

## **An Analysis of Pope Benedict XVI's Speech at the University of Regensburg**

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On September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech intended for an academic audience at the University of Regensburg in Germany. The speech was titled "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections." He spoke about the importance of the inclusion of theology in the rational discourses of the modern university. Speaking on the day following the five-year anniversary of Al Qaeda's attacks on the United States, the Pope no doubt had the murder of innocent people in mind when he cited the fourteenth century Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Palaeologos (d.1425 CE), who said, "God is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature." By citing this statement, the Pope wanted to show that the role reason plays in determining faith ought to assure an ethical check on religious violence. By drawing an intrinsic relation between faith and reason, the Pope sought to demonstrate that "theology rightly belongs to the university, ...not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but...as an inquiry into the rationality of faith." This inquiry into the rationality of faith could then serve as a basis for "genuine dialog of cultures and religions so urgently needed today."

The Pope calls on rationalism to check religious extremism. For this he relies on a Byzantine emperor who recounts a debate he had with a Muslim scholar. In this debate, he declared Islam a religion that brought nothing but evil, inhumanity, and violence to the world. Instead of tempering such an inaccurate statement, the Pope tells us that the nature of Islamic theology permits this violence: God in Islamic theology is absolutely transcendent and therefore beyond any rational boundary. The Pope then goes on to declare Christianity (of the pre-Reformation sort) to be inherently rational. The Greek word for rationalism is *logos*; and the Christian worldview begins with the phrase from the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the *logos*, ...and the *logos* was God." He explains that the distinct relationship between the Christian

faith and Greek rationalism enables Palaeologos's declaration that "Not to act with *logos* is contrary to the nature of God." So, while one can be a good Muslim and act irrationally, one cannot be a good Christian and act irrationally.

Pope Benedict XVI's remarks regarding ethical and rational reflection on religious violence and the use of the divine gift of reason for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialog are most welcome. What is disturbing about his speech is his appropriation of reasoned faith for European Catholicism to the exclusion of Islam, Judaism, Protestantism, and liberalism (not to mention Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and many other religions and schools of thought). It may seem unfair to criticize the head of a religious institution for believing his understanding of the world is the most rational and thus the best. However, the Pope affirms the rationality of Catholicism by drawing an organic connection between ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity in a way that harkens back to definitions of Europe as the civilizational outcome of Christianity's synthesis of Hellenism and Hebraism, a synthesis that was credited for the achievements of the Enlightenment and in turn was used to justify European colonialism as a "civilizing" project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Pope begins drawing an organic connection between ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity by citing a Byzantine emperor's polemic against Islam. This polemic has survived in a collection of letters addressed to a learned Persian. The letters were most likely written during a time when the Byzantine Empire had become a client state of the Ottomans to whom the emperor Manuel II paid tribute and whose assistance he employed to fight fellow Christian rivals to his throne. During his lifetime the emperor also traveled in western Christendom in search of financial and military support for his fight against the Ottoman Turks. These examples of Manuel II's engagement in war suggest that when he mentioned that "God is not pleased by blood" he was not speaking against all wars waged for religious reason. Rather, the emperor was reiterating an old polemic against Islam which held that since Islam was spread by the sword and since "faith is born of the soul, not the body," Islam could not be a divinely inspired

religion. The emperor thus said—and this is the statement repeated by Benedict XVI to the anger of many Muslims: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”

The Pope’s speech also includes a more recent alteration made to Manuel II’s polemic against Islam. This alteration recognizes the fact that verse 2:256 in the Qur’an reads “there is no compulsion in religion,” but it goes on to argue that this verse was revealed during Prophet Muhammad’s career in Mecca when he was “powerless and under threat.” The implication being that as soon as Muhammad had the power to force his faith upon others he did so and the verses in the Qur’an on jihad and fighting unbelievers sanctified his efforts.

Relying on the authority of Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), the Pope goes on to explain that in Islam God is “absolutely transcendent, and not bound by any of our categories, even that of rationality.” This disassociation of faith from reason, he implies, allows Muslims to commit irrational acts of violence in the name of religion, presumably as Muhammad himself did in spreading his religion. For the Byzantine emperor, however, who was “shaped by Greek philosophy,” it seemed “self-evident” that “not to act in accordance with reason is to act contrary to God’s nature.”

From these statements of the Pope it is clear that he knows little about Islam and Islamic history. First, according to Richard Bulliet’s study of early conversion to Islam in the former Sassanid Empire, Muslims constituted less than fifty percent of the population during the first two centuries of Islamic rule. So, Muslims did not forcefully convert all those whom they conquered.

Second, according to classical works of *asbab al-nuzul*, which contain reports of the occasions on which particular verses of the Qur’an were revealed, verse 2:256 was not revealed in Mecca. It was revealed in Medina. Although reports of the occasion of revelation for verse 2:256 differ in detail, they generally agree that it was revealed in relation to the Ansars, Medinan

converts who helped Muhammad establish himself in Medina. According to the most common understanding of the occasion for the revelation of verse 2:256, when the tribe of Banu al-Nadir was expelled from Medina, they had children among the Banu al-Nadir whom they did not want to leave. It was then revealed, “Let there be no compulsion in religion. True guidance has been made clear from error.” That is, the children of the Ansar had to choose to become Muslim; they could not be compelled to convert.

