

Article

War and Truth—The Question of Absolute Truth for the Peace Building Process

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of absolute truth in the peace building process through the work of Joseph Ratzinger. In his reflections on the consequences of war in ancient Rome and post-war Europe, Ratzinger presents a pattern of human rejection of the Christian God as absolute truth in search for material security or comfort. By using Ratzinger's theology of politics, this article offers a point of departure for peace building that considers the relationship between absolute truth and material security in a contested landscape of post-conflict truth claims. With the arrival of AI in the battle for truth, this reflection is even more pertinent.

Keywords: Ratzinger; peace building; absolute truth; AI

1. Introduction

Part of the brutality of war that can often be overlooked is that beyond the physical and material damage war wages upon persons, truth becomes a casualty that is usually last to heal. War rips apart reality as one party uses deadly force in order to secure a new reality at the expense of the other. In the aftermath of conflict, the desire to avoid future conflict, and secure material safety, results in the acceptance of political virtues such as economic success or military might becoming the absolute metric against which all political action is measured—even if that results in accepting and acting upon falsehoods. The 20th century Catholic theologian Joseph Ratzinger presents a theology of politics that hinges upon the notion of God as absolute truth. Consequently, Ratzinger argues that Christianity has freed politics to pursue true political virtue by first accepting God as absolute truth, consequently the highest virtue against which all other temporal goods or virtues ought to be measured. Through a careful reading of Ratzinger's reflections on conflict, and the subsequent aftermath, a renewed appreciation and urgency for the role of absolute truth in peace building can be found.

This paper considers the requirement for absolute truth in the wake of conflict and peace building from a Christian theological perspective. This paper argues that Ratzinger presents a theology of politics that can provide clarity in the wake of conflict and become a point of departure in the search for reconciliation during peace building. In comparing the post-war effects of the Sack of Rome with the Second World War through a Ratzingerian lens, this paper examines the rejection of absolute truth for political or practical benefits and finds that the rejection of God as absolute truth is often a casualty of war. Ratzinger's theology of politics provides the peace process with a groundedness that can turn communities away from the quest to control post-war reality towards the human suffering and material cost of war. The paper ends with a brief exploration of how AI is being used in conflicts to further



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warp the sense of reality felt by the citizenry and what consequences Ratzinger's theology of reality may have for our politics in the emerging age of AI.

2. The Sack of Rome and the Rejection of the Christian God

Despite the considerable advances in modern warfare, in many respects there is a very ancient, human dimension to war. One party seeks to secure something material from another, from gaining territory or resources to total annihilation, and there is to be a victor and those who are defeated. Whether through drones and algorithmic targeting, or horseback raids and spears, war is a tragic component of our shared ancestry. As such, reflecting on the history of warfare, as well as its consequences and resolutions, may offer us a deeper insight into war and peace building. The most evident example of this in Joseph Ratzinger's work is his reflection on the Sack of Rome in the year 410AD, the consequences of which were tackled in the work of Augustine of Hippo. *The City of God* is Augustine's response to the decline of the western Roman Empire, and from Augustine's writing, Ratzinger is able to reflect on how conflict and war shook the Roman populace' belief in Christianity. Before the Empire's conversion to Christianity, Rome had never been conquered, and the Sack of Rome was an indication to the people that "the Creator God whom Christian faith revered had no interest in political happenings." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 62). Such destruction and devastation caused many Romans, relatively new in their Christian faith, to question if abandoning their previous faith was the correct decision. For many, the conclusion was that the Christian God was not interested in Rome's politics nor its political success, and thus, a return to the gods that did care about Rome was needed to restore peace and security. In many respects, the security and peace enjoyed by the Roman populace was still one of the most fundamental aspects of their reality, and their religious doubts reflected this. Augustine's concern with their abandonment of Christianity showed the people to have a clear belief that "the domain of politics clearly had its own set of laws, which had no bearing on the supreme God; hence it should have its own religion." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 62). In the shock and turmoil of war, the faith in Christianity of the Roman population was shaken, and their hopes for peace and stability raised doubts in their minds about the claims of the Church.

