

**Tomasz Stępień**

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

ORCID 0000-0003-2422-1812

## **The God of the Philosophers and the God of Faith according to Joseph Ratzinger: Analysis in the Context of the Ambiguity of the Concept of God in the History of Ancient and Modern Philosophy<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The article suggests a revision of the concept proposed by Joseph Ratzinger, which he first formulated in a lecture given in 1959. In it, the theologian from Regensburg defended the notion of natural theology against its radical rejection made in the circle of dialectical theologians, especially by Emil Brunner. While the rejection of the theses of these theologians is entirely correct, the treatment of the God of the philosophers as pure thought (*reines Denken*) remains problematic. The article demonstrates that the God of the ancient philosophers cannot be seen in this way, because such a vision is based on the categories of modern and contemporary philosophy. The proposed account of the God of the philosophers allows the theses of the Protestant theologians to be rejected in a new way, while admitting that they are right about the idea of God in modern and contemporary philosophy as an anthropomorphic idol.

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, Emil Brunner, God of faith, God of philosophers

---

When in 1959 Joseph Ratzinger was appointed to the Chair of Fundamental Theology at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Bonn, he gave the inaugural lecture entitled: “The God of faith and the God of philosophers. A contribution

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Polish by Maciej Górnicki.

to the problem of *theologia naturalis*.<sup>2</sup> The text of this lecture appeared in print in 1960 and 2004. In my paper, I would like to deal with the content of this lecture and how Joseph Ratzinger later developed the statements contained in it, because it became an important voice in the then ongoing discussion on the status of natural theology. The importance of this text for fundamental theology is evidenced by the fact that the third volume of Joseph Ratzinger's *Opera Omnia* was given this title.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent editions of the text of this lecture indicate that this voice concerns a problem that is still relevant today.

Firstly, it is good to clarify the term “natural theology” itself, which is sometimes understood in different ways in the literature on the subject. Natural theology can be understood in a purely cognitive context as the knowledge of the justification of the existence of God and the rationality of faith in him, but it can also include among its very essence the apologetic task of convincing the sceptic of the existence of God and the rationality of faith.<sup>4</sup> For Joseph Ratzinger, natural theology has just such a function, that is, he does not regard it as a field of knowledge with a purely theoretical dimension, but emphasises its apologetic dimension. This seems important insofar as the apologetic task of natural theology is at the heart of the dispute. Indeed, the adversaries with whom Joseph Ratzinger is arguing do not question the existence of natural theology as knowledge about God, but rather question its usefulness for justifying the existence of God and the rationality of faith.

---

<sup>2</sup> This article uses the 2006 version of the text which was reprinted in the first part of the third volume of *Opera Omnia*, having the same title: *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen*, and in the Polish translation of this volume: Ratzinger, *Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 149–168.

<sup>3</sup> This is also the title with which Joseph Ratzinger has named the third chapter of his *Introduction to Christianity*, 94.

<sup>4</sup> These two aspects are discussed by Marek Pepliński, who even proposes to distinguish between “natural theology,” from which the apologetic dimension cannot be separated, and “philosophical theology,” which could be considered as philosophical reflections on God freed from the apologetic task, thus providing greater freedom for analytic philosophy dealing with the subject of the absolute, see Pepliński, “Cele teologii naturalnej,” 8.

Joseph Ratzinger delivers his lecture at a time when the discussion on natural theology is very lively. Its intensity has increased significantly in the face of the rejection of natural theology by Protestant thinkers. Their views were largely epitomised by the position of Karl Barth, who exerted perhaps the greatest influence on the proponents of the attitude of rejection of natural theology. He proclaimed that any idea of God that is drawn from a source other than Scripture is in fact a representation of an idol, since it is an idea that man draws using concepts he has created. Karl Barth rejects natural theology altogether because, according to him, it leads to the creation of a god in the likeness of man. This is why faith should not only not seek the support of reason, but such a search, according to Barth, would be a denial of the very essence of faith, which is solely the action of God in man. Obviously, this view contradicted what the First Vatican Council stated in the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius*” of 24th April 1870.<sup>5</sup> However, Emil Brunner, quoted by Joseph Ratzinger, who together with Barth formed the dialectical theology movement, went even further in rejecting natural theology. This Swiss Protestant applied these theses relating to natural theology to the writings of the Church Fathers. Analysing the name of God as it is revealed in the Old Testament (“I am who I am”) he states:

