The Pope WAS Wrong, But He Wasn’t Talking To Muslims

by Timothy Fallis

On September 12, 2006, the recently elected Pope Benedict XVI presented a speech titled “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections” at the University of Regensburg. The reaction to this speech in many parts of the Muslim world, including the Middle East certainly but by no means exclusively, was very angry. The lines that offended were quoted from a medieval source and seemed to insult Islam. People rioted in the streets, both religious and secular leaders demanded an apology and retraction, and at least one man declared that “the Pope must die” for what he had said (Doughty and McDermott). I would like to argue that this reaction was inappropriate for two reasons. One, while I agree that the Pope’s selection of quotation was very poorly chosen, his worst mistake regarding Islam was entirely different from the one for which he has been chastised. Two, I contend that the target of the speech, the religion the Pope intended to throw the gauntlet down to, was not Islam really but Protestant Christianity.

In his speech the Pope drew from a dialogue recorded by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus, a dialogue between himself and an educated Persian. The passage that inflamed the passions of many Muslims was thus: “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” (Benedict, “Meeting”). The Pope should have realized that this quote would be provocative and chosen something else, surely. However, taken in the context of the rest of the speech, it seems clear that his reason for using it was not to say that Islam is “evil and inhuman”; his purpose was to highlight the idea that Islam has not brought anything new to the discussion of religious rationalism. He was pointing this out for reasons I will address a bit later, but the point I want to make now is that the contention he was making about Islam is incorrect. Islam has a long and ongoing history of rationalistic religious thinking, and it is for misrepresenting this that, if anything, the Pope should have been upbraided by Muslim activists.

Historically, there was a time when a rationalistic school of thought was very prominent in Islam. That school, known as the Mu’tazila, rose in the 8th century and flourished until it lost out to the dogmatists by the end of the 9th. The Mu’tazila stressed that the teachings of Allah and a connection to Him spiritually could be ascertained through the rationalistic method and “that reason and revelation were complementary” (Denny 181). They used Greek texts as a starting point in creating a synthesis of reason and revelation.

Today, there are two main views in Sunni Islam (90% of the world’s Muslims are Sunni [Benedetti]) on the relationship between faith and reason. The more common view is that of the Ash’ari school which is classically deistic, meaning that faith based on scriptural revelation always trumps reason. The other view, represented by the Maturidi school, is that reason independent of revelation can legitimately come to the same truths. Both schools are considered equally orthodox and correct. In addition, the Shi’a have always emphasized the rational basis of their beliefs. It is an error, therefore, to reductively portray Islam as being entirely based on faith in the absence of a rational dialectic, just as it would be an error to ignore the contributions of such thinkers as Aquinas or Kierkegaard and portray Christianity as based solely on the Bible.

It is particularly ironic that the Pope chose to make his (erroneous) point by using the writings of a Byzantine Emperor, when it can be argued that at the time of his rule Western civilization was in decline precisely because it had turned its back on the Greek rationalism which it is now so proud to include. In his important historical work Muruj adh-dhahab wa ma’adin al-jawahir (“the Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems”), the great historian al-Mas’udi argued just that, claiming that this decline was due to the fact that the West had decided that Greek learning was incompatible with Christianity and so let science go by the wayside (al’ Mas’udi). At that time, it was Muslims who had built on the translational work done in Baghdad and were mining Greek philosophical texts, and some of the finest philosophical work of the time was done by Muslim scholars like Avicenna (Abu ibn Sina) and Averroes (ibn Rushd) who worked from this scholarship. In blunt terms, it was Muslims who had successfully
integrated Greek rationalism into their theology, and the Catholics who had been left behind. The Pope used the words of a 14th century Emperor, whose church had abandoned the basis of rationalism, to accuse modern Islam, who in the 14th century was alone preserving that same Greek tradition, of abandoning rationalism. This isn’t just ironic, it is revisionist and dishonest, and it is this that Muslims had cause to get up in arms over instead of the specific meaning of the words the Pope quoted and did not himself avow.

The other point about the Pope’s speech is, again, that it was not primarily directed at Islam but instead at Protestantism. While the Catholic Church, which still has larger membership than all other Christian denominations combined, relies very heavily on its history of Aquinarian rationalism, Protestant churches have for the most part eschewed religious philosophy in favor of biblical revelation. Although the Catholic Church certainly bases its religion on the revelations of the Bible, it does not teach literal absolutism in regard to it. Instead, it relies on biblical revelation informed and interpreted through the lens of rationalism.

It is this absence of the rational/philosophical in the Protestant tradition that the Pope meant to scold, because he sees it as an abandonment of the principles that make the Western tradition unique from the Eastern and the Islamic. This Pope is an educated scholar (he used to teach at the University of Regensburg) and cherishes reason; in his view Protestantism, especially in the U.S., has become absolutist in its intolerance of other faiths precisely because it relies entirely on doctrine without reason. In the Pope’s view this is a problem on two counts.

According to Benedict XVI, the first is that without the understanding of moral duty that flows from rational philosophy, Western civilization is ungrounded in its convictions. The Pope has said: “... Christians have lost confidence in the Christian claim to universal truth, and the validity and life has gone out of Christianity” (Chummar). Without those convictions that make Western civilization what it is, it cannot make a useful contribution to a dialogue between cultures. Any such dialogue cannot be based on faith, since there is little common ground to be found in conflicting assertions of divine revelation. As the Pope said 10 years ago when known by his personal name Joseph Ratzinger, “Reason will not be saved without the faith, but the faith without reason will not be human” (Ratzinger). Only a mutual understanding that human beings can come to know the truth of things rationally has a chance of providing the framework for a workable discussion. At this stage in world history, like so many others before it, just such a dialogue is essential in order to come to understandings that can undergird international peace, tolerance, and prosperity.

The other problem the Pope has with this separation of Western civilization from rationalism is that it lends itself to (what he sees as a) disastrous embrace of postmodern relativism. In 1996, Ratzinger said as much when he spoke in Guadalajara: “Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time” (Ratzinger). As George Weigel argued in the L.A. Times, postmodernism would have us believe that there is “your truth” and “my truth” but nothing so bold and definitive as “the truth”. I agree when he says that with this philosophy, or lack of one depending on how you look at it, leaves the West unable to defend itself in a conflict of ideas. Divine scripture does not provide reasons why the West’s usual commitments to tolerance, human rights, equal justice, civility, and the rule of law are worth defending; only rational argument can do that (Weigel).

Ultimately, the Pope selected an inflammatory quote to provide an example of a contrast between Christian and Islamic attitudes regarding rationalism that does not exist, in order to make a point about how the West needs to embrace its (supposedly but not actually) “unique” rationalism, so that it will be able to both hold a dialogue with the East and defend itself philosophically against it. He could have made his point a lot more clearly and simply and saved the world a lot of trouble. If, and it is a big If, this speech is ever widely understood for what it was really trying to say, it could indeed serve as a starting point for an important dialogue between East and West; however, it is so difficult to unpack and so loaded now with the baggage of its initial reception, such a dialogue seems very unlikely.
WORKS CITED LIST

“al’Mas’udi”. Britannica Online. Encyclopedia

Benedetti, Christine, ChristineCrabb, Kelly Machel, and Lisa Ro. “Fundamental Differences”.