Ratzinger reads into this rejection of Christianity a failure of the Roman population to see what Christianity is fundamentally offering compared to their pagan gods. The pagan religions of the Roman Empire were a form of "political religion" in which political virtues—such as economic growth, imperial expansion, or military strength—were treated as an absolute. As such, the Roman religion, "in its delivering over of man to the renunciation of truth, had become the worship of demons." (Ratzinger 2018, pp. 63–66). For Ratzinger, concern about the abandonment of absolute truth underlined the failure of the Roman population to realize the difference between the Christian account of the truth of God and what had come before it. As Ratzinger puts it, "concern for the polis and its well-being justified the violation of truth. In other words, the well-being of the state, which was believed to be dependent on the continuance of its ancient forms, was more highly valued than the truth." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 65). Rome's peace, prosperity, and security were paramount, and to the recently converted, if these crucial aspects of Roman life were jeopardized, then potentially, the new Christian God is not worth worshipping.

In the face of this, Augustine is said to argue that Christianity understood "religion ha[ving] to do, not with custom, but with truth, which was absolute." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 65). Ratzinger takes up Augustine's account to make a distinction between two different types of 'religion' within the same public sphere. The pagan Roman religion was the property of the state, and its account of reality and truth were altered as the Roman rulers saw fit to maintain authority and political and material prosperity. Christianity, in contrast, is driven

not by the political ambitions of a particular state but by what Pope Benedict XVI calls “absolute truth”, revealed to be God, and thus serves to free the state “from tyranny of custom for the sake of the truth.”¹ In understanding God to be absolute truth, Christian virtues are understood to be the greatest of all virtues, against which all other virtues, political or otherwise, are measured. Proclaiming God as absolute truth, Christianity desacralized the religious motivations of the public religion of Rome, revealing them to be mere political or material ambitions. The political religion of Rome placed political virtues, which are inherently limited and temporal in scope, as their absolute goal and sacrificed all else to it. The revelation of God as absolute truth placed it above all political virtue and temporal concern, and thus freed politics to concern itself with political virtue in service of the highest good, and not merely for itself. For fifth century Rome, the political and military successes of the past had become the blueprint for future success, and thus, political virtues linked to these successes through the memory of pagan gods held Rome to ransom. After the Sack of Rome, peace and security became of absolute concern once again, and thus, the population rejected the Christian God in favor of the tried and tested success found in the pagan gods. The consequences of war upon fifth century Rome resulted in the population turning away from the Christian God that promised more than material success in order for the City to rediscover peace and security.

Understandable after the trauma of conflict, the desire for material security superseded any affection towards the Christian God. The Roman rejection of custom or comfort over absolute truth is deeply rooted in the theology of Ratzinger, but this does not entail a rejection of politics wholesale—“despite the fact that politics is related to human salvation, human salvation cannot be realised through politics.” (Boeve 2010, p. 133). Ratzinger’s concern centers on the Roman rejection of Christianity as if that would provide political security. Instead, such a rejection allows political customs and traditions to become the absolute measure of all decision in society, entrapping Roman politics in a rejection of absolute truth so long as political virtues are being served. Ratzinger described the pagan gods the Romans returned to as glorified humans, whose successes and achievements were elevated to such an extent that in order for future success to be achieved, behavior or sacrifice towards these humans turned pseudogods was required (Ratzinger 2018, pp. 66–68). Roman politics was captured by the need to sacrifice to these pseudogods, trapping Rome in a vicious cycle of sacrificing to these pseudogods in order for the Romans to be more like them and succeed politically, further perpetuating the belief that these gods are directly interested in the political fate of Rome.