The Greek Fathers made a great mistake (and this error bore disastrous fruit) in turning the Name of Yahweh [...] into an ontological definition. The words *I am that I am* ought not to be translated in

---

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, in another of his texts, entitled “Faith and Philosophy,” aptly notes that Barth’s theses are largely a response to the basing of faith on human emotions proposed by Schleiermacher. Barth argued that faith should not seek a grounding in man, whether reason or emotion, because in its essence it is an activity of God and not of man. Therefore, faith cannot, by definition, have any rational justification (Ratzinger, *Wiara i filozofia*, 195). This view is also developed in the *Introduction to Christianity*, where it is presented as erroneous because it is essentially a proposal for Christianity to return to the situation of the pagan religions, which had rejected the God of the philosophers, thus remaining only in the realm of political and mythical theology. This resulted in the distinction between religion and truth, which ultimately led to the demise of paganism, which could no longer survive as being unsupported by truth, see Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 96–97 (*Wprowadzenie*, 95–96).

the language of speculative thought, as a definition: *I am He who is*. To do this not only misses the meaning of this statement, but it turns the Biblical idea of revelation into its opposite. The *Name* which cannot be defined is turned into a definition. The meaning of the Sacred Name is precisely this: I am the Mysterious One, and I will to remain so; I am that I am. I am the Incomparable, therefore I cannot be defined nor named.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Ratzinger rightly presents Brunner's view as the antithesis of the claim of St Thomas Aquinas, for whom Revelation was the completion and possibility of a profound knowledge of the God whom philosophers (including Aristotle) had come to know truthfully. It was St Thomas, as Étienne Gilson noted, who gave the true metaphysical meaning to the Augustinian interpretation of the name *I am who I am*. Whereas the Bishop of Hippo did so in accordance with Neoplatonic ontology, Thomas Aquinas gave the name of God a fuller explanation on the basis of his own metaphysics of the act of being.<sup>7</sup> For Brunner, such a philosophical interpretation would be, as Joseph Ratzinger observes, "a complete misunderstanding of the essence of Christian revelation and its falsification."<sup>8</sup>

It is worth looking at what apologetic tactics Joseph Ratzinger adopts in his lecture to dismiss Brunner's thesis. Since the charge was against the Church Fathers, it would be appropriate to ask what idea of God we can encounter in ancient philosophy, that is, what conception of God the Fathers inherited and identified with the God of revelation.

Although there were many concepts of the Absolute in ancient philosophy, Joseph Ratzinger reaches back in his argument to the origins of the very notion of natural theology, which we can find in the Stoic distinction of three theologies as presented by Marcus Terentius Varro.<sup>9</sup> He included among the theologies: θεολογία μυθική

---

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, *Die Christliche Lehre von Gott*, 125 (*The Christian Doctrine of God*, 120).

<sup>7</sup> Gilson, *Tomizm*, 164–165.

<sup>8</sup> Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens*, 22 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 159).

<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens*, 24–25 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 160).

(*theologia mythica*), i.e. what poets say about the gods, and the place where such theology is practised is the theatre; *θεολογία πολιτική* (*theologia civilis*) – how the gods are worshipped in the state, and this type of theology is practised there; and finally *θεολογία φυσική* (*theologia naturalis*), i.e. what philosophers say about God, and which has its respective place in the entire cosmos.

Joseph Ratzinger notes that it is a mistake to understand natural theology in antiquity without the context of political and mythical theology. He demonstrates that the first two are in fact interconnected and opposed to what philosophers say about God. The opposition that emerges from this distinction is in fact the problem plaguing every polytheistic religion. Polytheism here is not the claim that there is no one Absolute God who is always present in some form of supreme Deity, but the belief that this God is not accessible to man and is not a God to whom one can pray. Prayer and worship are only possible in the political and mythical dimension, while the God of the philosophers cannot be the object of worship and reverence. In this sense, monotheism is the bridging of the gap between God and man, because “the bold step of monotheism is that it turns to the Absolute – to the ‘God of the philosophers’, it recognises him as the God of men – ‘Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’.”<sup>10</sup> The God of the philosophers was thus an areligious Absolute and therefore natural theology could provide a neutral background for political and mythical theology. It is not surprising, then, that when Christianity entered Greek culture natural theology could eventually be integrated into religion.

