what this nature is. Nowhere do you define it and it therefore appears to be an irrational divinity which explains nothing. However, I would like especially to note that in your religion of mathematics three fundamental themes of human existence are not considered: freedom, love and evil. I am surprised that with a nod you set aside freedom which has been and still remains a fundamental value of the modern age. Love does not appear in your book, nor does the question of evil. Whatever neurobiology says or does not say about freedom, in the real drama of our history it is present as a crucial reality and it must be taken into account. However, your mathematical religion knows of no answer to the question of freedom, it ignores love and it does not give us any information on evil. A religion that neglects these fundamental questions is empty.

Distinguished Professor, my critique of your book is, in part, tough. However, frankness is a part of dialogue. Only thus can knowledge grow. You have been very frank and so you will accept that I am, too. In any case, however, I consider it very positive that you, in confronting my *Introduction to Christianity*, have sought such an open dialogue with the faith of the Catholic Church and that, despite its contrasts, at the centre of it all, convergences are not completely lacking.

With cordial greetings and every best wish in your work,

Benedict XVI

Register translation by Diane Montagna.

Read more: http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/full-text-of-benedict-xvis-letter-to-atheist-odifreddi?fb_action_ids=10153558346865109&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=other_multiline&action_object_map=%5B536541953097967%5D&action_type_map=%5B%22og.likes%22%5D&action_ref_map=%5B%5D#ixzz2nTKA1qKK