Christianity freed Roman politics from this vicious cycle, according to Ratzinger, revealing the Christian God to be absolute truth—a truth worth seeking even at the cost of material and political gain—thus allowing politics to focus on its intended purpose, securing peace and justice for its citizens. In their desire to secure peace and material security for Rome, the population turned back towards a politics that elevated human achievement as the absolute measure of all political action, while relegating Christianity to merely another competitor in the political landscape. The Christian theology that Augustine rebuked the pagan Romans with presents the relationship between humanity and divinity in radical terms. While God was separate from creation, creation was not abandoned and left to its own devices (Ratzinger 2018, pp. 69–70). The Christian “God had become man . . . God, who had created the world, also remained its Lord” (Ratzinger 2018, p. 70). The need for elevating humanity to the level of divinity was removed by the revelation that the Christian God was a natural God; divinity was part of his nature but creation can remain distinct yet infused with his divinity (Rowland 2010, pp. 115–16). All of creation, including political power and success, stems from the Christian God’s creativity but does not exhaust God’s nature. The radicalism of Christianity that Ratzinger takes up through Augustine

reduces political success to a function of the natural order, and frees humanity to turn towards God for relief from material strain rather than seeking that relief from within the human condition.

Ratzinger's theology of politics rejects a materialistic politics in favor of a Christian understanding of the political sphere, one that is connected to God through the incarnate Lord in which every state and nation are "subordinate to the one God" (Ratzinger 2018, p. 70). In order to reinforce his point, Ratzinger considered the historic fates of Israel and Rome to demonstrate the naturalness of political success. Quoting from *the City of God*, Ratzinger begins to answer the question by stating "the one true God himself gives earthly kingdoms to the good and to the evil alike . . . as for [true] happiness, he gives this only to the good." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 72). By giving earthly gifts to those who are good and those who sin, Ratzinger notes that for Augustine, God is setting apart true happiness from worldly happiness. The Roman Empire succeeded, according to Augustine, on the basis of Roman political virtues that were "love of country and immense desire for praise" (Ratzinger 2018, pp. 72–73). The desire to achieve national greatness, at the cost of many other earthly vices, was rewarded in national success, but by having as the highest virtue national greatness, the Roman Empire "cut themselves off from something greater, the value of eternity." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 74). Israel, God's chosen nation, experienced both political successes and failures in tandem, including occupation by the Roman Empire. The political success of Rome did not secure it greater virtue, since God has plans greater than those who seek national might. Ratzinger here uses Augustine's analysis of Rome after the pangs of war to highlight that the realm of politics is not inherently against God, but rather, the way to judge the success or failure of political powers is in what they regard as absolute, and if they strive for true virtues stemming from the eternal God and eternal happiness in God.

Christianity's political message for Rome, even in the face of defeat and ruin, was that divinity and truth were connected through the nature of God. Political success or failure was not a metric for a society's greatness but rather greatness in the absolute sense was measured in its proximity to the *Civitas Caelestis* or City of God. The Church is therefore not bound to any nation or its successes, but is the pilgrim City of God on earth that acts as a beacon towards the heavenly kingdom for all, and instead provides a goal for all nations and states to aim for (Nichols 2007, p. 31). Augustine, Ratzinger notes, places earthly states after "the one fatherland of all men" located in "God's state", "even when [earthly states] were ruled by Christian emperors and inhabited more or less only by Christian citizens." (Ratzinger 2018, p. 78). There is not a political state that is on par with the City of God, and the Church is not to be confused with a nation. As such, those states or peoples who succeed in wars or have greater military might are still merely of temporal concern in light of the absolute truth of God. God does not favor the strong nation over the weak, but righteousness over sin.