Joseph Ratzinger stresses that the integration of the God of the philosophers into the God of the Old Testament was something entirely natural for Christians, and this is evident not only in the theological reflections of the Church Fathers, but also in early Christian art, as there is a very early depiction of Christ as the perfect philosopher.<sup>11</sup> This thesis of the natural assimilation of the God of the philosophers by Christianity is explained at a greater length

---

<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens*, 28 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 163).

<sup>11</sup> Such representations are found on early Christian sarcophagi, see Ratzinger, *Prawda w teologii*, 12–13.

by Joseph Ratzinger in his *Introduction to Christianity*. Here, crucial is the commentary on the famous passage in the letter to the Romans in which St Paul accuses the Greeks that, although they had come to know the One God and “His invisible attributes – His eternal power and deity – are made visible to the mind by His works” (Rom 1:20), this did not lead them to worship Him. Joseph Ratzinger’s explanation here is very significant, because the content of the Bonn lecture, delivered in a somewhat different – polemical – context, suggested that precisely because of the separation of natural theology from political and mythical theology, the Greeks were unable to bridge this gap, which only Christianity crosses. Such a picture might have suggested that, in a sense, Emil Brunner was right in seeing this gap between the God of the philosophers and the God of faith in ancient culture.

Here, however, it turns out that this gap was not, as one might say, “systemic,” that is, arising from the very nature of the philosophers’ grasp of God. Rather, it was gradually built up by pagan religions, which became increasingly present in the domain of myth and politics, but were deprived of truth through their lack of being grounded in philosophy. This is why Joseph Ratzinger writes:

Religion did not go the way of the logos but lingered in myths already seen to be devoid of reality. Consequently its decline was inevitable; this followed from its divorce from the truth, a state of affairs which led to its being regarded as a mere *institutio vitae*, that is, as mere furniture and outward form of life.<sup>12</sup>

This is the object of St Paul’s charge addressed to the Greeks that they had not bridged the gap between the God of faith and the God of the philosophers: they were guilty, for they could nevertheless have bridged it if they had based religion on truth.

Nevertheless, I see a certain difficulty in what Joseph Ratzinger writes. For, on the one hand, natural theology is so areligious that, in a sense, it can provide a “background” to both pagan religion and Christianity, but on the other hand, according to what St Paul

---

<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 97 (*Wprowadzenie*, 96).

accuses them of, the Greeks are guilty of not seeing in this areligious God an object of worship and giving him glory. It would seem, then, that the God of the philosophers is inaccessible to man, but since the Greeks are guilty of this, He should nevertheless be accessible. At this point I do not want to defend the Greeks; on the contrary, it seems to me that Joseph Ratzinger is too lenient in his assessment of both the Greek philosophers and Emil Brunner. Let us also note that the harsh assessment of the God of the philosophers is naturally accompanied by a soft assessment of the Greek thinkers themselves. Since, in Joseph Ratzinger's assessment, God was only a philosophical idea, it cannot be surprising that the Greeks were unable to cross the gap between knowing the absolute God and worshipping him, as St Paul accused them and were unable to integrate natural theology into the practice of life.

We will return to the all too lenient assessment of the Greek philosophers in a moment. I would like to point out at this point that, in my opinion, Joseph Ratzinger treats his Protestant adversary in a similar way. At the end of his lecture, Joseph Ratzinger states that St Thomas' thesis is ultimately correct. The God of the philosophers is the God of faith, Revelation completes the picture of the Ideal Being precisely by the fact that he is someone to whom one can turn in prayer. While stating that Aquinas is right, however, Joseph Ratzinger at the same time notes that this does not mean that the problem of the relationship between faith and philosophy has been resolved by this. He therefore goes on to reflect on the issue, in a sense conceding Emil Brunner's point, not as to his conclusion, but considering justified his concern to remove the anthropomorphic image of the Absolute from the realm of faith.<sup>13</sup>

One might ask at this point why the concern that the philosophical image of God is in fact a blasphemous anthropomorphism can be considered legitimate at all? The second question that inevitably confronts us, and is closely linked to the one above, is why the God of philosophers cannot be prayed to.<sup>14</sup> In his *Introduction*

---

<sup>13</sup> Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens*, 24–25 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 166).

