

# THE CREATIVE AND REDEMPTIVE WORD

## Benedict XVI's Theology of the Book of Nature

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**ABSTRACT:** The book of nature is among the most enduring theological metaphors. It has also been used extensively by recent Popes, from John Paul II to Francis. However, it has not been widely recognized that Pope Benedict XVI developed a wide-ranging and harmonious theology of the book of nature in a series of documents and discourses. In this article, I provide an analysis of the various ways in which Pope Benedict spoke about the book of nature, highlighting the various themes covered, including science and religion, the natural law, the liturgy, and the theology of religions. I also discuss the theological underpinnings of Pope Benedict's employment of the metaphor. I argue that, instead of seeing creation merely as the first stage of revelation, he thinks of the books of nature and Scripture developing in dialogue and finding their fullness in Christ.

**KEYWORDS:** Book of Creation, Book of Nature, Cosmic Liturgy, Fundamental Theology, Natural Contemplation, Natural Law, Natural Theology, Science and Religion, Theology of Religions.

**RIASSUNTO:** Il libro della natura è una delle metafore teologiche più durature. È stato utilizzato ampiamente anche dai Papi recenti, da Giovanni Paolo II a Francesco. Tuttavia, non è stato ancora riconosciuto come papa Benedetto XVI abbia sviluppato un'ampia ed armonica teologia del libro della natura in una nutrita serie di documenti e discorsi. In questo articolo intendo fornire un'analisi dei modi in cui papa Benedetto ha parlato del libro della natura, evidenziando i diversi temi trattati, tra cui il rapporto tra scienza e religione, la legge naturale, la liturgia e la teologia delle religioni. Discuto anche i fondamenti teologici dell'uso della metafora da parte di papa Benedetto. Sostengo che, invece di vedere la creazione solo come il primo stadio della Rivelazione, egli ritenga che il libro della natura e quello della Scrittura si sviluppino in dialogo e trovino la loro pienezza in Cristo.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Libro della Creazione, Libro della Natura, Liturgia cosmica, Teologia fondamentale, Contemplazione naturale, Legge naturale, Teologia naturale, Scienza e religione, Teologia delle religioni.

SUMMARY: I. *Introduction*. II. “*The Creator’s Calligraphy*”: *The Christmas Discourse to the Roman Curia* (2005). III. *The Creator Logos between Science and Faith: Discourses in Rome and Verona* (2006). IV. *The Evolutionary Universe as the Writing of the Book of Nature* (2008). V. *The “Symphony of the Creation”*: *Homily on the Epiphany* (2009). VI. *Integral Ecology: Caritas in Veritate* (2010). VII. *The Analogy of the Word: Verbum Domini* (2010). VIII. *Learning to Read the Book of Nature: Science, Contemplation, and Grace*. IX. *Beyond Proofs of God’s Existence*. X. *The Relational Dimension: The Logos ut Verbum*. XI. *The Natural Law and the Language of Being: The Bundestag Address* (2011). XII. *The Cosmic Liturgy: Gaudí and the Sagrada Família* (2010). XIII. *Religions and Christ: The Magi in the Infancy Narratives* (2012). XIV. *Conclusion*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The book of nature – the idea that the visible world is like another divine book alongside the Bible – is one of the most enduring metaphors in the history of theology.<sup>1</sup> It developed gradually during the patristic period, was consolidated in the Middle Ages, and continues to be used extensively during the modern period across different Christian confessions. In the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the book of nature was discussed, among others, by the great French theologians Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, and Jean Mouroux.<sup>2</sup> Later, the metaphor has appeared in a variety of magisterial documents including John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio* (1998) and Francis’ *Laudato si*.<sup>3</sup> It is mentioned twice in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in relation to sacred art and prayer.<sup>4</sup> In recent decades, the importance of the book of nature has been especially highlighted by theologians such as Alister McGrath and Giuseppe Tan-

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. A. VANDERJAGT, K. VAN BERKEL (eds.), *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Peeters, Leuven 2005; A. VANDERJAGT, K. VAN BERKEL (eds.), *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, Peeters, Leuven 2006; O. JUURIKALA, *The Patristic and Medieval Metaphor of the Book of Nature: Implications for Fundamental Theology* (Diss.), Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. J. DANÉLOU, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, W. ROBERTS (trans.), Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2003, 18; H. DE LUBAC, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, R. ARNANDEZ (trans.), Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1984, 213; J. MOUROUX, *The Meaning of Man*, Image Books, Garden City 1961, chap. 2.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the documents of Benedict XVI cited later, cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), 19; FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si* (May 24, 2015), 12, 85, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2500, 2705.

zella-Nitti.<sup>5</sup> But what does the book of nature mean theologically? Few systematic discussions of the metaphor and its theological significance are available. I will argue that one of the most balanced and wide-ranging visions of the book of nature can be found in various documents and audiences of Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013). I will start by analyzing in chronological order various discourses and homilies in which the idea appears, culminating in the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010). I will then address the question of how the book of nature can and should be read according to Benedict. His answer to the question is illustrated by the application of the metaphor in different contexts such as the knowledge of God's existence, the relational dimension of the Word, the natural law, liturgy, and the theology of religions.

## II. "THE CREATOR'S CALLIGRAPHY": THE CHRISTMAS DISCOURSE TO THE ROMAN CURIA (2005)

The metaphor appears in a variety of contexts and under a variety of expressions in Benedict XVI's papal magisterium. The earliest instance is his 2005 Christmas discourse to the Roman Curia.<sup>6</sup> This discourse is perhaps best remembered for the Pope's reflections on the hermeneutics of the Second Vatican Council, but they were preceded by reminiscences on the World Youth Day celebrated in Cologne. Commenting on its motto – "We have come to worship him" – Benedict notes this was an image of pilgrimage, and one dimension of this pilgrimage is the task of looking beyond one's own affairs:

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. A.E. McGRATH, *The Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis*, Doubleday/Galilee, New York 2003, 41, 107-109, 162; IDEM, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, 147-155, 166-167; IDEM, *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2017, 78-87, 155; IDEM, *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2023, 38-41, 71-87; G. TANZELLA-NITTI, *The Two Books prior to the Scientific Revolution*, «Annales Theologici» 18 (2004) 51-83; IDEM, *La metafora dei "due libri": un breve itinerario storico-teologico*, in *Teologia fondamentale in contesto scientifico*, 3: *Religione e rivelazione*, Città Nuova, Roma 2018, 360-394.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*, December 22, 2005, Italian original in AAS 98 (2006) 40-53. For the English translations of Benedict XVI, I have used the texts available on <https://www.vatican.va/> unless otherwise noted.