In reflecting on the tragedy of war in the life of the Church, the fragility of belief can be seen alongside the human desire for material security and relief from suffering. Ratzinger opens this duality up through the Christian response to the Sack of Rome, and Augustine's defense of Christianity as not only the superior religion, but the full revelation of the truth of who God is. By understanding fully who God is as absolute truth, all political successes or failures can be put into perspective, and righteousness becomes more valuable than military might or material security. It is easy to consider how changes in religious preferences in Rome were swift when politically and economically the Empire was successful, but when war wages, the desire for comfort and protection is overwhelming. Ratzinger's analysis is penetrating, but a direct comparison would be limited—Christianity successfully captured the religious and philosophical landscape of Europe, so surely the desire for relief from

war would not result in the inflating of political aspirations at the cost of relativizing the absoluteness of God. On the contrary, Ratzinger tracks how Europe turned away from a Christian understanding of absolute truth after the Second World War, and has instead introduced new political pseudogods in the form of technological and scientific absolutism.

3. Post-War Europe and the Security of Progress

The underlying alignment towards absolute truth in any political system has come under serious strain in the centuries after the Enlightenment, with new philosophical trends resulting in the nature of the Christian God being called into question. This departure from a Christian theology of God as absolute truth was accelerated in Europe after the Second World War. New philosophies, scientific discoveries, technological advancement, and political fragmentation resulted in claims to any form of absolute truth becoming politically untenable outside of a religious context. Not only was the Christian God as absolute truth rejected, but a philosophical relativism also emerged, rendering public consensus on absolute truth untenable. Ratzinger laments this change in European politics, especially as it has become the blueprint for wider political change across the globe (Ratzinger 2007, p. 23). In many respects, the post-war transformation of European politics away from a consensus on absolute truth and towards competing political, material, social, and economic interests reflects the transformation Augustine witnesses in Rome after its destruction in the fifth century. Ratzinger believes we are witnessing a return of the pseudogods of pagan Rome, in which human achievements and political virtue become so elevated as to become binding upon all future success. War, once again, has a profound impact upon the priorities of those impacted by conflict, and leaves open the possibility for absolute truth to be relegated to the general pool of political opinions.

In his extensive reflections on European history, Ratzinger praises the advancements in technology and science that have marked Europe despite the tragedy of the World Wars. Despite these advances, Europe has also witnessed a political and philosophical transformation that Ratzinger criticizes as having turned technological or scientific progress into political absolutes against which all political decisions are measured. The Second World War tore Europe apart, leaving much of it in moral, material, and financial ruin, divided down the middle, and endeavoring to never repeat the tragedies it suffered. The Iron Curtain enveloped half of Europe in a Communist philosophy that fabricated reality in order to fit its particular political narrative. For Ratzinger, the technological and political successes enjoyed by Western Europe had bred a “civilisation of technology and commerce” in which humanity had abandoned the “things over which we have no control” in favor of a world in which “man expects redemption to come from himself” through the embrace of uninterrupted technological developments (Ratzinger 2010b, p. 92). In Eastern Europe, the state controlled what was to be understood as absolute, and in the West, the desire for greater material and technological success had become the absolute good towards which all political action must compare. What was typical in both the East and West was the growth of the state, in both its capacity to intervene in life and also the expectation from the populace that the state will resolve every crisis and attend to every human need (Ratzinger 2010b, p. 92). By the dawn of the millennium, Ratzinger’s assessment of the European politics was starting to reflect Augustine’s.

In his evaluation, Ratzinger saw a desire for technological progress over and above moral progress as becoming the hallmark of European society. The outsourcing of labor, the exploitation of workers, and the emergence of consumerism could be overlooked in the pursuit of technological or scientific progress. Rather than aiming specific critiques at individuals or nations, Ratzinger’s criticisms are aimed more broadly at the wider philosophical shifts in European society, and the fundamental epistemic flaws that lie

behind them. The fault in this way of thinking for Ratzinger was that “the modern world cannot only be identified with progress towards more humanity, it is also and always characterised by an illegitimate ‘will to absolute autonomy’, the will to live without God, which is modern hubris.” (Boeve 2010, p. 120). The desire for technological and economic superiority in the past had come to relativize God as absolute truth, with Ratzinger arguing that the belief that “the fundamental trajectory of historical development is progress” had become a new political dogma: Western Europe’s absolute truth (Ratzinger 2010a, p. 16).