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Ratzinger repeats this statement in the Bonn lecture [*Der Gott des Glaubens*, 19, 25 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 156, 162)] and later in the *Introduction*

to Christianity, Joseph Ratzinger emphasises even more strongly that the God of the philosophers could not be the object of prayer, because he was completely areligious.<sup>15</sup> And in the conclusion, when he briefly wants to describe the differences between the God of the philosophers and the God of faith he states: “The philosophical God is pure thought [*reines Denken*].”<sup>16</sup> At this point a doubt arises: is this how the ancient philosophers saw God, more as a mere thinking that cannot be related to man in any way, having, as it were, no “points of contact” with man?

In order to show that the image of God in ancient philosophy was completely different, I will quote two arguments that seem to me relevant in this case. In both cases, I would like to refer to Aristotle, since he can be considered the best example of the Greek image of God as someone to be worshipped. Besides, the characterisation of the God of the philosophers as ‘pure thinking’ immediately recalls the considerations of the Stagirite. However, even his thought can make us realise that for the Greeks the First Principle was not just a self-thinking idea, but precisely God, i.e. not just thinking, but in the first instance someone who thinks. This is perhaps best demonstrated by a passage from Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, in which we can find traces of such a belief. The philosopher best illustrates this problem because his conception of God is regarded as a prime example of the description of the Absolute as a Being turned towards itself and turned away from the world.<sup>17</sup> The first Unmoved

---

to Christianity, where he adds that the God of the philosophers cannot be an object of worship [*Introduction to Christianity*, 98 (*Wprowadzenie*, 97)].

<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 98 (*Wprowadzenie* 98): “The God of the philosophers, who was acknowledged, had no religious significance in antiquity; it was only an academic, extra-religious reality.”

<sup>16</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 103 (*Wprowadzenie*, 103). In the German original the sentence reads: “Der philosophische Gott ist reines Denken,” which should rather be translated as pure thinking, in which sense God would be the pure eternal act of thinking, in which there is no room for anything but thought itself (Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, 107).

<sup>17</sup> As Leo J. Elders notes (*Filozofia Boga*, 102–103), the proof of motion from Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, which I have cited, was unpopular with Christians, and the idea of God as the First Unmoved Mover was unattractive to them, and so the proof rarely appeared in Christian literature.



Mover may indeed pretend to be such, but it is undoubtedly also a living being. In arriving at the fact of the existence of the Unmoved Mover in his famous proof from motion, the Stagirite observes that such an entity is not only an object of thought and desire for itself, but must also be the highest object of thought and the highest desired good for all lower beings.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, this Unmoved Mover, whose action is to think of Himself and to want Himself, is in the highest degree happy because He fully possesses the highest object of thought and the highest good, which is Himself. At this point Aristotle clearly changes his treatment of the Supreme Principle he has discovered, for when he begins to speak of the Unmoved Mover as someone living, he begins at the same time to call Him God.<sup>19</sup> To see the significance of this change, it is useful to refer to the view, which in Greek culture goes back to the time of Homer, that some force of nature can only be called a god if it influences the destiny of man.<sup>20</sup> So, if Aristotle begins to call the Unmoved Mover God, it means that he recognises, at least in some sense, His influence on human destinies. Does this mean that He is then already a God to whom one can pray? Of course, there is no unambiguous answer here; rather, he seems to lose none of his remoteness from the world. What I want to show here, however, is that Aristotle's philosophical God is certainly not a pure concept and an abstract idea, but someone living and acting.

Even though one might object to the above reasoning, saying that the God of the philosophers continues to remain insensitive and inaccessible and, above all, does not listen to the prayers of men, he is nevertheless the supreme object of thought and desire. Therefore, it could be said that even if he did not affect human life in any way, philosophers still tried to worship such a God in a certain way.

In order to show this, I would like to present the second argument against the statement that the God of the ancient philosophers was

<sup>18</sup> Aristoteles, *Metaph.* XII, 7, 1072a, 31–32.

