

Faith, reason and modernity

Words from the lecture given by Benedict XVI in Regensburg earlier this month have reverberated around the world, because of their perceived criticism of Islam. All the more reason, then, to examine precisely what the Pope said in the whole address, and why he said it

Few academic lectures have caused such a stir as Pope Benedict's recent address in Regensburg on faith, reason and the university. Yet, judging by many of the responses, few lectures have also been so poorly understood.

The central idea of the lecture is that religion and violence are incompatible because religion and rationality are intrinsically connected. Pope Benedict's justification of this claim is based on the premise that as God is rational (John 1:1, Logos means word and reason) and has created us as rational beings, any attempt to justify violence (such as religiously motivated terrorism) is a contradiction in terms. Violence occurs in religions when faith and reason are not properly correlated or brought into a relationship of complementarity.

How does Pope Benedict arrive at this conclusion? There are four major steps in his argument. The first involves quoting from the dialogue between the fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on Christianity and Islam. In criticising the spreading of Islam through force, the Emperor is arguing that any use of violence to spread faith is self-defeating, as

faith itself is a free gift of God and cannot be forced on anyone. Here the Pope quotes surah 2,256 from the Qur'an: "There is no compulsion in religion", to support this statement. This allows a central argument of the Pope to be drawn from both the Qur'an and the Emperor as to exactly why faith is incompatible with violence: "not acting according to reason, not acting reasonably, is contrary to God's nature". To act violently is to act against the rational nature of God, our own souls and the faith freely given to us by God.

The second step in the Pope's argument is a critique of some Christian and Islamic tendencies to see God as above rationality. In the voluntarism of the late-medieval philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308), Pope Benedict detects a tradition that leads to seeing knowledge of God as only what God wills us to have. This opens the door to the view that our knowledge of God does not correspond to the true nature of God. From this premise it is a relatively short distance to the conclusion that God may not be rational after all. Pope Benedict draws the same conclusion from the premise of the medieval Islamic theologian Ibn Hazm (994-1069) that the transcendence of God means that God is

not bound by rational strictures and so is free to depart from his word.

These examples provide illustrations of just how, when religious faith is detached from reason, a certain arbitrariness is introduced into our moral actions and violence may enter. If God is not rational and we are made in God's image then perhaps we too are not rational. Against these irrationalist tendencies, Pope Benedict points out that although there is an infinite difference between God and humanity, the Catholic Church holds that this difference does not destroy the validity of using analogy and its language to talk of God. Analogy is a valid way of speaking of God because there is sufficient correspondence between human and divine reason to make such language meaningful.

Drawing on the particular correlation of faith and reason that has been developed in the analogical language of Christianity, Pope Benedict goes on to make the point that this has been foundational for European culture and so defines the essential nature of Europe in Greek and Biblical categories.

The third step of Pope Benedict is to trace the ways in which faith and reason have been historically uncoupled in Europe through three phases of the de-Hellenisation of Christianity (that is to say, through the removal of Greek philosophical categories from Christian reflection).

The first phase of this uncoupling was brought about by the rejection of the metaphysical nature of theology at the Reformation in favour of a strictly biblical theology (*sola scriptura* – "scripture alone") provides the authority for deciding issues of faith and morals). Next, this uncoupling was deepened by the liberal theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who, following Kant, reduced faith to morality and so lost the connection of faith to the totality of existence. In the context of a scientifically dominated era, theology now falls off the radar screen as the horizon of rationality and truth shrinks to the empirically verifiable and mathematically provable.

The third phase of the de-Hellenisation of the Christian faith is the current tendency to consider the Greek framework of the New Testament to be just one possible example in a range of cultural options.

The fourth step in Pope Benedict's argument is to call for a new recoupling of faith and reason in the modern world. This is necessary in order to combat the "dictatorship of relativism" prevalent in Western societies.

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His critique of modern reason is not meant to be an attempt to turn the clock back to a pre-Enlightenment era. Rather, he accepts the gains of modernity and also wants modern reason to expand its parameters to include a much-needed new understanding of the correlation between faith and reason that allows space for both. Such a broader horizon for modern reason is vital, for Pope Benedict, if Western culture is to be able to dialogue respectfully with other cultures and faiths.

The Pope's lecture contains so many points worthy of debate that it is sad that what was to my mind an error of judgement (not clearly distancing himself in the text from the "amazingly brusque" remarks of the Emperor, to the effect that new things Muhammad brought were "only ... evil and inhuman things such as his command to spread the faith with the sword") has grabbed the headlines. Now that he has made it clear that he in no way holds a negative opinion of the Emperor regarding the Prophet Muhammad, I want to remark on the importance of the central message of his lecture: the need for a new correlation of faith and reason in the modern world.

For some time now scholars in various disciplines (such as theology, philosophy and sociology) have been raising questions about the way in which religion has been caricatured. Central to this unease has been the relegation of religion to the private sphere. The various strands of secularisation theories that we have grown up with no longer seem to capture the ways in which religions exist and are practised in today's world.

In his 2004 exchange on this question with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas at the Catholic Academy in Munich, a consensus emerged between the then Cardinal Ratzinger and Habermas, that a new post-secular correlation of faith and reason is now central to the major global challenges facing us today of peace, justice and respect for the environment.

But what does the call of Pope Benedict to a new post-secular correlation of faith and reason actually mean? The outlines of an answer to this question are clearer when his Regensburg lecture is read in tandem with his exchange with Habermas.

First of all, he is not suggesting that the future should be theocratic. As is clear from his previous writings and pronouncements, the prospect of religious leaders dictating to politicians or themselves being the politicians could not be further from his thought. The separation of religion and the state is a gain in the modern process of secularisation and needs to be defended. Colonisation of the public sphere by religion of any form is not a viable option for a pluralistic world grounded in justice and the rule of law.

However, the secularist ideology of excluding religion from the coherent universe of rational inquiry, and so of making religion simply a private matter, is also no longer a viable option. A post-secular correlation or alignment of faith and reason is an as yet unfinished project. It involves both reconstructing reason in dialogue with faith and purifying and heal-



ing faith through rational inquiry. It is an unfinished process because only through intercultural and interreligious dialogues can this new correlation be achieved today. This point was illustrated in his exchange with Habermas, by his statement that the Catholic Church could not assume prior agreement on the notions of rational human nature and natural law when it enters into frank and respectful dialogue with other cultures and religions. (Jürgen Habermas/Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, pages 50-51, Herder 2005.)

For Pope Benedict, a particular responsibility for Christianity and Western secular reason comes from the fact that these cultural

forces determine the world situation more than any others. Because of their privileged position, it is up to these major players to take the lead in this interreligious and intercultural dialogue, in order to ensure that the new balance between faith and reason can truly become what Pope Benedict calls a "polyphonic correlation" between religions and cultures.

In inviting Western secular reason to enter into these dialogues, Pope Benedict is remembering his old interdisciplinary conversations with colleagues at Bonn University, in which the place of theology in these conversations was assumed even by those most sceptical of it. The mutual learning process that occurs through such encounters is vital in limiting the excesses of the narrowing of modern reason due to specialisation. Moreover, these memories lead him to the reflection that in the search for a new correlation of faith and reason the role of the modern university is essential. It is through fostering the experience of this *universitas* (conversation of humanity) in the wider community that the university serves its purpose of promoting a truly polyphonic world based on a complementary relationship between faith and reason.

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