First of all, there was the invitation not to see the world that surrounds us solely as raw material with which we can do something, but to try to discover in it “the Creator’s handwriting”, the creative reason and the love from which the world was born and of which the universe speaks to us, if we pay attention, if our inner senses awaken and acquire perception of the deepest dimensions of reality.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the Pope’s remarks do not go further, but already several details of this text are worth noting. First, it contrasts two different ways of relating to the material world: one, a possessive and exploitative attitude which views the world as “raw material” for doing something practical and useful; the other, a respectful but intellectually curious and spiritually open attitude that seeks to go beyond the mere materiality of the world. Second, instead of “handwriting,” the Italian original speaks of the Creator’s “calligraphy”, which implicitly underscores the *beauty* of creation. The created world is not merely embedded with traces of its maker, but those traces have a beautiful character. Third, the Pope suggests that there are two different dimensions present in the book of creation, namely God’s “creative reason” as well as his “love”; the world comes from both and “speaks to us” of both. Finally, the perception of God’s handwriting and voice in nature is not automatically perceptible to us but requires an interior transformation – a theme which we will return to in a moment.

### III. THE CREATOR *LOGOS* BETWEEN SCIENCE AND FAITH: DISCOURSES IN ROME AND VERONA (2006)

Benedict XVI comes back to the topic of the book of nature more explicitly in two discourses in 2006. One is a response to a question by a high school student in a meeting with the youth of Rome and the Lazio region on Saint Peter’s Square, dated 6 April.<sup>8</sup> The other is directed to the participants of the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention in Verona, which took place on 19 October.<sup>9</sup> I will begin with the latter. It

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the Youth of Rome and the Lazio Region in Preparation for the XXI World Youth Day*, April 6, 2006, Italian original in AAS 98 (2006) 355-356.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Participants of the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention*, Verona, October 19, 2006, Italian original in AAS 98 (2006) 804-815.

discusses the challenge of evangelization in today's world. Referring to the role of science and technology in the contemporary worldview, the Pope suggests that they should not be seen as self-contained activities but as something that point beyond themselves, which is the basis of their power:

Mathematics, as such, is a creation of our intelligence: the correspondence between its structures and the real structures of the universe—which is the pre-supposition of all modern scientific and technological developments, already expressly formulated by Galileo Galilei with the famous affirmation that the book of nature is written in mathematical language—arouses our admiration and raises a big question.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, when we think about the dynamics of science and technology, we should be led to reflect on the remarkable power of mathematics and the “real structures of the universe” which render science and technology possible. A sense of wonder is necessary on our part, so that we can recognize that the discovery of the mathematical language of the universe “raises a big question” concerning its origins. Benedict cites Galileo Galilei's (1564-1642) famous use of the metaphor of the book of nature, of which he developed a peculiar interpretation.<sup>11</sup> The Pope's reference to Galileo does not necessarily imply that he endorses the latter's overall vision.

In fact, Benedict goes on to propose a richer understanding of the metaphor rooted in the ancient Greek notion of *logos*. The intelligent structuring of the universe suggests a certain kind of “correspondence” between “our subjective reason and the objective reason in nature.”<sup>12</sup> This, in its turn, implies that there seems to be an “original intelligence” that is at the source of both, so that the reflection on the development of science brings us towards the creator *Logos*.” The Pope argues that this discovery enables us to respond to the tendency among some scientists to give primacy to “irrationality, chance and necessity”, and we can see how “our intelligence and our freedom” form part of the bigger picture in which a divine *Logos* is the foundation of both our interior experience

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. A. SALUCCI, *La metafora del libro della natura in Galileo Galilei*, «Angelicum» 83 (2006) 327-375; G. TANZELLA-NITTI, *The Two Books prior to the Scientific Revolution*, 74-76.

<sup>12</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Participants of the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention*.

and the success of science and technology. What is at stake is the enlarging of our rationality, so that it is open to “questions of the truth and the good”. Indeed, science, philosophy, and theology can respect each other in their “reciprocal autonomy” when we are aware of “the intrinsic unity that holds them together.”<sup>13</sup>

In the earlier encounter with the youth of Rome in April 2006, Benedict XVI answers a question concerning science and faith along similar lines. He refers to Galileo who “said that God wrote the book of nature in the form of the language of mathematics. He was convinced that God has given us two books: the book of Sacred Scripture and the book of nature. And the language of nature – this was his conviction – is mathematics, so it is a language of God, a language of the Creator.”<sup>14</sup> And the Pope invites the listeners to reflect a bit more on the power of mathematics and its “incredible” coincidence with “the structure of the universe”.<sup>15</sup> It seems there must be an “antecedent reason” that accounts for both, so that our subjective rationality is able to discover “the reliable and intelligent structure of matter.”<sup>16</sup> The wordings of the two discourses differ in their details, but the overall structure is so similar that one almost suspects that the earlier Roman text was used as a draft for the later Verona discourse.