<sup>19</sup> Aristoteles, *Metaph.* XII, 7, 1072b, 26–29: ἔχει δὲ ὧδε. καὶ ζωὴ δὲ γε ὑπάρχει· ἢ γὰρ νοῦ ἐνέργεια ζωὴ, ἐκεῖνος δὲ ἢ ἐνέργεια· ἐνέργεια δὲ ἢ καθ' αὐτὴν ἐκείνου ζωὴ ἀρίστη καὶ αἰδίου. φαμὲν δὴ τὸν θεὸν εἶναι ζῶον αἰδίου ἄριστον, ὥστε ζωὴ καὶ αἰὼν συνεχῆς καὶ αἰδίου ὑπάρχει τῷ θεῷ· τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ θεός.

<sup>20</sup> Gilson, *Bóg i filozofia*, 18–19.

an abstract “pure thinking” (*reines Denken*). It is about the practice of the philosophical life, which, from the first century after Christ, becomes identical with the pursuit of unity with God. This is what Joseph Ratzinger seems to have missed in the text quoted above. He argued that mythical and political theologies had a practical dimension, while natural theology, though true, was merely a theory. Well, natural theology seems to have had a practical dimension, which developed, as it were, alongside the reverence paid to the gods in theatre and state. Ancient philosophy in general was not merely a theory, but it was part of the essence of its practice to live according to the philosophy professed. The practices called spiritual exercises were the essence of philosophy already from the times of Pythagoras, and Aristotle, quoted above, wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the man who learned philosophy but does not live in the philosophical way resembles a patient who knows what activities he should undertake to recover but does not undertake them.<sup>21</sup> However, a particular change occurs in the first century after Christ in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, where we observe the identification of the Platonic One with the God of the Old Testament, and the life lived by the philosopher striving for perfection becomes a quest for union with God. This is where natural theology gains its practical dimension, as God becomes the goal of philosophical life, and all the practices of philosophical life become *de facto* religious practices, a kind of piety. It is also important to note that the Middle-Platonists and later the Neoplatonists did not see God as someone who was interested in them, but as one who significantly changes man himself, his purpose of life and his

---

<sup>21</sup> Aristoteles, *Eth. nic.* II, 3, 1105b, 12–17: “But most people do not do these [justice and temperance], but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy.” See also a commentary on this text in: Domański, *Metamorfozy pojęcia filozofii*, 14–15. The author also points out that the ancient ideal of the philosophical life was strikingly similar in structure to how the Church Fathers understood the ideal of the Christian life (Domański, *Metamorfozy pojęcia filozofii*, 19).

attitude to the world, since simply embarking on the path of practising philosophy requires a kind of conversion. The aim of Plotinus' life was explicitly to unite with the supreme God and to strive towards him,<sup>22</sup> and the culmination of this process was ecstatic union with Him. However, it was Plotinus who most accurately described this paradoxical state of man striving for union with God (the One), who, while being the object of man's deepest desires, is not interested in him at all. For this reason, the highest point of experience and ultimate union, which is ecstasy, can be aptly described as "the flight of the solitary to the Solitary" (φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, in relation to such a God-One, man remains alone, and in this sense, he is completely different from the God of Christian revelation. Finally, it should be added that it was the Greek philosophers themselves, towards the end of the history of pagan philosophy, who recognised that the practice of the philosophical life must not be limited to intellectual exercises, but it must also include prayers to the gods and the offering of sacrifices, what they called divine work, or theurgy. In this way, the last Neoplatonists, beginning with Jamblichus, became de facto priests, and the sacrifices they offered to the gods were meant to help purify the soul and provide a straight path back to union with God.

It seems that the arguments presented above make it clear that Joseph Ratzinger's assessment that the God of the philosophers was only an abstract thought in antiquity, which remained entirely areligious, is not quite correct. Even if we treat religiosity in a narrow way, and prayer is such only insofar as it is accompanied by sacrifice, the last Neoplatonists would still have met such criteria. Of course, we must remember that they prayed to the God of the philosophers

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 160 (*Czym jest filozofia starożytna?*, 208–209).