The desire for security and technological progress after the horrors of the early 20th century has led to the rise in what can be described as the pseudogod of political progress—an absolute belief to which all political decisions and actions must be orientated, even at the expense of the minority. Rather than God being the absolute truth and the corresponding Christian virtues being the measure against which all political and social actions are judged, the modern “concept of truth has moved into the zone of anti-democratic intolerance.” (Heim 2007, p. 390). The political, material, or social claims of certain groups compete against those of other groups within European society, without an accepted account of absolute truth to help weigh up these claims. As such, Ratzinger concludes that “the modern concept of democracy seems to be inseparably connected to relativism.” (Heim 2007, p. 390). Ratzinger supposes the following:

“one government can declare to be legal what its neighbour makes illegal. At the same time, in the mind of a large number of politicians today ... this is modified to mean that the law has to mirror, and to translate into norms, the value judgements actually found in society. When majority opinion becomes in this way the only real source of law and the essential criterion of *authoritas*, the paradox is not in any way diminished. The man condemned today may see himself as the pioneer of the law of tomorrow and so feel justified to use every means at his disposal to usher in the future, of which he regards himself as the custodian. If truth is as inaccessible as it is here supposed, then there is no distinction in reality between right and wrong, no distinction between rightful and wrongful power, but only the pressure of the momentarily strong group, the supremacy of the majority.” (Ratzinger 2010a, pp. 50–51).

In arguing that the claim to absolute truth has been relativized in this way, Ratzinger suggests that modern politics lacks integrity. Without adherence to an absolute truth, one that is truly above all political and material desires, Ratzinger fears European politics will be doomed to inflict progress for progress’ sake on its citizenry, using majority support to enact oppressive laws on minorities and rendering true justice impossible (Ratzinger 2012, p. 205). In its turn away from Christianity, European politics has turned away from absolute truth, and is languishing in the depths of political relativity.

Ratzinger strongly advocates for the return of absolute truth in society, arguing that through the revelations of the Christian faith, humanity can succeed in producing a just and lawful society. Rather than advocating a return to the past, as if some golden era of morality was achieved and departed from, Ratzinger’s hope is to correctly understand technological and scientific progress as temporal political virtues measured correctly against an absolute truth that sits above politicking. For Ratzinger, the Church provides society with a call to seek the highest possible virtues and helps to correctly subordinate the political and material desires of any state or nation to these virtues.

Ratzinger remains consistent in his analysis in declaring that as in Augustine’s day, so today, politics is “an exercise in moral reasoning” and as a result, the correct role and function of the state exists to the extent that it “safeguard[s] peace and uphold[s] the law.” (Ratzinger 2010a, p. 56; 2019, p. 7). The state has power over its citizenry, and as such, must exercise its power carefully under the influence of the legal system so as to provide peace

both domestically and internationally (Ratzinger 2019, p. 202). This is only achievable, Ratzinger concludes, “when the essential rights of man and of the community are respected and guaranteed.” (Ratzinger 2010a, p. 58). In reflecting an Augustinian account of the right role of politics, Ratzinger’s account of God as absolute truth frees modern society to direct its material and political aspirations towards the absolute truth, rather than elevating these earthly aspirations to an absolute level. Technological and scientific progress, when properly sought in relation to an absolute truth, can serve the common good and provide space for integral human development. When these earthly aspirations became the absolute goal in and of themselves, there is often moral decay and abuse. Often, it ends up with the law of might over right. The Church, according to Ratzinger, acts as a beacon towards absolute truth and reminds politics of its limited ability to provide society with a compelling answer as to the true end of humanity. Unfortunately, as Ratzinger’s analysis of post-war Rome and Europe highlight, the trauma of conflict often results in peace and security becoming society’s absolute necessity.