Benedict XVI’s emphasis on the divine *Logos* – and not merely mathematics taken in isolation – as the foundation for the book of nature is in direct continuity with the Greek Fathers as well as the thought of Saint Augustine.<sup>17</sup> The Greek notion of *logos* is in fact central to Joseph Ratzinger’s and Pope Benedict’s theological thought as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Another significant

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the Youth of Rome*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. JUURIKKALA, *The Patristic and Medieval Metaphor of the Book of Nature*, 32-44, 290-291; IDEM, *The Two Books of God: The Metaphor of the Book of Nature in Augustine*, «Augustinianum» 61/2 (2021) 495-497. On the patristic assimilation and transformation of the philosophical notion of *logos*, cfr. W.V. DE BEER, *The Cosmic Role of the Logos, as Conceived from Heraclitus until Eriugena*, «Philosophy and Theology» 27/1 (2015) 324; K. CLARKE, *Words in the Word: Maximus on Christ the Creator*, «Saint Anselm Journal» 19/1 (2023) 57-81.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. P. BLANCO SARTO, *Logos: Joseph Ratzinger y la historia de una palabra*, «Limite. Revista de Filosofía y Psicología», 1/14 (2006) 57-86. Important references in Ratzinger/Benedict include J. RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, San Francis-

text in this respect is his 2006 discourse to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which discusses the new challenges for the faith brought about by the development of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> In this discourse, the Pope argues that the key to avoiding any perception of “competition” between faith and reason is that “Jesus Christ is indeed the Lord of all creation and of all history” through whom and for whom “all things were created”, and in whom they “hold together” (Col 1:16-17).<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, Christians should make “a serious evangelizing effort” with respect to “scientific and philosophical discoveries”, pointing out that “the whole of creation is an immense invitation” and that it points beyond itself to “the great response that [human reason] has always sought and awaited.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the book of nature is a context for an ongoing dialogue between God and man.

#### IV. THE EVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSE AS THE WRITING OF THE BOOK OF NATURE (2008)

Pope Benedict returns to the book of nature in the dialogue of science and faith in his 2008 address to the members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.<sup>22</sup> The topic of their plenary assembly was *Scientific Insight into the Evolution of the Universe and of Life*. The Pope begins his discourse synthesizing some ideas from Thomas Aquinas to the effect that “the notion of creation must transcend the horizontal origin of the unfolding of events, which is history” and that creation “is instead the foundational and continuing relationship that links the creature to the Creator.” He then suggests that the language of evolution is related to the metaphor of the book: “To ‘evolve’ literally means ‘to unroll a scroll’, that is, to read a book. The imagery of nature as a book has its roots in Christianity and has been held dear by many scientists.”<sup>23</sup>

co 1990, 94-113; IDEM, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2003, 162-183; BENEDICT XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections* (Regensburg, September 12, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, February 10, 2006, Italian original in AAS 98 (2006) 254-257.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, October 31, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

Hence, the evolutionary history of nature is like the writing process of this “book whose author is God in the same way that Scripture has God as its author”: “It is a book whose history, whose evolution, whose “writing” and meaning, we “read” according to the different approaches of the sciences, while all the time presupposing the foundational presence of the author who has wished to reveal himself therein.”<sup>24</sup> The advantage of this metaphor is that it enables us to perceive the science of evolution in a wider context, which is rooted in the divine intelligence and purpose:

This image also helps us to understand that the world, far from originating out of chaos, resembles an ordered book; it is a cosmos. Notwithstanding elements of the irrational, chaotic and the destructive in the long processes of change in the cosmos, matter as such is “legible”. It has an inbuilt “mathematics”. The human mind therefore can engage not only in a “cosmography” studying measurable phenomena but also in a “cosmology” discerning the visible inner logic of the cosmos.<sup>25</sup>

The Pope notes that we do not always see “the harmony both of the whole and of the relations of the individual parts, or their relationship to the whole.” But within the individual events and processes, there is intelligibility and “an order of evident correspondences and undeniable finalities” between the various dimensions of the cosmos, which provides the foundation for “humanity’s place in the cosmos”. Importantly, the gradual discovery of these various orders requires both “experimental and philosophical inquiry”.<sup>26</sup>

One might of course ask whether it is appropriate to describe the evolutionary universe in straightforward terms as harmonious. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the theological relevance of nonhuman suffering as part of evolutionary processes before the Fall.<sup>27</sup> As a consequence, some people might think that the book of nature is a rather too neat metaphor for the evolutionary universe.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. J.R. SCHNEIDER, *Animal Suffering and the Darwinian Problem of Evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020; B.N. SOLLEREDER, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall*, Routledge, London-New York 2019.



However, in his Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Pope is at least implicitly acknowledging this dimension of the picture when he speaks, above, of “elements of the irrational, chaotic and the destructive in the long processes of change in the cosmos”.

#### V. THE “SYMPHONY OF THE CREATION”: HOMILY ON THE EPIPHANY (2009)

Benedict XVI develops the metaphor in a slightly different direction in his 2009 homily on the solemnity of the Epiphany.<sup>28</sup> Taking the cue from the account of the Magi from the East in Matthew 2:1-12, he reflects on the relationship between ancient astronomy and Christ. This provides him with an occasion to reflect on the book of nature, because “Christian thought compares the cosmos to a ‘book’ – the same Galileo said this as well – considering it as the work of an Author who expresses himself in the ‘symphony’ of the Creation.”<sup>29</sup> The Pope goes on to develop this idea of a cosmic symphony as follows, suggesting that the Incarnation is a solo that transforms the symphony and ushers in a new cosmic age:

In this symphony is found, at a certain point, what might be called in musical terminology a “solo”, a theme given to a single instrument or voice; and it is so important that the significance of the entire work depends on it. This “solo” is Jesus, who is accompanied by a royal sign: the appearance of a new star in the firmament. Jesus is compared by ancient Christian writers to a new sun. According to current astrophysical knowledge, we should compare it with a star that is even more central, not only for the solar system but also for the entire known universe.<sup>30</sup>

The Pope’s use of the metaphor in this text is intriguing for several reasons. He connects the *book* metaphor to the *musical* metaphor of the symphony, so that the book of nature is almost compared to a partiture performed by all the creatures. At the same time, he seems to suggest that the book or symphony of creation is longing for a fullness that is provided by the novelty of the Incarnation.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Homily on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord*, January 6, 2009, Italian original in *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI*, 5/1, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2009, 17-21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

This novelty – this “solo” of Jesus – is not entirely foreign to creation, the Pope goes on to say. The basis for Jesus’ coming into the world was provided by the “mysterious design” of nature, “which led to the appearance of the human being as the crowning of Creation’s elements” (an allusion to Genesis 2:7, perhaps with an evolutionary twist).<sup>31</sup> Christ unites “earth and Heaven, the Creation and the Creator, the flesh and the Spirit”, being “the centre of the cosmos and of history”, so that “in him the Author and his work are united without being confused with each other.”<sup>32</sup> The book of nature is brought to its fulfilment in Christ’s Sacred Humanity, which is the basis for the transformation of the entire cosmos.