<sup>23</sup> Plotinus, *Enneades* VI, 9, 11, 51. A. Louth (*The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition*, 50) comments on this text in the following way: "The Flight of the alone to the Alone": the very familiarity of that phrase is a measure of the influence of Plotinus. It also enshrines the essence of the mystical quest as he sees it: a solitary way that leads to the One, sovereign in solitary transcendence. The One has no concern for the soul that seeks him [...] the One is unaware of those who seek it, and so cannot turn towards them [...]."

not as the only God, but the highest among the gods, and to these minor gods they primarily offered sacrifices. However, this supreme God always remained the ultimate goal of the philosopher's desires and aspirations. It is also worth noting that such a picture of the God of the philosophers in a sense escapes the division of the three theologies invoked by Joseph Ratzinger, since the last Neoplatonists – priestly philosophers offered their sacrifices in the Roman Empire, which was already Christian, and so political theology was also understood quite differently, and pagan myths were already gradually being supplanted by Revelation. So it may have been that in the latter period, philosophy simply took over the role of political and mythical theology and therefore prayer and sacrifice became part of its practice. Nevertheless, it is significant that the pagan Neoplatonists themselves saw this form of philosophy as a natural continuation of the earlier tradition of Greek thought.

There remains then the question, why is the assessment that Joseph Ratzinger formulates about the God of the philosophers so harsh? Well, in my view, it is because both Emil Brunner and Joseph Ratzinger see the God of the philosophers through the glass of nineteenth-century German philosophy, which ultimately idealised the Cartesian view of God. It is significant that the Bonn lecture starts with the Pascal's *memorial*,<sup>24</sup> which reappears in the *Introduction to Christianity*, in the context of the transformation of the God of the philosophers that was accomplished by Christianity.<sup>25</sup> In this brief statement, Pascal rejects not the God of the ancient and medieval philosophers, but the idea of God formulated by Descartes. For when we compare the ancient and medieval concept of God with that which was so sharply delineated in the texts of the 17th century philosophers, one cannot resist the impression that authors such as Emil Brunner are seeking in the texts of the ancient philosophers what was never there, namely, there was no concept of reason, conceived as Descartes' mathematical reason, but neither was there the concept of God that such reason sought to produce. For mathematical reason is characterised by the fact that it makes demands on reality and

---

<sup>24</sup> Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens*, 11–12 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 152).

<sup>25</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 99–100 (*Wprowadzenie*, 99).

truth to conform to itself and its way of apprehending reality, instead of conforming itself to how reality makes itself known.<sup>26</sup> Of course, reality did not become such at Descartes' request, just as philosophy did not become mathematics.

The fruit of making such demands on reality was the creation of concepts which, only in Descartes' reasoning, bore mathematical characteristics, although in reality they were not such at all. Descartes therefore believed that the concept of a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) was clear and distinct, like a geometrical point, and therefore, like a point in geometry, could be the origin of all reasoning and deductive knowledge.<sup>27</sup> In reality, however, the notion of a thinking thing was not at all what Descartes thought of it, as was best demonstrated by his successors plunging into disputes as to what this *res cogitans* actually is.

One may ask, however, what does this have to do with our problem of the relationship between the God of philosophers and the God of faith? Well, this conception of reason itself and of the soul as a thinking thing necessarily entailed a similar conception of God. Therefore, just as a *thinking thing* is clear and distinct, so must be a clear and distinct concept of God, whose existence, after all, Descartes derived from the concept of a *thinking thing*. Conceived in this way, God, the Absolute of mathematicians, can in no way be identical with the God of faith. Although Nicolas Malebranche attempted to construct a new theology having such a concept of God at its centre, the failure of this project largely consisted precisely in the fact that such an idea of God is not Someone with whom a personal relationship can be established. The God of the mathematicians, the God of the mechanists is an a-personal Absolute. In this sense, Pascal's rejection of the "God of mathematicians and philosophers," which Joseph Ratzinger cites, is perfectly understandable and is certainly much more intellectually honest than Malebranche's

---

<sup>26</sup> Etienne Gilson, together with Thomas Langan (*Modern Philosophy*, 57), put it rightly by stating that Descartes did not claim that reason can only know figures and numbers, i.e. mathematical objects, but: "Rather, he discovered that all objects should henceforward be handled as if they were mathematical objects, even if they were not so."

