

# On Pope Benedict XVI's Address on Faith and Reason

By Fr. Patrick J. McInerney LSAI, TheolM, PhD (Cand.)

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On the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2006 Pope Benedict XVI visited the University of Regensburg where he used to teach and gave an academic lecture entitled *Faith, Reason and the University*.<sup>1</sup> His theme was the necessary compatibility between reason and faith, and the reverse side of that same position, the necessary incompatibility of religion and violence. His address was directed primarily against an aggressive "Western" secularism that denies the inherent intelligibility of faith and relegates religion to the sidelines of public life as a matter of private opinion.

To introduce his topic Pope Benedict quoted from his recent reading of Professor Khoury's account of the 14<sup>th</sup> century dialogue between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a Persian scholar on the controversial topic of "holy war". The Pope first affirms that the emperor must have known the Quranic injunction in surah 2:256: "*There is no compulsion in religion.*" Secondly, he quotes the emperor's accusations against Muhammad in relation to spreading faith by violence. And thirdly, he again cites the emperor: "God", he says, "is not pleased by blood - and not acting reasonably (σὺν λόγῳ) is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body ... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death..." All of the above is preamble to "the decisive statement in the [emperor's] argument against violent conversion," a statement which the Pope repeats in the middle of his lecture and again in his conclusion – "***not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.***"

The Pope's first and third steps are largely uncontested,<sup>2</sup> but his inclusion of the middle quote was most unfortunate because it could have been omitted without any detriment to the case he was making, which, as noted above, was against an aggressive secularism that discounts the reasonableness of faith, a point on which nearly all Muslims would agree, and was not against Islam or its Prophet.

The offending quote is a negative stereotype associating the spread of Islam with violence. However, the mediaeval emperor's accusation can hardly be considered impartial and unprejudiced, since it was made when his city was under siege from Muslim armies. Pope Benedict had noted this historical context but had not elaborated its modifying significance with regard to evaluating the reliability of the quote. He had also noted the quote's "startling

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<sup>1</sup> The Vatican's English translation of the lecture is available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> On a technical matter, the Pope's citing of experts who posit the occasion of the revelation of surah 2:256 as early does not enjoy the consensus of scholars, either Muslim or non-Muslim. Consequently, his implication that this instruction was subsequently abrogated by the Prophet's later teaching and practice regarding armed hostilities cannot be established.

brusqueness,<sup>3</sup> “a tone which sounds surprisingly harsh to our ears,”<sup>4</sup> and even “crude.”<sup>5</sup> He cited the emperor as “having expressed himself so forcefully”<sup>6</sup> or as “having lashed out”<sup>7</sup> - both of which translations indicate the emotive intensity of the mediaeval accuser’s assessment of Islam and the Prophet. However, despite the above indications, because Pope Benedict did not clearly dissociate himself from either the content or the tone of the offending quote, he left himself open to the impression of being in agreement with it.

Finally, the quote was unfortunate because the negative furore that has subsequently arisen (or been deliberately provoked) by “sound bite” presentations of the quote divorced from the academic context of his lecture has prevented many people from appreciating the very positive point that the Pope was making about the rationality of faith, indeed, of all faiths. To the dismay of most Muslims, the very irrationality of the more impassioned protests by a tiny fringe of extremists supposedly in defence of Islam and the Prophet but usually in order to promote their own “Islamic” credentials to a gullible audience, and the scattered acts of violent reprisal have merely served to confirm the violent stereotype. But this sad outcome underlines and confirms the importance and necessity of reasoned discourse within and between believers from the two religions, the very point that Pope Benedict was making.

Christian and Muslim representatives have commented on the Pope’s lecture and on the various reactions and responses from around the world. The Pope has since apologized, not for his words, but for the adverse reactions to his address; has clarified his positive intent; has clearly distanced himself from the content and tone of the offending quotation; and has re-affirmed his personal respect for Muslims in line with the teaching of Vatican II:

“I wished to explain that not religion and violence, but religion and reason, go together. I hope that my profound respect for world religions and for Muslims, who “worship the one God” and with whom we “promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values for the benefit of all humanity” (*Nostra Aetate*, 3), is clear. Let us continue the dialogue both between religions and between modern reason and the Christian faith!”<sup>8</sup>

All religions claim high ideals of spirituality, of morality, of rationality, and we believers must keep on proclaiming these ideals. But history shows that not all believers have lived up to these high ideals at all times, and Christians and

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<sup>3</sup> Official English translation from the Vatican.

<sup>4</sup> English translation by Christa Pongratz-Litppit in *The Tablet*.

<sup>5</sup> Comment on the German original by Donald Senior in *The Chicago Tribune*.