#### VI. INTEGRAL ECOLOGY: *CARITAS IN VERITATE* (2010)

The metaphor is used in an ecological context in the Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (2010).<sup>33</sup> The general theme of the encyclical is integral human development in love (*caritas*) and truth. The Pope refers to the book of nature while arguing that “the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.”<sup>34</sup> He points out that the Church “has a responsibility towards creation” as well as towards “human ecology”.<sup>35</sup> These go hand in hand because “the book of nature is one and indivisible” – it covers nature in the sense of the environment “but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development.”<sup>36</sup>

Benedict does not elaborate on the metaphor here, and one almost wonders why the book metaphor is employed. The implication, in any case, seems to be that the book of nature is not only something to be read; it is also something that must be taken care of. Like old manuscripts of the Bible, so the book of creation is in some sense in the hands of the Church and humanity. The communication of God’s

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 51. Latin original in AAS 101 (2009) 641-709.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, (emphasis removed).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, (emphasis removed).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem.*

wisdom and salvific will suffers when these instruments or channels of communications are damaged. The Pope specifically cites life, sexuality, marriage, the family and social relations: they all play a special role in revealing something about God's plan and even of his trinitarian nature in whose image humanity has been created.

## VII. THE ANALOGY OF THE WORD: *VERBUM DOMINI* (2010)

The centrality of the divine *Logos* receives a more systematic expression in Pope Benedict's Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010).<sup>37</sup> In a crucial part of the text, Benedict XVI reflects on the analogy of the Word of God.<sup>38</sup> Christian reflection on the divine Word has always found inspiration in the Johannine Prologue, which speaks of the multiple dimensions of the divine *Logos*: it is eternal and consubstantial with God, but it has also become "flesh" (Jn 1:14). The analogous uses of this notion give rise to "a symphony of the word, to a single word expressed in multiple ways," which together produce "a polyphonic hymn".<sup>39</sup>

According to *Verbum Domini*, it is precisely this analogy of the Word that enables us to speak of the cosmic dimension of the Word:

While the Christ event is at the heart of divine revelation, we also need to realize that creation itself, the *liber naturae*, is an essential part of this symphony of many voices in which the one word is spoken. We also profess our faith that God has spoken his word in salvation history; he has made his voice heard; by the power of his Spirit "he has spoken through the prophets". God's word is thus spoken throughout the history of salvation, and most fully in the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, the book of nature is part of a larger symphony that finds its culmination in Christ. As Benedict stresses in what follows, this is God's original plan: everything has been created through and for the divine *Logos* (citing Jn 1:3,15-16 and Col 1:16): "Creation is born of the *Logos* and indelibly bears the mark of the *creative Reason which orders*

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, September 30, 2010, Latin original in AAS 102 (2010) 681-787.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

and directs it”.<sup>41</sup> The Pope points out that this idea is already implicit in a number of Old Testament texts such as Psalm 33, which sings “with joy-filled certainty” that “by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps 33:6) and “he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth” (Ps 33:9).<sup>42</sup> Citing Psalm 19’s magnificent opening (“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork”), Benedict affirms that “all reality expresses this mystery”, which is why “sacred Scripture itself invites us to acknowledge the Creator by contemplating his creation (cf. Wis 13:5; Rom 1:19-20).”<sup>43</sup>

The Pope goes on to note that Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), “who in the great tradition of the Greek Fathers sees all the possibilities of creation present in the *Logos*, states that ‘every creature is a word of God, since it proclaims God’.”<sup>44</sup> Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* is also cited in this respect, stating that “God, who creates and conserves all things by his word (cf. Jn 1:3), provides constant evidence of himself in created realities”.<sup>45</sup> A bit later, Galileo is mentioned once more: “we can contemplate the profound unity in Christ between creation, the new creation and all salvation history. To use an example, we can compare the cosmos to a ‘book’—Galileo himself used this example”.<sup>46</sup>

The exposition of the theme in *Verbum Domini* recruits a wide variety of sources and perspectives to the cause. This may somewhat obscure an important feature of Benedict XVI’s use of the metaphor both here and in the Epiphany homily. Instead of referring to God’s Two Books (nature and Scripture), which became the standard framework in the modern period, the Pope is thinking of a more complex and dynamic

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*. The document refers to *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, II, 12. On the book of nature in Bonaventure, cfr. JUURIKALA, *The Patristic and Medieval Metaphor of the Book of Nature*, 249-273; W. RAUCH, *Das Buch Gottes: Eine systematische Untersuchung des Buchbegriffes bei Bonaventura*, Max Hueber Verlag, München 1961.

<sup>45</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 3.

<sup>46</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 13.

whole. There is first of all the voice of the Word in the book of nature; then the communication of the Word in salvation history – particularly in the prophetic Word; and finally, there is the *fullness* of this communication in the Incarnation.