<sup>27</sup> Gilson – Langan, *Modern Philosophy*, 58–59.

attempts. For Pascal does not want to pretend that the true God can be clearly and distinctly apprehended no matter how strongly we might wish for it. It is here that we observe the birth of the modern conception of God, which is an idea produced by reason limited by the framework of clarity and distinctness. It is clear that such an idea conceived by mathematical reason is clearly anthropomorphic.

The fundamental problem is that such a concept of God is completely foreign to the thought of the Middle Ages and Antiquity. For St Thomas Aquinas, whose view Joseph Ratzinger presents,<sup>28</sup> it was only natural to conclude that the picture of the God of faith that Revelation draws is a much more detailed version of the same picture drawn earlier by the Greek philosophers. By this I mean to say that, prior to adopting the philosophical concept of God presented by Descartes, it would have been impossible at all to see the opposition that Emile Brunner so radically sharpens.

Brunner's thesis, as well as the whole rejection of natural theology by dialectical theologians, is in fact a second act, a repetition of what Blaise Pascal did earlier. Just as Pascal rejected the Cartesian idea of God, Brunner rejects the idea of God created by German idealism. Joseph Ratzinger understands very well how this idea is not only anthropomorphic, but also dangerous. The philosophy of German idealism from Kant onwards wants to step into the role of religion and is concerned with giving man a new hope in the form of some kind of paradise on earth. How futile and dangerous these ideas are was shown by Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Spe salvi*.<sup>29</sup> The idea of God cannot be a substitute for the living God, and this is why any hope that man associates with it must prove to be just as empty as the idea of the Absolute conceived in this way.

But let us return finally to the question posed above and the difficulty we have seen in Joseph Ratzinger's presentation of the God of the philosophers. It seems that the harsh assessment of the God of the philosophers as an areligious idea that cannot be the object of religious experience is entirely correct, but not with

---

<sup>28</sup> Ratzinger, *Der Gott des Glaubens*, 15–16 (*Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów*, 154–155).

<sup>29</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 16–23. In this section of the encyclical, the cited views of Immanuel Kant (no. 19) and Karl Marx (no. 21) are particularly striking.

regard to the understanding of God in antiquity and the Middle Ages. This is not to say that the God of the philosophers was very close to the God of faith at that time, for there remains the fundamental problem of the impossibility of justifying that the philosophical God is able to turn to man and establish a personal relationship with him. In this respect, as one can clearly see in Plotinus, the philosopher is, as it were, doomed to pursue a God who remains turned away from him and indifferent. However, he is certainly a living and knowing Person, fulfilling the criteria of Boethius' definition, and as such he is close enough to the God of faith that St Thomas could conclude that Revelation completes what philosophy could not know. Therefore, I am convinced that the God of the ancient and medieval philosophers should not be called pure thinking (*reines Denken*). However, this statement is entirely true in the case of the idea of the Absolute as formulated in modern and contemporary philosophy, which has cast a shadow over the present-day understanding of philosophy and religion in antiquity. In the case of the God of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, I would be more than willing to agree with Joseph Ratzinger in recognising Emil Brunner's concerns as valid. It even seems reasonable to concede the point of both Karl Barth and Emil Brunner that in this case God is an anthropomorphic product of human thought and therefore a man-made idol. The problem, therefore, is not the thesis itself, but the fact that we are actually dealing with two completely different concepts of God, and that the problem of natural theology actually began to exist from the moment Descartes recognised that God should be a clear and distinct idea of the human mind.

### **Bóg filozofów i Bóg wiary według Josepha Ratzingera. Analiza w kontekście niejednoznaczności koncepcji Boga w historii filozofii starożytnej i nowożytnej**

**Abstrakt:** Niniejszy artykuł proponuje rewizję koncepcji zaproponowanej przez Josepha Ratzingera, którą pierwszy raz sformułował podczas wykładu wygłoszonego w 1959 roku. Teolog z Ratzbony bronił w nim pojęcia teologii naturalnej przed radykalnym jej odrzuceniem dokonany w kręgu teologów dialektycznych, a szczególnie przez Emila Brunnera. Choć odrzucenie tez owych teologów jest całkowicie słuszne, to problematyczne pozostaje traktowanie Boga filozofów jako czystej myśli (*reines Denken*). Artykuł niniejszy wykazuje, że Bóg filozofów starożytnych nie może

być tak postrzegany, bo taka wizja opiera się na kategoriach filozofii nowożytnej i współczesnej. Zaproponowane ujęcie Boga filozofów pozwala na odrzucenie tez teologów protestanckich w nowy sposób, przy jednoczesnym przyznaniu im racji co do idei Boga w filozofii nowożytnej i współczesnej jako antropomorficznego bożka.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Joseph Ratzinger, Benedykt XVI, Bóg filozofów, Bóg wiary, Emil Brunner