<sup>6</sup> Official English translation from the Vatican

<sup>7</sup> English translation by Christa Pongratz-Litppit in *The Tablet*.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday, 20 September 2006  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20060920\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20060920_en.html)

Muslims are no exception, both having used imperial force, financial gain and emotive discourse to win converts, to spread their rule, to suppress heresy and schism, and to prescribe the practice of other religions.

Despite the Gospel's clear injunction - "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21) - Christianity since Constantine has often aligned with empire for religious ends: for example, in the mediaeval inquisition, in the religious wars of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, in complicity in the European colonial enterprise, and in shabby alignments with political parties.

Islam too, despite the equally clear Quranic injunction against violence quoted above, and because it does not clearly distinguish religion and state, has also at times availed of empire for religious ends: for example, the expansion of Islamic rule within a military context (e.g. the 14<sup>th</sup> century army that besieged the city of the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus), and in state-sponsored preferential treatment for Islamic institutions to the detriment of non-Muslim minorities.

Believers in each tradition may rightly claim that the above instances were aberrations, that they are not true Christianity, or true Islam - but that very admission confirms the discrepancy between ideal and practice.

Although Judaism and Christianity were both transformed by their encounters with Hellenic rationalism – Pope Benedict summarizes both developments in his lecture – Christians cannot claim exclusive propriety of reason. The collaboration of Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars in the 8<sup>th</sup> century ensured that the Greek heritage of reason was gathered, preserved and developed in the Arab Muslim world, where the application by scholars to all fields of learning contributed to the flourishing of Islamic civilizations while Europe languished in the superstitions of the Dark Ages. Then in 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century Cordoba, Toledo and Sicily the collaboration of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars passed this heritage back to Europe, where the encounter between Christian systematic theology and Greek rationality provided a new synthesis which contributed to the high achievement of mediaeval scholasticism, leading in turn to the European Renaissance and the subsequent technological advances of Europe.

Despite their respective claims to rationality, Christianity has often opposed and only reluctantly conceded modern scientific developments, and Islam too has been reluctant to subject its tradition to modern critical scholarship. While both are rightly wary of a "scientism" that a priori excludes religion, both will surely benefit from an authentic engagement with "the whole breadth of reason" and be better able to serve the modern world.

Our long histories of both positive and more cautious engagements with reason remind us to keep a balanced perspective, especially in times of controversy. The stereotype of any religion as being wholly prone to violence and irrationality is an exaggeration, but has a grain of truth; and the pretence of any religion to being wholly benign and wholly rational is also an

exaggeration, but it too has a grain of truth. The reality is that we are all a “mixed bag”. We cannot justly accuse any other of all ills without first taking responsibility for our own shortcomings, nor can we truly claim that we alone know all truth and goodness without first acknowledging the truth and goodness that is in the other.

While the more impassioned reactions of both attack and defence of the Pope’s address have inflamed sensibilities, this very fact confirms the basic positive intent of the Pope’s speech, the importance in today’s global village of a reasoned, courteous, sensitive and respectful dialogue between people of different cultures and religions.

This year, depending on the sighting of the new moon, *Ramadan*, the Muslim month of fasting began around the 25<sup>th</sup> of September. In the light of the recent controversy, may Christians and Muslims both avail of this ‘sacred time’ to turn to God and to each other to build friendship and mutual understanding on the basis of our shared spiritual bonds.

The many people of good-will from all faiths and none who followed these recent events will recognize that Pope Benedict clearly did not intend to offend but intended the good. But people of ill-will from all faiths and none will find in those same events opportunity to condemn religions other than their own, or to dismiss all religions as irrational. What the final outcome of the Pope’s lecture will be is best expressed in the following story, versions of which appear in nearly all traditions and religions:

*Once there was a wise old man who lived at the top of a mountain. This wise old man meditated and shared valuable insights about life with people from a nearby village.*

*One day, three teenagers decided to trick the wise old man. One of the boys said, “This old man thinks he knows everything. Well, I’ll show him. I’m going to hold a bird behind my back and ask the old man if the bird is alive or dead. If he says it’s alive, I’ll crush the bird. If he says it’s dead, I will let the bird loose to fly away.”*

*With the plan set, the three boys climbed to the top of the mountain. There they saw the wise old man meditating in peaceful splendor. The boys walked over to the man and the one boy asked, “Wise old man, what do I have in my hand?”*

*Because the wise old man knew everything, he continued looking straight ahead and said, “It’s a bird, my son.”*

*Now the boy winked at his friends and said, “Wise old man, is the bird dead or alive?” The wise old man turned and looked the boy in the eye and said, “The answer is in your hands, my son.”<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sheriff.co.wise.tx.us/cuffnstuff/03-10-00.htm>