4. War and Truth—A Ratzingerian Reflection

In Ratzinger’s theology of politics, a trend emerges in response to war and conflict. In the aftermath, there is a move towards aspiring for material security and protection as the absolute goal of society. In pagan Rome, the populace, who are only recent converts in many cases, returned to their long-held political religion as a way of protecting their fragile peace and ensuring future security. The Roman gods had protected Rome, while Christianity, with its claims to God as absolute truth, allowed for Rome’s ruin. Augustine needed to reaffirm the active role of God in society, and the philosophical superiority of an absolute truth over the pagan pseudogods. As the Church emerged as a political entity, proclaiming God as absolute truth above the political gods of Rome, it is possible to glean several valuable lessons for the peace building process after war. First, war will shake the fabrics of reality for those caught in its wake, and call into question even the deepest foundations and beliefs—the Christian faith of the Romans was shaken, and that is a faith that speaks to the whole of the human person. Secondly, ‘proven’ claims to providing security and peace will be sought out. Third, the state is turned to by those looking for security and peace, and this can result in an elevation of these material aspirations to an absolute level and the emergence of a political religion.

As his theology of politics develops, Ratzinger shows that these trends persist in times of conflict, and can be witnessed in the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe. Post-war Europe is marked with a sharp decline in religiosity, paired with an increasingly technologically developed society. After the war, trust is placed in the technological and material abilities of the state to bring about the flourishing of society. Rather than subordinating technological, scientific, political, or material aspirations to the highest virtues made visible through God as absolute truth, post-war Europe regarded technological progress as the absolute to which all other moral and ethical concern would be subordinate. In both post-war Western and Eastern Europe, the state took on an even greater role in protecting society and taking on responsibility for its prosperity, to such an extent that Ratzinger believes that new political dogmas around continual progress have developed into pseudogods that threaten to trample over the marginalized minority for the sake of progress.

Therefore, when considering peace building, truth becomes a thorny subject that requires careful attention. War will make people desire peace and security in an absolute sense, even willing to accept immorality and falsehood in order achieve these ends. History has borne witness to the countless scapegoats that were blamed for war, and the consequences for this have been catastrophic. The Holocaust cannot be fully understood without

recalling how the Jews were first accused of being the reason for many European nations' ruin after the First World War. When political virtues become the absolute goal of the state, to which all other truth and action must be measured, even the most fundamental moral imperatives can be violated.

The acceptance of absolute political virtues by post-war communities, even to the extent of believing in immoral or false claims for the sake of peace and security, ought to provoke deeper reflection on how to approach peace building. Ratzinger's theology of politics offers both Christian and non-Christian peacemakers a point of departure. For the Christian peace builders, the task is to remind those who have faced the realities of war that political virtues, even the most innate, are all subordinate to the highest virtues of the Christian God. In doing so, the Christian peace builder can combat the dangerous consequences of material absolutism through the subordination of all material concerns to the absolute goodness of God. For non-Christians, the challenges that Ratzinger poses are that even if one rejects Christianity, the possibility of an absolute truth needs to be factored into the peace building process. If there could be one, then how ought peace building be reflective of this possibility. If there is not one, then the peacemaking process must account for the competing material claims of different communities. Non-Christian peace builders must also find ways to reject immoral or false claims that become absolute truths, which history shows can have catastrophic consequences.

Ratzinger reminds us that from a Christian perspective, there is an absolute truth to which all is subordinate. For the non-Christian, there must be a compelling engagement with the concept of absolute truth, for it is a claim that dictates a response. This open question provides scope for a deeper discussion during the peace building process about truth, success, failure, and ultimately, peace. Peace requires justice, and justice cannot exist when what ought to be the absolute measure of temporal action is contested. As such, truth must be sought for its own sake, and attempts to subvert or relativize truth in order to 'win' peace is merely a continuation of war.