Third, jihad in Islamic sources is always mentioned as *jihad fi sabil allah*, which means “to strive in the path of God.” This striving is most often interpreted as fighting for the sake of God. As such, jihad is not just any war, but a justifiable war, a war that could be shown to be for the sake of God. Of course, in Islamic history, there have been many Muslims who have sought to justify whatever war they were engaged in as a jihad. This historical fact, however, should not be confused with the doctrine of *jihad fi sabil allah*, which demands ethical reflection on the reasons for which one engages in war.

Fourth, there were many debates about what constitutes faith in early Islam, and the resulting consensus was that faith has to be attested to both by the tongue (an outward declaration of faith) and by the heart (an inward expression of faith). Thus, in Islam, similar to Christianity, faith has to be “born of the soul.”

Lastly, the Pope’s invocation of Ibn Hazm is problematic for even though Ibn Hazm is one the most productive and colossal scholars in Islamic intellectual history, he belonged to the Zahiri school of thought, which rejected any use of reasoning, including analogical reasoning, and communal consensus as sources of divine law. The Zahiri school was a minority school in Islamic history that is now defunct. It was deemed heretical by the majority of Muslims.

As one reads the rest of the Pope’s speech, given his lack of serious inquiry into Islam, it is clear that his argument is not really against Islam. He employs stereotypical and essentialist caricatures of Islam as a rhetorical device to argue against the theological notion that faith is a matter of conscience rather than reason. He believes such an understanding leads to

subjectivism and thus wrongly pushes theology outside of the scope of rational studies undertaken at modern universities. Islam and the violence perpetuated by Al Qaeda are rhetorical sticks with which he opposes positivism, the Reformation, and liberal theology. Although he does not say this directly, what he implies in his speech is that if European Christians do not reason about faith (particularly at universities) and take faith to be a subjective matter, there would be no difference between them and those Muslims who act in irrational and violent ways in the name of God.

The Pope argues that not to reason about faith is un-Christian because Christianity is the culminating synthesis of biblical faith and Greek rational thought. He states that when the Gospel according to John in the New Testament modified the first verse of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible by asserting that “in the beginning was *logos*,” a Greek word which means both ‘word’ and ‘reason’, and that the *logos* was God, it demonstrated that, in Christianity, the rational order behind creation reflects the rationality of the divine nature.

The Pope attributes the role reason plays in Christianity to Hellenism. In this way he distances Christianity from its historical roots in the religion of the ancient Israelites in the Middle East. He says, “despite the bitter conflict with those Hellenistic rulers who sought to accommodate [Christianity] forcibly to the customs and idolatrous cults of the Greeks, biblical faith [i.e. faith in the God of ancient Israel], in the Hellenistic period, encountered the best of Greek thought at a deep level.” He further distances Christianity from its historical roots in Israelite religion by claiming a special status for the Septuagint, which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible done in the third and second centuries BCE. He calls the Septuagint “an independent textual witness and a distinct and important step in the history of revelation.” He goes on to state: “From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act ‘with *logos*’ is contrary to God’s nature.” As such, he makes rational faith the primary domain of Hellenized Christianity to the exclusion of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism. From his statement, one

wonders if rational faith would have been possible in the history of religions had the Hebrew Bible never been translated into Greek.

Such assertions call to mind racial understandings of culture like those pronounced in the nineteenth century by the likes of the famous French Orientalist, Ernst Renan (1823-1892). Although some of Renan's contemporaries criticized his work as anti-Semitic because of his notion that the "Semitic races" are inferior to the "Aryan races," this was a popular notion in nineteenth-century European scientific racism. Renan conflated race, culture, and language and argued based on the structure of Semitic languages (such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic) that the speakers of these languages, who happened to live under European colonial rule, are racially and culturally inferior to speakers of Indo-European languages, such as Greek, Sanskrit, German, and French. In a lecture on "Science and Islam," for example, Renan said:

Everyone who has been in the Orient or in Africa will have been struck by the kind of iron circle in which the believer's head is enclosed, making him absolutely closed to science, and incapable of opening himself to anything new.<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to his five-volume *History of the People of Israel*, Renan wrote:

For a philosophic mind, that is to say for one engrossed in the origin of things, there are not more than three histories of real interest in the past of humanity: Greek history, the history of Israel, and Roman history....Greece in my opinion has an exceptional past, for she founded, in the fullest sense of the word, rational and progressive humanity. Our science, our arts, our literature, our philosophy, our moral code, our political code, our strategy, our diplomacy, our maritime and international law, are of Greek origin....Greece had only one thing wanting in the circle of her moral and intellectual activity, but this was an important void; she despised the humble and did not feel the need for a just God....Her religions were merely elegant municipal playthings; the idea of a universal religion never occurred to her. The ardent genius of a small tribe established in an outlandish corner of Syria [i.e., the Israelites] seemed to supply this void in the Hellenic intellect [by giving birth to Christianity]. (vol. I, p. vii)

It is difficult not to recall Renan and other nineteenth-century thinkers who sought to define modern Europe as the civilizational legacy of the ancient Greeks, when one reads Pope Benedict XVI's description of the Hellenization of biblical faith in Christianity as a matter that was not only theologically significant but also historically significant because it defined the character of modern Europe. The Pope states:

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<sup>1</sup> E. Renan, 'L'islamisme et la science' in *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 332-333, cited in A. Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*, p. 30.

This inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history—it is an event which concerns us even today. Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.

In other words, despite the historical roots of Christianity in the Middle East and Israelite religion and despite the presence of Orthodox Christian churches in Egypt and the Levant, the true character of Christianity is Greek and European. Moreover, despite the presence of millions of Turks, Arabs, and Africans in today's Europe who are not Christian, Europe, properly understood, is Christian.

The Pope further emphasizes that Christianity is a predominantly, if not exclusively, European enterprise, when he says:

In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was a preliminary inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieux. This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision.

Here the Pope denies non-European Christians “the right” to interpret the New Testament in light of the realities and histories of their own cultural context. As a religion of “distinct European character” being Christian seems to necessarily entail “Hellenization” and “Europeanization.” The Pope relies on an outdated and frankly racist understanding of culture in which the “character” of any culture is said to be defined by language. The New Testament as a Greek text thus bears the “character” of “Greek spirit”, which according to him, is the source of rational thought in Christian history: “The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed.”

After arguing for the essential European and Greek character of Christianity, the Pope argues against what he calls a “programme of dehellinization” found in the Protestant Reformation, liberal theology, and scientific positivism. In the sixteenth century, the Reformers, he says, found themselves confronted by a Christian faith that they deemed too philosophical

and scholastic. Through the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), they “sought faith in its pure, primordial form, as originally found in the biblical Word.” They sought faith as “a living historical Word.” In other words, they sought faith as an *experience* to be realized through individual encounters with scripture, reducing the interpretive authority of scholastic theologians and the Church. The eventual outcome of this, the Pope says, was that faith was disassociated from reason to the point that in the eighteenth century the German philosopher Kant said “he needed to set thinking aside in order to make room for faith.”

According to the Pope, liberal theology, unlike the Reformation, tried to develop rational understandings of faith, but it made the mistake of limiting the scope of rationality. Influenced by positivism and science, it defined what is rational as what is scientific and thus empirically verifiable. It left metaphysical and non-empirical questions aside. Taking Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) as an outstanding representative of liberal theology, the Pope, says “Harnack’s central idea was to return simply to the man Jesus and to his simple message, underneath the accretions of theology and indeed Hellenization.” This meant that Christianity should be understood in its historical context. After all, historically speaking, who was “the man Jesus” but a Jewish Rabbi.

In the Pope’s view, these programs are “dehellenizing” because they do not adhere to the Greek notion that the underlying, unseen structure of the world is rational and thus could be understood through reason. Put in the Christian vocabulary used by the Pope, they do not recognize that between God’s “eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy.”

The Pope then associates “the disturbing pathologies of religion and reason” (a reference to violence) with such “dehellenized” understandings of faith.

If science as a whole is this and this alone, then it is man himself who ends up being reduced, for the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics, then have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by ‘science’, so understood, and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective. The subject then decides, on the basis of his experiences, what he considers tenable in matter of religion and the subjective ‘conscience’ becomes the sole arbiter of what

is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter.

This passage represents the theological core of the Pope's speech. If reason is disassociated from faith, faith cannot serve as a basis for ethical action; it becomes subjective; and it cannot serve as a basis for creating community. However, this theological argument when placed in the context of the rest of the Pope's speech carries significant social and political implications. If a "dehellenized" faith cannot serve as a basis for ethical action, then those who do not share in the Pope's understanding of a Hellenistic Christianity cannot be trusted to act ethically. If faith, ethics, and religion are viewed to be subjective, there is no way to hold others, like the perpetrators of the attacks of 9/11, accountable for the violent acts that they commit in the name of religion. Only Hellenized Christianity stands in a position to pass moral judgment on them. Finally, a subjective understanding of faith cannot create a community, which challenges the notion of Europe as a Christian community and Christianity as a religion distinctly European in character.

The Pope concludes by reiterating what Manuel II said to his Persian interlocutor: "Not to act reasonably, not to act with *logos*, is contrary to the nature of God.'...It is to this great *logos*, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialog of cultures. To rediscover it constantly is the great task of the university." Such a call for a dialog based on rationality and supported by the university would have been welcomed had not Benedict XVI founded it on an ancient polemic against Islam and had he not defined it in racial and essentialist terms as the proper domain of Hellenized Christianity and Europe, to the exclusion of the rest of the world. Having done so, it is not difficult to see how others, particularly those who live with the legacy of European colonialism, read his speech not as an invitation for dialog but as a justification of European hegemony and the moral superiority of conservative Catholicism.