



Pope Benedict XVI

On Tuesday of last week, Pope Benedict delivered a lecture at the University of Regensburg, where he was once a professor of theology. During the course of his address, the Pope quoted a portion of a Christian-Muslim dialogue between a fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor and an unnamed, but learned, Persian. The Emperor was apparently trying to reconcile the Koran's assertion that "there is no compulsion in religion" with the "Holy War" that was being waged against his Christian kingdom. The Holy Father recounted this episode as a starting point for considering the relationship between faith and reason, and between religion and violence.

The reaction to the speech, from both Islamic voices and the western media lead one to believe that the Pope's critics have not actually taken the time to read his words, of which the now-infamous quote formed only a small portion. In itself, the words of Emperor Manuel II Paleologus are clearly "brusque" and "startling," a description used by the Pope himself. "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new," the Emperor asked his Persian interlocutor, "and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

Not exactly a politically-correct statement. Yet, we might say the same if we had witnessed the gradual evisceration of our nation and culture at the point of the sword, whose sharpness was employed as the principal instrument of religious conversion for those who had been conquered.

The Pope did not adopt the Emperor's words as his own, yet he surely knew that his remarks would cause a sensation – and let's not imagine for one minute that Pope Benedict did not intend to "stir things up," although not in the way the media and others

have suggested – what, we may ask, was the Pope’s purpose? Was this reference important to some deeper argument? Let’s turn to the text to answer that question.

Entitled *Faith, Reason and the University*, Pope Benedict’s lecture addressed the legitimate place of theology among university studies. Recalling his years as a professor, the Pope said that the University of Regensburg “was very proud of its two theological faculties [Catholic and Protestant]. It was clear that, by inquiring about *the reasonableness of faith* [emphasis added], they too carried out a work which is necessarily part” of the university’s mission. To say that faith is *reasonable*, means that it has a content that can be known and understood by the human intellect. Furthermore, this assertion implies that not only is there is no conflict between faith and reason, but that human reason is necessary in order to articulate the faith in a coherent way.

While this may seem a little too abstract for a Sunday morning (!), it is vitally important that we understand the point the Pope is making.

Christians believe that God is reasonable. This means two things. **First**, that God can be *known*. Because God can be known, human reason plays an indispensable part in faith. There is no necessary conflict between faith and reason. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines faith as “a personal adherence” to God and as a “*free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*” (CCC, no. 150; emphasis in original). The definition of Christian faith presumes the use of our reason to grasp, comprehend, and help us to put into practice the content of the faith which is revealed to us by God.

Our knowledge of God comes to us through both creation and Divine Revelation. Since God is the origin of “all things visible and invisible,” His “fingerprints” mark the world He created, enabling us to know Him as we come to know the world. Through Divine Revelation, contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, God reveals his inner life to us, and invites us to share in it.

Second, to say that God is reasonable is to assert that He always acts in accord with His nature. In other words, God’s words and actions are always a reflection of who He is; He is never capricious or contradictory. God doesn’t just “make things up.” God does not deceive Himself, nor does He deceive us.

For example, God cannot decree that two plus two equal five. This would contradict not merely mathematical principles, but also the reasonableness of God, who is the origin of those principles. Similarly, God cannot decree that one is no longer obliged to love one’s neighbor. This would contradict the very nature of God, who is pure love. In the same way, God cannot make Himself cease to exist, since He is the origin and source of all existence.

This understanding of the *reasonableness* of God is a thoroughly Judeo-Christian idea. We take it for granted that God can be known and that He always acts in accordance with reason. All of Western science and intellectual inquiry owes its existence to this truth.

Even atheists are indebted to the Christian, and specifically Catholic, intellectual tradition that has made modern science possible.

There are two principal movements in contemporary society, however, that deny the reasonableness of faith. One is the materialistic or secular worldview. This view asserts that faith is not reasonable because its claims cannot be verified by science. Since God's existence cannot be proved in the laboratory, for example, He cannot be said to exist, thus reducing faith to a form of sentimental religiosity. The secularist thereby consigns religion to the private sphere, and objects when religiously-inspired ideas are brought into public discourse.

Some religions also seem to erect a wall between faith and reason. Unlike the Christian understanding of God, for example, Muslims assert that God is completely transcendent; He is so beyond us that He *cannot* be known, and any self-revelation would diminish God's perfection. The concern of the Islamic faith is to preserve the transcendence of God, his utter differentiation from the world. Therefore, no attempt by human reason could ever decipher any truth about God in Himself, and man is incapable of understanding why and how God acts.

One of Islam's most influential scholars, Ibn Hazm (994-1069) "went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry" (quoted in Pope's text).

By quoting the six-hundred year-old statement of Emperor Manuel II, the Pope was drawing our attention to the difficulty of dialogue between those who have such different ways of looking at the world. Effective dialogue, the Pope asserts, relies upon a reintegration of faith in reason.

To divorce faith from reason inevitably leads to confusion and cultural disintegration. On the one hand, Western secularists want to *keep faith away from reason*, removing religion from influencing public life altogether. On the other hand, when *reason is divorced from faith*, the door is opened to every sort of aberration, including violence in the name of religion. In that view, God may simply command what he wants, without any reference to what is reasonable, rational, or logical.

The reaction of Pope Benedict's critics – from the rebuke of *The New York Times* to the rioters on the streets of the Middle East – merely serves to prove the Pope's point: when we divorce faith and reason, we are left with secularity or irrationality.

The solution to these errors is to embrace an authentic Catholic world view, expressed beautifully by Pope John Paul II who wrote that "faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth" (*Fides et Ratio*). To rediscover this reality is an essential task of our age. May the Holy Spirit, font of all truth, lead us in that endeavor.