## Bibliography

- Aristoteles, *Aristotelis ethica Nicomachea* (ed. I. Bywater; Oxford: Clarendon Press 1894; repr. 1962); Aristoteles, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (ed. J. Barnes; Oxford: Princeton University Press 1984) II; Polish translation: Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, in Arystoteles, *Dzieła wszystkie* (trans. D. Gromska; Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 2000) V, 77–300.
- Aristoteles, *Aristotle's metaphysics* (ed. W.D. Ross; Oxford: Clarendon Press 1953; repr. 1970) I–II; Aristoteles, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (ed. J. Barnes; Oxford: Princeton University Press 1984) II; Polish translation: Arystoteles, *Metafizyka*, in Arystoteles, *Dzieła wszystkie* (trans. K. Leśniak; Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 1990) II, 615–857.
- Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi* (2007).
- Brunner, E., *Die Christliche Lehre von Gott. Dogmatik* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag 1946) I; English translation: E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God. Dogmatics* (trans. O. Wyon; Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press 1949) I.
- Domański, J., *Metamorfozy pojęcia filozofii* (Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN 1996).
- Elders, L.J., *Filozofia Boga. Filozoficzna teologia św. Tomasza z Akwinu* (trans. M. Kiliszek – T. Kuczyński; Warszawa: Agencja Wydawnicza Katolików Mag 1992).
- Gilson, E., *Bóg i filozofia* (trans. M. Kochanowska; Warszawa: Pax 1982).
- Gilson, E., *Tomizm* (trans. J. Rybałt; Warszawa: Pax 1998).
- Gilson, E. – Langan, T., *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant* (New York, NY: Random House 1963).
- Hadot, P., *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (trans. M. Case; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2002).
- Louth, A., *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007); Polish translation: A. Louth, *Początki mistyki chrześcijańskiej* (trans. H. Bednarek; Kraków: Wydawnictwo M 1997).



- Pepliński, M., “Cele teologii naturalnej i filozoficznej a preferowane wartości poznawcze,” *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 2(212) (2004) 3–11.
- Plotinus, *Enneades: Plotini Opera* (ed. P. Henry – H.R. Schwyzer; Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964–1983) I–III; English translation: Plotinus, *The Six Enneads* (trans. S. McKenna – B.S. Page; Chicago – London – Toronto: William Benton Publisher 1952); Polish translation: Plotyn, *Enneady I–VI* (trans. A. Krokiewicz; Warszawa: Akme 2004) I–III.
- Ratzinger, J., *Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der theologia naturalis* (Bonn: Paulinus Verlag 2006); Polish translation: J. Ratzinger, “Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów. Przyczynek do problemu theologia naturalis,” in J. Ratzinger, *Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów, Rozum filozoficzny – Kultura – Europa – Społeczeństwo* (eds. K. Gózdź – M. Górecka; trans. J. Merecki; Opera omnia 3/1; Lublin: KUL 2021) 149–168.
- Ratzinger, J., *Introduction to Christianity* (trans. J.R. Foster; New York, NY: Herder and Herder 1970); German ed.: Ratzinger, J., *Einführung in das Christentum* (München: Kösel 1968); Polish translation: J. Ratzinger, *Wprowadzenie w chrześcijaństwo* (trans. Z. Włodkowska; Kraków: Znak 1970).
- Ratzinger, J., *Prawda w teologii* (trans. M. Mijalska; Kraków: Wydawnictwo M 2005).
- Ratzinger, J., “Wiara i filozofia,” *Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów, Rozum filozoficzny – Kultura – Europa – Społeczeństwo* (eds. K. Gózdź – M. Górecka; trans. J. Merecki; Opera omnia 3/1; Lublin: KUL 2021) 193–204.