The theme of the Two Books is there, but the picture is fundamentally that of the book of creation and the Old Testament preparing together for the coming of Christ and finding mutually their fulfilment in him. The book of nature is not merely an earlier phase of God's revelation. It is an enduring voice that is in constant dialogue with the prophetic Word throughout the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> Further, in Christ, it is taken up and transformed by the very reality of the Incarnation and the paschal mystery. Although Benedict only cites the medieval Bonaventure, the framework he employs is ultimately a patristic one, at least hinted at by Origen and developed particularly by Saint Maximus the Confessor.<sup>48</sup>

#### VIII. LEARNING TO READ THE BOOK OF NATURE: SCIENCE, CONTEMPLATION, AND GRACE

A major question concerning the book of nature is how it should be read. If it is not written in ordinary human language, what language is it and how can one learn it? John Paul II had alluded to this challenge in *Fides et Ratio*, which invited us “to recognize as a first stage of divine Revelation the marvellous ‘book of nature’, which, when read with the proper tools of human reason, can lead to knowledge of the Creator.”<sup>49</sup> But what are these proper tools of human reason? Is mathematics one of such tools, as Galileo had argued?

Pope Benedict's vision of the book of nature certainly includes the idea that the natural sciences play a role in its reading. As we saw earlier, the Pope has invoked the metaphor most frequently in relation to the relationship of science and theology. He returns to this theme, for

<sup>47</sup> Cf. G. TANZELLA-NITTI, *La Rivelazione e la sua credibilità: Percorso di Teologia Fondamentale*, Edusc, Roma 2016, 115-120.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. H. DE LUBAC, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, A. ENGLUND NASH (trans.), Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2007, chap. 8; O. JUURIKKALA, *The Patristic and Medieval Metaphor of the Book of Nature*, 78-94, 172-192.

<sup>49</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 19.

example, in his 2010 general audience on St Albert the Great.<sup>50</sup> He presents the great Dominican as an example of how “a man of faith and prayer [...] can serenely foster the study of the natural sciences” because it also “contributes to fostering thirst for and love of God.” This is because Scripture “speaks to us of creation as of the first language through which God who is supreme intelligence, who is the *Logos* reveals to us something of himself.” In consequence, “one can compare the natural world to a book written by God that we read according to the different approaches of the sciences.”<sup>51</sup> The Pope points to St Albert as a reminder of the “friendship between science and faith”, showing that dedicating themselves to the study of nature in the spirit of faith, “scientists can take an authentic and fascinating path of holiness.”<sup>52</sup>

However, neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI thought that scientific learning is all that one needs to decipher the book of nature. *Fides et Ratio* suggests that it is not only a question of rational tools: “If human beings with their intelligence fail to recognize God as Creator of all, it is not because they lack the means to do so, but because their free will and their sinfulness place an impediment in the way.”<sup>53</sup>

Benedict XVI’s texts provide at least two further suggestions. First, he gives more details on the interior conditions of reading the book of nature. In the 2005 discourse to the Roman Curia, Benedict speaks of an interior attitude of detachment, a disinterested attention to something that is not merely useful. In particular, he submits that “our inner senses” need to be awakened (implying that they are a dimension of our being that is often dormant, so to speak). Only in this way will we “acquire perception of the deepest dimensions of reality.”<sup>54</sup>

This description of an interior attitude that enables us to discover the deeper dimensions of reality is a powerful synthesis of what the patristic and medieval tradition understands as natural contemplation or the contemplation of nature (*theoria physike*).<sup>55</sup> Contemplation is not

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience*, March 24, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*.

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. J. LOLLAR, *To See into the Life of Things: The Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the*

principally an intellectual tool, but an interior transformation which is relevant also to the reading of Scripture as God's Word as well as the meditation on the Sacred Humanity of Christ. Indeed, the patristic period associated the book of nature with the contemplation of nature.<sup>56</sup> A closely related theme, highlighted by *Verbum Domini*, is the importance of the Holy Spirit for understanding the word of God.<sup>57</sup>

In a 2013 general audience, Benedict highlights something obvious but potentially neglected, namely that the interior help of grace is always needed.<sup>58</sup> In the first audience of a cycle commenting on the *Creed*, he begins by speaking of the very first verse of Scripture (Gen 1:1). He then links it to the Hebrews 11:3 statement that it is "by faith" that "we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear." This divine gift is necessary so that we may learn to see and read nature as a divine communication: "Faith thus implies the ability to recognize the invisible, by identifying its traces in the visible world. Believers can read the great book of nature and understand its language (cf. Ps 19:2-5)."<sup>59</sup>

In the same audience, Pope Benedict hints towards another central and traditional principle for reading creation, which is that the book of nature and the book of Scripture complement and illuminate each other: "the word of revelation that awakens faith is necessary if man is to become fully aware of the reality of God as Creator and Father."<sup>60</sup> We saw this also in various earlier texts earlier: the book of nature is in some way analogous to the prophetic Word of the Old Testament; both can be enigmatic and mysterious until they are considered in relation to

*Confessor and His Predecessors*, Brepols, Turnhout 2013; J. PAFFHAUSEN, *Natural Contemplation in St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Isaac the Syrian*, in J. CHRYSAVGIS, B.V. FOLTZ (eds.), *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013, 46-58.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. P.M. BLOWERS, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, 316-335; O. JUURIKALA, *The Patristic and Medieval Metaphor of the Book of Nature*, 38-44.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 15-16.

<sup>58</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience*, February 6, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

the Incarnate Word. If this is true, then the dynamism of promise and fulfilment, and preparation and fullness, can be applied to both the Old Testament and the book of nature.

This framework may be related to the suggestion we saw earlier about the evolutionary history of the universe as the unfolding of a scroll. If the book of nature is compared to the prophetic word of the Old Testament, then we would expect it to be incomplete on its own. This is an important consideration when we think about the problem of nonhuman suffering in natural history. The challenge is not so much to explain it by itself, but to ask how it might relate to the mystery of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

## IX. BEYOND PROOFS OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

What does the book of nature say, then? We have already seen some suggestions, but in the following sections, I will explore several further themes present in Benedict XVI's texts on the book of nature. A classical theme is that, through creation, one can arrive at some knowledge of the Creator.<sup>62</sup> This idea of the book of nature as a first stage of revelation, which provides a preamble to the faith, is only briefly mentioned in Benedict XVI's teaching.<sup>63</sup> The principal interest seems to lie elsewhere: in line with patristic and medieval thinkers, Benedict seems more interested in how the mystery of Christ illuminates the book of nature.

