

## *Triumph of the Theo-Cons*

### **Pope Benedict XVI, a Rightwing Politician**

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**I**n most of the media coverage of Cardinal Ratzinger's election as successor to John Paul II, he has been presented as very conservative on moral and religious issues. His opposition to legalizing abortion, homosexual marriage, and the ordination of women and his support for continuing the celibacy of priests and other church traditions, all have contributed to his reputation as a profoundly conservative religious person. Not much has been said, however, about his political views, except his being a member of the youth branch of the Nazi Party in Germany (the Hitler Youth). This was mentioned, then quickly dismissed as having no significance, since, as the *Herald Tribune* (21 April 2005) noted, "Everybody had to be enrolled in Hitler Youth at that time." Otherwise, his political positions have been overlooked, ignored, or set aside as having no relevance.

The reality, however, is quite different. Ratzinger is profoundly political. And his political positions are more than conservative, they are ultra-right-wing. He was one of the most ultra-right cardinals of recent times. I will elaborate on this, but first, let's dispense with the claim that every young person in Germany at that time was in the Hitler Youth. That is nonsense. Many young Germans, including Catholics, not only refused to join the Hitler Youth but fought against Hitler in a courageous and principled way. In a village near where the young Ratzinger lived (near Markt a mere 15 miles from Braunau, Hitler's birthplace), two thousand Catholics signed a petition protesting the Nazi order to remove crucifixes from schoolrooms. In Munich, where Ratzinger later became archbishop, twenty Catholic students were executed in 1942 for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets at the university. They became known as the White Rose -- *die weisse Rose*. There was an anti-war resistance in Germany, including a Catholic resistance, which Ratzinger never joined, supported, or recognized. Even later, when Germany regained democracy, Bishop Ratzinger of Munich never paid tribute to those who had been killed because of their commitment to liberty and freedom. Among them, incidentally, were many communists, whom Ratzinger had defined as "scum."

There is no evidence that Ratzinger was a Nazi or a Nazi sympathizer. But there is plenty of evidence that he was an opportunist who went along pursuing his personal ambitions, regardless of what was happening around him. He indicated early in life that he wanted to become a cardinal. And recently a mere two years ago he confided to another person that he expected to become Pope. Spanish public television showed a postcard that Ratzinger sent two years ago to a person

in Spain, which he signed "Pope Benedict XVI," the name he took when he indeed became Pope. This contradicts his recent statement that he did not want to become Pope. In fact, when he finally was chosen, reports indicate that he accepted quickly, firmly, and without any hesitation. If he did not want to become Pope, he could have stopped the active campaigning on his behalf by the influential ultra-right Opus Dei. He did not do so.

Let's return to Ratzinger's youth. One of the cardinals who most impressed him was Cardinal Faulhaber, then archbishop of Munich, who founded the boarding school where young Ratzinger studied (and later, in 1951, ordained him). Cardinal Faulhaber was an open Nazi sympathizer. According to Ratzinger's brother, Georg, Joseph joined the Hitler Youth to get a scholarship that would allow him to continue his studies at Faulhaber's boarding school.

During all his years in Germany, Ratzinger never in his writings publicly condemned the Holocaust, and, as late as 2000, he referred to the Catholic Church's collaboration with the Hitler regime as a sign of "a *certain insufficiency* of Catholics in front of the Holocaust because of the anti-Semitism that existed in the souls of many of them" (emphasis added). A "certain insufficiency" is a dramatic understatement.

Ratzinger did not travel much in his youth and early adulthood. He was in many different ways a typical priest in the most conservative state of Germany, Bavaria. He was close to the Christian Union Party, the political branch of the very conservative Bavarian Catholic Church. This was the most right-wing party in the German parliament after World War II. It governed Bavaria for more than sixty years, establishing a link between Church and state that enormously benefited both the Catholic Church and Ratzinger. Ratzinger was a close friend of the leader of the Christian Union Party, Franz Josef Strauss, who was prime minister of Bavaria for the longest period in German history.

Ratzinger's ultra-conservatism made him an attractive figure to the Vatican. He was made a cardinal shortly after being appointed bishop of Munich. He was strongly hostile to students protesting the Vietnam War in the 1960s, calling them "ideological terrorists." He was eventually appointed head of the Inquisition (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), soon overseeing a record number of condemnations by that tribunal. One of his priorities as head of the Inquisition was to ban and destroy the Christian liberation movement that had surged in Latin America in protest against the Catholic hierarchy's support of fascist and ultra-right dictatorships. He was assisted in this task by Cardinal Sodano, a close friend of dictator Pinochet (see my article *Opus Dei and the Pope*, 8 April 2005). Sodano referred to one of the leaders of the liberation theology movement, Mr. Boff, as a "Judas of Christ." The first decision Ratzinger made when he became Pope, incidentally, was to appoint Sodano his deputy - in Vatican parlance, Secretary of State. Moreover, to make sure the other cardinals and bishops would not interpret that appointment as a mere renewal (Sodano was already Secretary of State under John Paul II), Ratzinger stressed that this was a special appointment to last at least four years. Sodano's fascist sympathies are well documented.

