Reign of Faith and Reason?

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The controversy surrounding the speech of Pope Benedict XVI entitled ‘Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections’ has evoked so much interest due to a variety of reasons. It may be helpful to examine in depth some of these reactions, so that we will be able to promote a greater understanding and mutual trust among people of all faiths today. It may not have been strange that initial media reports and reactions drew varied responses from both Muslims and Christians alike. There are many unanswered questions that can only be found by looking at the full text of the speech bearing in mind both the context in which the ideas that were developed in this philosophical discourse, as well as the intent of the speaker.

It may be helpful to begin by focussing on the various implications of the contents and intent of the message of the Pope Benedict VI at University of Regensburg on the 12th of September 2006. The voices from many in the Muslim world claim that his presentation was a blatant attack on Islam. At the same time Christians have argued that it was a call for a serious introspection on the part of the West. In desiring to take a closer look at these responses, we need to be conscious not to fall into the trap of attempting to slot them into the stereotypical categories of traditionalists, moderates, progressives, fundamentalists or extremists. It is therefore vital that we do not look at these different perspectives as conflicting but as differences that need to be further scrutinised. This is because we urgently need to move towards a greater mutuality in understanding the underlying paradigms and perspectives in order to work towards the greater common good of humanity.

It is significant that a quote to illustrate a philosophical argument about violence has provoked such anger from various Muslim quarters. Many have asked the question: Was he speaking as a Pope or as a Professor? Was his statement a political slogan or an attempt to understand the philosophical roots of the growing violence and wars in the world today? Those scrutinising the core of his message at Regensburg, can see that the reference to the controversial quote from the Byzantine Christian Emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, was an integral part of this philosophical discourse which attempted to make the point that reason cannot justify violence. The argument of the Emperor was that violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. The most important question that each believer has to ask is: How many Christians and Muslims today really believe that violence by its very nature is not in keeping with the plan of the Divine?

Many of us would like to believe that the Pope in quoting this text is not only condemning the use of violence by some Muslims today, but is also challenging and confronting anyone who engages in violence. This has to bring one to the realisation that one ceases being a believer, be s/he Christian, Hindu or Muslim, when one promotes violence, as this goes against Reason and God, who is the source of Reason. This position is reflected in the first Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, God is Love (Deus Caritas Est), where the proclamation of the Christian God as Love is intimately linked to the charity (Caritas – Love) for each human person and justice for the whole human family. This is the only path to true Peace and Reconciliation in the world today. Peace flows from our faith in God; and this faith includes reason which gradually seeks to find expression as a lived faith in the world of violence, war and inequalities today.

The source that Pope Benedict used seems to be prejudicial. However does it undermine the validity and relevance of the argument for our times? Put into context, the Emperor Manuel II who, when under
siege from Muslim armies, questioned the religious legitimacy of violence. The Emperor was writing around the year 1400 as he fought to keep the Turks, from overrunning his empire that finally fell into their hands in 1453. Was the Pope in repeating Manuel's claim that the demand to spread Islam by the sword was ‘evil and inhuman’, also guilty of condemning only the violence of Muslims? Perhaps he might not have been so ‘misconstrued’, as he put it, if he had also similarly referred to the violence of the Crusades.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church (No: 496 - 497) published in 2004, as a result of more than 100 years of study and discernment, states the official position on violence:

"Violence is never a proper response. With the conviction of her faith in Christ and with the awareness of her mission, the Church proclaims "that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy of man. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings."

The contemporary world too needs the witness of unarmed prophets, who are often the objects of ridicule. "Those who renounce violence and bloodshed and, in order to safeguard human rights, make use of those means of defence available to the weakest, bear witness to evangelical charity, provided they do so without harming the rights and obligations of other men and societies. They bear legitimate witness to the gravity of the physical and moral risk of recourse to violence, with all its destruction and death."

The Magisterium condemns "the savagery of war" and asks that war be considered in a new way. In fact, "it is hardly possible to imagine that in an atomic era, war could be used as an instrument of justice. War is a "scourge" and is never an appropriate way to resolve problems that arises between nations, "it is never been and it will never be", because it creates new and still more complicated conflicts. When it erupts, war becomes an "unnecessary massacre", an "adventure without return" that compromises humanity's present and threatens its future. "Nothing is lost by peace. Everything is lost by war. The damage caused by an armed conflict is not only material but also moral. In the end, war is "the failure of all true humanism", it is always a defeat for humanity: never again some peoples against others, never again! ...no more way, no more war!""

This would be the views of both the current Pope and the Universal Church on violence. What was therefore the point of this conversation between the Emperor and the scholar? The full text of the Pope can be seen not as a condemnation of violence perpetrated by some Muslims, but as an appeal to Christians to a rediscovery of their biblical faith. The Pope attempts to show that in the Hellenistic period, Christianity encountered the best of Greek thought at a deep level, resulting in a mutual enrichment of faith and reason. To be able to dialogue with the cultures of today thus requires a return to the foundations of western civilisation rooted in reason and in dialogue with faith. The statement by the Byzantine Emperor to the Persian Muslim highlights the need to bring together the Christian faith and reason as the premise for an on going dialogue with people of other faiths. This may be more and more difficult to attain in an increasingly secularising Europe and particularly in a growing, and perhaps misplaced, sense of fear generated by the increasing numbers of Muslims in Europe.

The Pope concluded that positive aspects and insights of the modern age are not to be rejected. Neither can we relegate religion to the margins of social life. We cannot run away from the fundamental issue as to whether acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature. The challenge today is therefore to return to the historic Christian faith in consonance with reason. It has to begin with an intra-ecclesial dialogue
and critique on the essentials and the fundamentals of the Christian faith. This will prepare us to enter into dialogue with people of all faiths today. Moving us to our roots will give us new sources to enrich our genuine dialogue with all cultures and religions – a dialogue so urgently needed today.