For example, in his response to the Roman high school student in 2006, the Pope recognizes that what he is suggesting concerning the correspondence between objective and subjective rationality is not a question of strict demonstration: "no one can now prove [...] that they both really originated in a single intelligence"; however, when one contemplates the picture as a whole, "this unity of intelligence, behind the two intelligences, really appears in our world. And the more we can delve into the world with our intelligence, the more clearly the plan of Creation appears."<sup>64</sup> In other words, when one contemplates the whole

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. SOLLEREDER, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering*, 175-178.

<sup>62</sup> Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 19; Wis 13:5; Rom 1:20.

<sup>63</sup> Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the Youth of Rome*.



picture with an open attitude and potentially with the help of God's grace, different elements find their place. This sense of the whole is a crucial part of the credibility of Christian revelation.

Benedict then goes on to note that what is at stake is something greater than intellectual arguments. He invites the student and his other listeners to consider the fact that there are really "only two options", because "God exists or he does not exist."<sup>65</sup> We are speaking of existential choices. Each option has its consequences; in the negative case, "everything that functions on our earth and in our lives would be only accidental, marginal, an irrational result – reason would be a product of irrationality." One cannot "prove" either alternative, but if God exists, everything changes. For one thing, "the great option of Christianity is the option for rationality and for the priority of reason." This is "an excellent option" because "behind everything is a great Intelligence to which we can entrust ourselves." Moreover, something great is revealed to us in Christ, namely "God, who was made flesh and shows us that he is not only a mathematical reason but that this original Reason is also Love." Therefore, the option proposed by Christianity is "the most rational and the most human" because it allows us to build our lives "on this trust that the creating Reason is love and that this love is God."<sup>66</sup>

#### X. THE RELATIONAL DIMENSION: THE *LOGOS UT VERBUM*

Implicit in the foregoing discourse is the relationship with God. Like the notion of the *logos*, this relational dimension is central to Benedict XVI's theological project as a whole. It is also central to the book metaphor. Nature can only be meaningfully compared to a book if the rationality that penetrates the natural world is not only a *logos ut ratio* but also a *logos ut verbum* – that is, it is not only an intelligence but also a word, a communication, a message that *someone* has addressed to someone else.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>67</sup> Cfr. G. TANZELLA-NITTI, *La dimensione apologetica della Teologia fondamentale: Una riflessione sul ruolo dei Praeambula fidei*, «Annales Theologici» 21 (2007) 49-51; IDEM, *Filosofia e rivelazione: Attese della ragione, sorprese dell'annuncio cristiano*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2008, 83-91.

Joseph Ratzinger noted this dynamism of the *logos* already in his *Introduction to Christianity* (1968). Reflecting on the doctrine of the Trinity and its implicit elevation of the category of relation, he argued that the Church's trinitarian faith produced a subtle revolution in the Christian vision of reality and also of philosophical categories.<sup>68</sup> Through the revelation of the Trinity, humanity gained an "experience of the God who conducts a dialogue, of the God who is not only *logos* but also *dia-logos*, not only idea and meaning but speech and word in the reciprocal exchanges of partners in conversation".<sup>69</sup>

But this also changed the way the concept of *logos* was perceived. When John applied it to Jesus of Nazareth, it acquired a new dimension: "It no longer denotes simply the permeation of all being by meaning; it characterizes this man: he who is here is 'Word'."<sup>70</sup> The Greek emphasis on "meaning" (*ratio*) gave way to a new emphasis on "word" (*verbum*): "He who is here is Word; he is consequently 'spoken' and, hence, the pure relation between the speaker and the spoken to. Thus *logos* Christology, as 'word' theology, is once again the opening up of being to the idea of relationship."<sup>71</sup>

## XI. THE NATURAL LAW AND THE LANGUAGE OF BEING:

### THE BUNDESTAG ADDRESS (2011)

In his 2011 address to the German Bundestag, Benedict XVI applies the idea of the book of nature to the question of natural law.<sup>72</sup> In this address, the Pope points out that the Christian view of the state and society has never been strictly derived from Scripture, because "it has

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 180-190; G. MASPERO, *Ratzinger's Trinitarian Ontology and Its Patristic Roots: The Breakthrough of Introduction to Christianity*, «Wrocław Theological Review» 31 (2023) 5-33.

<sup>69</sup> RATZINGER, *Introduction to Christianity*, 183.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 189.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Bundestag*, September 22, 2011, German original AAS 103 (2011) 663-669. For an analysis, cfr. M. RHONHEIMER, *The Secular State, Democracy, and Natural Law: Benedict XVI's Address to the Bundestag from the Perspective of Legal Ethics and Democracy Theory*, in M. CARTABIA, A. SIMONCINI (eds.), *Pope Benedict XVI's Legal Thought: A Dialogue on the Foundation of Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, 79-92.

pointed to nature and reason as the true sources of law—and to the harmony of objective and subjective reason, which naturally presupposes that both spheres are rooted in the creative reason of God.”<sup>73</sup> This understanding of the creative *Logos* as present in all creatures is, the Pope argues, the underlying motive of the Pauline statement in Romans 2:14–15, the *locus classicus* for a biblical notion of the natural law: “When Gentiles who have not the Law [the Torah of Israel] do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves [...] they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.”