Having been the candidate of Opus Dei (see my previous article), Ratzinger has encouraged Christians to become involved in political life that adheres to his teachings, which are ultra-right-wing. Ratzinger took his name from Benedict XV, the spiritual founder of Christian Democracy, whose primary purpose was to halt the surge of socialism in Europe. Ratzinger has preached anti-communism his entire life, interpreting communism very broadly (as do most ultra-right politicians) to include a lot of left and even center left parties. He has been very critical (hostile

may be a better word) of the Spanish social democratic government led by Zapatero, accusing it of being open to moral decay.

Ratzinger has not made any statements about the Church's concern with social justice or poverty, or similar rhetorical statements, as the previous Pope was inclined to do. Ratzinger is more down to earth and dispenses with these niceties. His primary and only concern is for the purity and strength of the Church as a temporal power. His enormous personal ambition fueled his strategy to be elected Pope from an early stage in the campaign, immediately after the death of John Paul II. Assisted by Opus Dei, very powerful under the John Paul II papacy, Ratzinger's campaign distributed documents among the cardinals that, according to the Milanese paper *La Stampa*, presented a picture of decay and moral laxity among the clergy in Europe, Latin America, and the U.S. He wanted to stress that the Vatican had a moral problem on its hands that needed to be corrected by a strong leader. His next step was to give a very uncompromising speech at the opening of the cardinals' meetings to elect the Pope, forbidding all cardinals to make any statements outside the conclave—a norm imposed under the threat of excommunication, a Vatican norm that Ratzinger felt he needed to remind the cardinals about, even though most of them (115 of 120) were appointed by John Paul II. A leading campaigner for Ratzinger was Cardinal Sodano. One of Ratzinger's first decisions, besides making Sodano his right-hand man, was to increase the age of retirement for bishops and cardinals from 75 to 80 years of age, as they had requested.

Surrounded by what the Italian press has called the "theo-cons," Ratzinger has a political project aimed at strengthening conservative forces worldwide, but particularly in Europe, supposedly awash in moral decay. His intervention in political matters is very aggressive. In Spain, for example, the Vatican has given instructions to Catholic civil servants to sabotage enforcement of the civil union law that applies to homosexuals. The Vatican's hostility to the socialist government of Spain—which has eliminated Catholic teaching as a compulsory subject in public schools, while maintaining it as an elective; has made it easier to get a divorce; has legalized homosexuals' civil unions, including their right to adopt children; and is planning to expand the law on abortion, which until now has allowed abortion only on medical and social grounds—has reached extreme and overtly hostile levels. Seeing Spain as its territory, the Church cannot accept the secular and democratic processes that have been occurring in that country since the end of the Franco regime—one of Europe's cruelest fascist dictatorships (for every political assassination by Mussolini in Italy, Franco killed ten thousand), supported by the Catholic Church. Today, in Spain, the Church is one of the least trusted and least liked institutions, particularly among the young. Only 14% of young people are practicing Catholics. Actually, this lack of popularity of the Church is evident in all countries. In the Latin American countries, the largest granary of Catholics in the world, the number of Catholics has fallen by 25 million over the past ten years, as they have moved to Protestant churches. And the number of priests is declining most dramatically. Even in the new Pope's Germany, the most recent poll among university students shows that 83% thought the Church was either in crisis or dying. In this poll, more Germans opposed Ratzinger's becoming Pope than favored it.

Still, more than 1,200 million of the world's people are Catholic. And the Church, with 4,700 bishops and 400,000 priests, is a formidable organization that can do a lot of harm. The Vatican's prohibition of condom use, for example, has been a major factor in the spread of AIDS in Africa. As Mithela Wrong of Nigeria has written (*New Statesman*, 11 April 05), "The Vatican has done more to spread AIDS in Africa than all the prostitutes of that Continent combined." And the Vatican's support for oligarchic regimes in Latin America (including Duvalier's in Haiti) has

created enormous poverty. The Pope and many of the cardinals form an ultra-right leadership that has become a source of religious and political fundamentalism that threatens progress worldwide. While much has been written about the threat of Muslim fundamentalism, not much has been said about the threat posed by this Catholic fundamentalism. It is time that people recognized it. As Umberto Eco recently wrote, "It almost seems like we are going back to the middle Ages."

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