Ratzinger's theology of politics connects well with the existing body of work in post-conflict peace building, namely the role of truth in education after conflict, and the need for Truth Commissions to bring about true and lasting justice. Since the 1970s, over 35 different international Truth Commissions have been established to "respond to past abuses, and [to act as] the starting point from which other measures for accountability, reparations, and reforms may be developed." (Hayner 2011, pp. 52–53). The courageous effort post-conflict to seek the realities of atrocities, to do the painful task of uncovering the truth, lends credence to the wider argument in this paper about the importance of truth in peace building. As Pricilla Hayner makes clear, Truth Commissions are at times limited in their scope, restricted in what they can investigate, and may only represent a fraction of the entire history of the atrocity. Clearly, Truth Commission reports "cannot be the whole truth—that is impossible to provide in one report. But it can hope to represent a broad—and specific—truth that will be accepted across society." (Hayner 2011, pp. 126–27). Truth Commissions can work to reduce the effects of falsehoods in the aftermath of war by providing clarity on the actions of perpetrators and the experience of the victims of conflict, with a voice that can break through the fog of competing material interests centering the victims of conflict.

Alongside Truth Commissions, there are existing examples of religious input into the peace building process which a Ratzingerian reflection on truth may feed into. Jack Snyder explores such work by the Guatemalan Catholic Church in not only bringing about national dialogue, but also transmitting through its educational institutions a "culture of peace" that "offered politically focused education, attentive to reclaiming the past, historical memory, and contributing to transforming violence." (Snyder 2025, p. 125). Snyder's work ends by suggesting "the religious reconciliation approach" as a way of supporting Truth

Commissions, reinforcing the case for religious participation in the peace building process (Snyder 2025, p. 129). What Ratzinger adds to the conversation is that agreements on what post-war society has as its absolute are crucial in order to avoid fragmentation, partial justice, and the possibility of new conflicts.

Christianity has, in Ratzinger's understanding, been a constant reminder that even in the wake of war and devastation, God is present. Absolute truth is not merely what is easy, comforting, or protective, but a radical challenge to our control of reality. Absolute truth is not something that can be manipulated or even fully grasped, but something transcendent towards which we must work and orientate ourselves. In the most recent developments in Artificial Intelligence, the hard work to find consensus around what is true is becoming more difficult.

5. AI, Truth, and War

Over the last half decade, generative AI in the form of Large Language Models and other technologies have begun to clog the internet with a never-ending stream of computer-generated content. To many, it is merely a case of pumping out content for cheap profit or for reactions. However, the ability to create deceptively realistic images and videos has transformed the war for truth. There are already examples coming through from contemporary conflicts documenting how generative AI is being used to manipulate the perception of the citizens of warring nations, to turn the tide of public sentiment and destabilize.

Reports have emerged from the war in Ukraine of deliberate AI-generated disinformation being used to target the morale of the Ukrainian population. As recently as November 2025, videos began to circulate online of supposed Ukrainian conscripts "pleading for help" against their conscription, "designed to erode trust in Ukraine's leadership, sow panic, and weaken Western support." (Scott and Tarrant 2025; Zadorozhnyy 2025). Various news agencies have verified the fraudulent nature of these videos, but they paint a bleak picture. The Ukrainian population is being fed two accounts of the war in their country, one based on the reality on the ground, and one based on a lie.