The Pope sees this as an illustration of a general principle, namely that “Christian theologians aligned themselves against the religious law associated with polytheism and on the side of philosophy, and that they acknowledged reason and nature in their interrelation as the universally valid source of law.” Paul’s text thus combines “the two fundamental concepts of nature and conscience, where conscience is nothing other than Solomon’s listening heart, reason that is open to the language of being.”<sup>74</sup>

*Reason open to the language of being* – in a sense, this is another way of putting the idea that the book of nature has a moral dimension, which the notion of the natural law tries to capture in words. The Pope thus seeks to address a concern raised by Hans Kelsen, the great legal positivist, according to whom nature could only contain norms if a will had somehow put them there; but this presupposes “a Creator God, whose will had entered into nature” – an idea that it is “utterly futile” to discuss. But Benedict retorts: “Is it really? – I find myself asking. Is it really pointless to wonder whether the objective reason that manifests itself in nature does not presuppose a creative reason, a *Creator Spiritus*?”<sup>75</sup> That, after all, is the whole point of the reflection on the book of nature. The discovery of an objective moral law is intimately related to the discovery of the objective *logos* embedded in nature.

This is not to say that the former must be directly derived from the latter. In an insightful discussion of Benedict’s Bundestag address,

<sup>73</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Bundestag*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

Martin Rhonheimer has noted that the Pope's use of the word 'nature' "remains unclear and underdetermined with respect to its relevance for moral reason."<sup>76</sup> The problem is that "the natural law, according to the tradition, is not simply a law that 'nature' reveals to us in some unambiguous way. Instead, it is always and only an 'ordering of *reason*' (*rationis ordinatio*)", which means that "it cannot simply be read from the Book of Nature; 'nature' as such is not yet a moral or legal norm."<sup>77</sup>

This is an important observation, but I believe it is entirely compatible with Benedict's intention. He points precisely to the foundations of such an order of the *logos* in the wider language of being that we discover through the contemplation of the book of nature. The moral dimension of that book can only be penetrated through carefully reflecting on the specific nature of human beings both in themselves and in their relationship with the wider creation as well as their Creator. The Pope seems right in suggesting that the modern crisis of natural law ethics reflects a more general challenge, which is the loss of the intuition that the moral quest of human beings is inseparable from the attitude of openness and listening to a language of being that is both a gift and a call.

## XII. THE COSMIC LITURGY: GAUDÍ AND THE SAGRADA FAMILIA (2010)

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis highlights the importance of the book of nature for the understanding of the Church's liturgy and sacraments.<sup>78</sup> The idea is in some respects as old as the liturgy itself. In modern times it has been developed in a special way by the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí i Cornet (1852-1926), who frequently referred to the book of nature as a principal source of inspiration for his art. For example, he is said to have stated that "everything comes from the great book of nature, the works of men are like a printed book", and that "the great book, which is always open and which we have to make an effort to read, is that of Nature, and other books are taken from it".<sup>79</sup> These

<sup>76</sup> M. RHONHEIMER, *The Secular State, Democracy, and Natural Law*, 88.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>78</sup> Cfr. FRANCIS, *Laudato si'*, 235-237.

<sup>79</sup> There are various statements like this attributed to Gaudí, but the only writings left by him were one published article and a few letters; the rest has been remembered and transmitted by his disciples. For a study of this aspect of Gaudí's architecture, cfr. J.

expressions were not a mere figure of speech for Gaudí, but reflected his deep theological vision of art. According to one disciple and expert on his life and work, Gaudí considered himself as a “copyist” of God, transferring solutions discovered in nature to architecture.<sup>80</sup>

Benedict XVI was aware of this spirit of Gaudí and employed it as a central theme of his 2010 homily at the dedication of the Sagrada Família.<sup>81</sup> He spoke of the complementarity of and interaction between the *three* books of nature, of Scripture, and of the liturgy:

In this place, Gaudí desired to unify that inspiration which came to him from the three books which nourished him as a man, as a believer and as an architect: the book of nature, the book of sacred Scripture and the book of the liturgy. In this way he brought together the reality of the world and the history of salvation, as recounted in the Bible and made present in the liturgy.<sup>82</sup>

In Benedict’s interpretation, Gaudí’s architecture puts the three books in creative dialogue. As one student of Gaudí points out, he always called nature “my teacher”<sup>83</sup> and stated that “originality consists in returning to the origins.”<sup>84</sup> However, he did not mean that the task of copying the book of nature or returning to the origins is merely one of conservation; created in God’s image, man is a created co-creator that imitates and continues God’s work of creation in his creativity, collaborating in the bringing to light the original beauty which is the splendor of truth present in all creatures.<sup>85</sup>

As Benedict puts it in his homily, the Sagrada Família “stands as a visible sign of the invisible God, to whose glory these spires rise like arrows pointing towards absolute light and to the One who is Light,

BASSEGODA NONELL, G. GARCÍA GABARRÓ, *La c tedra de Antoni Gaud : Estudio anal tico de su obra*, Edicions UPC, Barcelona 1999, 43-48.

<sup>80</sup> J. BASSEGODA NONELL, *Gaud : L’architettura dello spirito*, Ares, Milano 2009, 202.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Homily During Holy Mass with Dedication of the Church of the Sagrada F milia and of the Altar*, Barcelona, November 7, 2010, Spanish original AAS 102 (2010) 883-887.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>83</sup> J. BERG S MASS , M. LLIMARGAS, J. BASSEGODA NONELL, M.A. CRIPPA, *Gaud , el hombre y la obra*, Lunwerg, Barcelona 1999, 23.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, 34.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

Height and Beauty itself.”<sup>86</sup> This *trialogue* between nature, Scripture and liturgy is part of God’s original design, which Gaudí put to action when he “made stones, trees and human life part of the church so that all creation might come together in praise of God”; thus, “he brilliantly helped to build our human consciousness, anchored in the world yet open to God, enlightened and sanctified by Christ.” According to the Pope, Gaudí’s work corresponds to “one of the most important tasks of our times” – that of “living in this temporal world and being open to eternal life” and of finding harmony “between the beauty of things and God as beauty.” Thus, in the “masterpiece” of the Sagrada Familia, “Gaudí shows us that God is the true measure of man; that the secret of authentic originality consists, as he himself said, in returning to one’s origin which is God.”<sup>87</sup>