We are all aware of the turmoil that this statement has created in the Muslim world. To make matter worse, these events must have also reinforced in the minds and hearts of those who witnessed these angry reactions in the media, their own sense of fear of retaliation and revenge. The question therefore has to be whether this ‘imprudent’ quote was a condemnation of violence in parts of the Muslim world or a challenge to end all forms of violence in the world today. To some, Manuel's challenge of Byzantine Christianity to ‘Muslim Violence’ seems also to be the same challenge that needs to be posed to repudiate ‘Christian Violence’. In fact, Byzantine orthodoxy helped formulate the first just war theories, which argued that Christians should only engage in warfare for defensive purposes. But as we have seen today, even the notions related to just wars are being redefined in the context of ‘terrorism’ and pre-emptive attacks as a justification for global peace and security.

So the Pope's authoritative stand seems to be also a double edged sword: it is a denunciation that applies equally to Christians and to Muslims, as well as to those who wage war in the name of God and religion. Has the real message of the Pope's lecture been missed? Theologically, it is apparent that we need to chart a common path for all the monotheistic faiths and come to the realisation that there have been perversions in the use of war and violence. Indeed, he suggested that insofar as Islam has gone wrong, so has Christianity.

Pope Benedict argued further that the common paradigm that underpins the illegitimate justification of war by religion is the separation of faith and reason. The hallmark of fundamentalism is the claim to have direct, unmediated access to the will of God. Reason prevents this logic by stressing that knowledge of God is never direct, but is always partial, limited and mediated. The recognition of the impossibility of direct knowledge of God should prevent people from killing in his name. In fact, the Pope's lecture has brought into focus the need for a new kind of Interreligious Dialogue. It acknowledges that a fresh engagement among faiths is an urgent necessity today. Although the Second Vatican Council and the teachings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences have recognised the importance of dialogue, many would claim it has been a “liberal dialogue” that has had limited impact in the global arena. This may have been due to our inability to enter into a genuine dialogue with the fundamentals and essentials of our own faith and faith traditions. Side by side with this may have been the framework of various forms of "secular fundamentalism": the tendency to make rationalism the new name for God, without the ability to lend a listening year to the voices of the Divine rooted in our revealed faiths. One form of this is the rampant and predominant economic rationalism of globalisation and its accompanying political and cultural homogenisation. Are religions so divided in their inner core that they are unable to offer a new and radical solution confronting the post-modern world?

Liberal models of interfaith understanding rely on exactly the separation of faith and reason that the Pope sees in religious fundamentalism. Reason shows us that there is only one God but faiths are assumed to be private and mutually incompatible. Thus they are relegated to an interior sphere that they cannot meet and debate with each other. Secular reason, understood as being value-free and religiously neutral is thus seen as the way to promote and protect the interactions of these privatised faiths. Hence, it is to be expected that religious people have become more and more involved with their institutional self-preservation, rather than make courageous moves into the "world of the secular" (defined as the political, economic and social) in order to nurture them with the spiritual dimensions of their faith. But this seems to be only possible with the merger of faith with reason and the movement to a higher level
of dialogue with people of other faiths who are also ready to be involved in a dialogue of mutuality and graduality.

The Pope in highlighting the importance of mutual dialogue may see again the resurgence of a new era of dialogue and the wish to restore the possibility of the great faiths talking to each other. It is not about going back to the Middle Ages but to be able to take the middle path, when faith and reason are not separated and where Christians could attempt to understand the unique God Experiences as a Human Person who happens to be a Muslim and Muslims to do likewise. We hope that the Church in Asia takes the cue with sensitivity and courage to enter into an authentic theological engagement among the people of all faiths in Asia and especially with our Muslim sisters and brothers.

The lesson to be learned from this controversy, according to the head of the French Council for the Muslim Religion, Dalil Boubakeur, is for the Catholic Church to clarify its position so that it does not confuse Islam, which is a revealed religion, with Islamism which is not a religion but a political ideology. We, as Christians at the same time need to make a clear distinction between our fundamental beliefs as Christians and the way Christians have also resorted to violence both in our historical past and in the world today. Our history has shown us that the path through mutual dialogue today in spite of our differences and divergent world views cannot be relegated to politicians, but has to be the responsibility of intellectuals, and religious and civil leaders to engage in genuine dialogue and to be deeply in touch with the faith sentiments of their respective believers.

Those who have known Pope Benedict as an intellectual would claim that the topic of his presentation on Faith and Reason is also the central theme of his pontificate. Europe in general and his native homeland in particular, is facing a new crisis rooted in the rise of various forms of secularism. This fight against secularism has to be addressed at its very foundation as summed up in the penultimate paragraph of his speech: "The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby. The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur -- this is the programme with which a theology grounded in biblical faith enters in the debates of our time". It was an urgent appeal to the university community to rediscover reason (logos) as the path to a true dialogue of cultures.

Our experiences as Church in Asia and our on-going daily encounters with millions of Muslims affirm our belief that we can be one of the key agents to heal the wounds of the past and the present. We need to seek earnestly to promote mutual understanding that can only come through a greater commitment to compassionate, humanitarian endeavours and projects that promote justice and sustainable development in countries plagued by vicious cycles of dehumanising poverty, including in countries with predominantly Muslim populations. This movement towards harmony has to begin with a reassertion of reason that "is not deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of the subcultures (is) incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures". We are sure that our way forward to a new harmony in the world and in Asia has to be with a greater sensitivity to the realities of people of other faiths. This can begin with a critique of our own inadequacies and failings and at the same time through a firm commitment to our fundamental beliefs that will act as our pledge to the well being of the whole of humanity.

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