Manipulation and disinformation are not a new aspect of warfare, but the scale and sophistication of AI-generated material present a new challenge. When the war in Ukraine began in 2022, reports of deepfakes and doctored videos emerged almost immediately (Osadchuk 2024). Such is the interest in the role of AI material and warfare that there has been a flurry of new journalistic and academic studies seeking to explore the phenomenon and its impacts. In one study, the impact of deepfakes was explored in the context of the war in Ukraine, and it was found that as a result of the large volume of misinformation, trust in established sources was diminished, and this was responsible for the fueling of conspiracy theories (Twomey et al. 2023). In particular, the coverage of deepfakes by media companies was highlighted as exacerbating the problem, in many ways fueling the general distrust of both the videos in particular, and the reporting of them. The impact of this misinformation is not yet fully realized. When it comes to peace building, what fake memories will linger, what tragedies will have never happened, and how do peace builders seek to challenge these falsehoods? What was witnessed in Ukraine has found its way into other conflicts, with reports emerging from the conflict in Gaza of similar AI misinformation or manipulation escalating the conflict in the Middle East (Klepper 2023; Suárez 2023). This is an issue that is rapidly escalating, and the solution does not seem immediately apparent. What is clear is that the trust once placed in technology as a means of progress is being replaced with a distrust in technology. Where that lost trust will be placed next remains to be seen.

6. Conclusions

Europe looked to technology after the Second World War in the same way the Romans looked to their pagan gods. It was not moral virtue they wanted; it was material virtue. Security, peace, and stability were sought from the state which provided for their needs and offered reassurance. War brings to the fore the most desperate needs of humanity, and it manifests itself in the urge to find security and peace. Augustine witnessed it after the Sack of Rome, and Ratzinger in post-war Europe. The Christian God as absolute truth and the moral virtue that follows become a hardship that can become too great to bear. In the face of conflict and tragedy, it is easier to cling to what seems to be in human control—Roman pseudogods will guarantee the city's victory and prosperity, and a technocratic state can be called upon to provide security and survival. Both realities reflect a deeper challenge to post-war reconciliation. When war shatters the reality people are living in, what becomes their absolute concern can jeopardize the moral fabric of society.

In the modern theater of war, AI disinformation is making it harder for citizens to know what is real and what is manipulated, what will provide security and safety, and what is unwittingly accepted as disinformation about warring nations. Therefore, Ratzinger's reflections are a poignant reminder to always seek a greater truth. AI disinformation is a weapon used upon the civilians, to influence popular sentiment, to sow confusion and unrest, and to force a narrative that can cast a people into oppression. The political and technical leaders of today must recognize that in the European political climate that Ratzinger is writing into, the relativizing of absolute truth between competing claims to political virtue presents an obstacle to lasting peace. This paper argues that Ratzinger provides a theology of politics that challenges the rejection of absolute truth for political virtues, immorality and falsehoods in the aftermath of war, and can provide a meaningful point of departure for lasting discussions for long-term peace and justice.

In his analysis of the Sack of Rome, Ratzinger showcases how the Church entered the political scene by preaching an absolute truth and moral virtues found in the Christian God above and beyond the political virtues of pagan Rome that had become their political absolutes. In a similar fashion, post-war Europe embraced a dogmatic technological progressionism and scientism that Ratzinger believes threatens the wellbeing and rights of the minority in order to secure material progress. In both cases, the results of war were a rejection of a divine absolute truth for material security and protection from future conflict. Reflecting on the realities of conflicts today, technology, and in particular AI-generated content, has further degraded the possibility of speaking about truth as a universal concept. Ratzinger's solution is the right ordering of politics and society, with political virtues being understood correctly in relation to absolute truth of God. Below this is a deeper calling to question the viability in both contemporary politics and peace building post-war. In a politically fragmented world, whoever is in power is the one who aligns the state with an absolute goal, and as such, the absolute aims of the state can change every election. Unless there is a wider discussion about absolute truth, and the correct relationship between politics and truth, then, as Ratzinger observed, humanity places its complete trust in entities doomed to fail. When searching for peace, there must be a consensus on what our actions are orientated towards, so that true justice can be achieved.

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Note

- ¹ (Ratzinger 2018, p. 66) In Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*, the then Joseph Ratzinger expounds further on God as absolute truth, and as such, liberates humanity from subjective truth claims towards the realization of the greater, absolute truth of God. This encyclical continues many of the themes and arguments of Ratzinger, but is presented in a more formal and authoritative form (Benedict XVI 2009).

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