The idea is simple but of great importance. Jean Mouroux notes in his reflections on the book of nature that we cannot merely contemplate creation; we must also *consecrate* it to God.<sup>88</sup> We must offer the natural world to God, for otherwise we risk turning nature into an idol and adoring creation instead of God. Like the book of Scripture, the book of nature must find fullness in the celebration of the Eucharist. Ratzinger notes similarly in his *Spirit of the Liturgy*, commenting on Teilhard de Chardin’s cosmic vision: “the transubstantiated Host is the anticipation of the transformation and divinization of matter in the christological ‘fullness’”; thus, “the Eucharist provides the movement of the cosmos with its direction; it anticipates its goal and at the same time urges it on.”<sup>89</sup>

This is how Pope Benedict framed it during his flight to Spain for the dedication of the Sagrada Familia: “Gaudí wanted this trinomial: a book of nature, a book of Scripture, a book of the Liturgy.”<sup>90</sup> This vision affects our understanding of them all:

<sup>86</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Dedication of the Sagrada Familia*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>88</sup> J. MOUROUX, *The Meaning of Man*, 44-46.

<sup>89</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2000, 29.

<sup>90</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Interview with the Journalists During the Flight to Spain*, November 6, 2010.

In the Liturgy, Scripture becomes present, it becomes a reality today. It is no longer a Scripture of 2,000 years ago, but should be celebrated and brought into being. And in the celebration of Scripture creation speaks, creation speaks and finds its true response because, as St Paul tells us, the creature suffers and instead of being destroyed and despised, it waits for the children of God, that is, those who see it in God's light. And so – I think – this synthesis between the sense of creation, Scripture and adoration is actually a very important message for today.<sup>91</sup>

### XIII. RELIGIONS AND CHRIST: THE MAGI IN THE INFANCY NARRATIVES (2012)

A final theme found in Benedict XVI's theology of the book of nature is the theology of religions, on which he provides illuminating considerations in the last volume of his trilogy on Jesus the Nazareth, *The Infancy Narratives* (2012).<sup>92</sup> The story of the Magi in Matthew 2:1-11 has been interpreted in various ways in the history of theology. Benedict favors a reading that takes seriously the possibility of a historical core in which a celestial phenomenon guided the Magi whose religiosity combined elements of Babylonian astronomy and Jewish messianic expectation.<sup>93</sup> But whatever the historical background, the Pope sees in the narrative a deeper theological significance: "We could well say that they [the wise men] represent the religions moving towards Christ, as well as the self-transcendence of science toward him."<sup>94</sup>

This self-transcendence of science and the movement of the religions towards Christ is an illustration of the book-of-nature theology which we have seen in Benedict earlier. Science and natural religion, both of which find their initial impulse from the book of nature, are incomplete in themselves. They need to be purified and elevated to a higher order, which also confirms the permanent value of their original intuitions. Synthesizing his understanding of the book of nature, the Pope writes of the Magi's following of the star that "this implies that the cosmos speaks of Christ,

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>92</sup> Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, Image, New York 2012, chap. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 98-100. For recent studies on the question, cfr. P. BARTHEL, G. VAN KOOTEN (eds.), *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy*, Brill, Leiden 2015.

<sup>94</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 95.

even though its language is not yet fully intelligible to man in his present state.”<sup>95</sup> Still, the “language of creation” provides “an intuition of the Creator”, but it also goes further in that it also “arouses the expectation, indeed the hope, that this God will one day reveal himself.”<sup>96</sup>

We saw earlier that Benedict’s vision of the book of nature views nature and Scripture pointing together to, and finding their fullness in, Christ. This dynamism is found also in his account of the Magi. The Babylonian tradition of reading the heavens as a medium of divine messages is employed by God’s providence as a way of leading the pagans to Christ, but even a heavenly sign cannot guide them all the way without the help of Israel’s Sacred Scriptures (Mt 2:4-5).<sup>97</sup> As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes in its comment on the Magi, the nations had to turn to the Jews in order to discover Jesus.<sup>98</sup> But instead of highlighting the insufficiency of natural religiosity, Benedict affirms its positive value: “the world religions can become a star that enlightens men’s path, that leads them in search of the kingdom of God. The star of the religions points to Jerusalem, it is extinguished and lights up anew in the Word of God, in the Sacred Scripture of Israel.”<sup>99</sup>

Benedict’s theological analysis of the Magi in Matthew 2 is a masterful synthesis of his theology of the book of nature. Despite its brevity, it strikes a balance between the various elements, encompassing also the meeting of scientific activity (which Babylonian astronomy was, too) and natural religiosity in the human person – a meeting based on the intrinsic self-transcendence of science and capable of provoking an attitude of attentive listening and hopeful expectation. The biblical account of the Magi presents the religious reading of the stars as taking place contemporaneously with the Incarnation itself, so that this astronomical activity enters into a dialogue with Israel’s Scriptures in a way that influences their reading. On the other hand, the dialogue constitutes to the Jews of the time a partial hermeneutic key to the interpretation of

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, 100.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 528.

<sup>99</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Many Religions – One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1999, 26.



the messianic prophecies and their fulfilment in history.

#### XIV. CONCLUSION

In a variety of papal documents, discourses, and audiences, Benedict XVI develops a multifaceted theology of the book of nature. He places its foundations in the Creator *Logos* who is present in all creation and whose self-revelation reached its temporal fullness in Christ. To read the book of nature, we need the tools of reason and science, an attitude of contemplation, and the help of God's grace. The dialogue between the book of nature and book of Scripture is a dynamic one, and it must always have the Incarnate Christ as a reference point in which both find their fullness.

Pope Benedict's theology of the book of nature is developed further through a wide range of applications, from the dialogue between science and theology, to integral ecology, from spirituality to the natural moral law, and from liturgy to the theology of religions. Benedict thus demonstrates the great versatility and fruitfulness of the metaphor, inviting both theologians and believers in general to explore the metaphor in their work and personal lives. It is essentially a unifying metaphor, capable of providing a profound synthesis of various strands of reflection and practice into a dynamic vision which gathers together the entire work of the creative and redemptive *Logos* in a movement towards its fullness in God.

