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# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop  
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## WHAT POPE BENEDICT SAID

During his mid-September travels in his native Germany, Pope Benedict XVI went to the University of Regensburg. Much of his German trip was a stroll down memory lane, as he visited the town of his birth and other places that he had known before moving to Rome as Pope John Paul II's prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. The Regensburg leg of the journey included a lecture to the university community. In the first lines of his address, the former professor of theology remembered fondly his early days as a teacher at the University of Bonn. It was 1959, and the students and professors from every academic department came together once a semester for a day of lectures and discussions. For that day the usual boundaries created by academic specialization were breached, and everyone could talk to everyone else, "working in everything on the basis of a single rationality with its various aspects and sharing responsibility for the right use of reason." Bonn had not just one but two departments of theology, whose members joined in the discussions that inquired into "the reasonableness of faith... the faith which theologians seek to correlate with reason as a whole." This is, the pope insisted, an absolutely essential enterprise, this pursuit of the question of God through the use of reason. This must be carried forward not only within the West, but also in a dialogue between the West and other parts of the world, and particularly those parts of the world where the religion of Islam is dominant.

The pope set as the purpose of his lecture the

discussion of a single point within that dialogue, the question of whether or not it is in the nature of God to act with reason. Although Christianity, throughout its two thousand year history, has generally answered that question with a Yes, it no longer speaks with one voice on the matter, and significant numbers of Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, are now inclined to either answer it in the negative or deny its importance. Muslims, on the other hand, with their emphasis on the utter transcendence of God, insist that God is beyond all human categories, including that of reason, and so it is not at all in his nature to be bound by rationality. As a focal point for illustrating the difference in theology between the two faiths, the pope chose the issue of violent coercion in religion, and to introduce this point, he chose a dialogue that took place in 1391 between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian Muslim, the proceedings of which were recently published in a new edition by Professor Theodore Khoury of the University of Münster, a book the pope had evidently just finished reading.

And it was here that Pope Benedict cited the lines that were no doubt the most quoted and re-quoted lines of the month. The pope noted that the emperor addressed his partner in dialogue "with a startling brusqueness" on the central matter of the relationship between violence and religion. The emperor said: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhu-

man, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” The emperor then went on to explain why spreading religious faith by violence is evil and inhuman – it is evil because it is unreasonable. Violence is not compatible with either the nature of God or the nature of the human soul. “God is not pleased by blood,” the emperor continued, “and not acting with reason is contrary to God’s nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... 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...”

Manuel II Paleologus was of course a Greek Christian, a man shaped by the gospel of Christ and by Greek philosophy. The core assumption of his argument – that not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature – would have been self-evident to him. However, the pope points out, this would not have been the case with his Muslim interlocutor, whose faith proclaims that God is above all, even above reason, and so is not limited to our category of rationality. Thus this late 14<sup>th</sup> century dialogue shows clearly that we cannot avoid the question of whether the emperor’s core assumption is merely a Greek idea, or something that is always and everywhere true.

The pope’s firm conviction is that there is a “profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God.” Citing the first verse of John’s gospel (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”) Benedict notes that the thrice repeated “Word” (*logos* in Greek) is precisely the term used by the emperor, for the Greek word *logos* means both “word” and “reason,” depending on the context. The emperor insists

that it is God’s nature to act with *logos*, that is, with reason. John 1:1 is thus one fairly obvious occasion of the encounter between Biblical faith and Greek thought. And, the pope points out, it was neither the first such encounter, nor did it happen by chance.

Greek thought and the faith of Israel had been rubbing shoulders even before the time of Alexander the Great, who died in 323 B.C. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity had made the Jewish people a minority within a vast empire with many religions and many gods. Like it or not, from this time on the revelation to Israel would be in dialogue with other religions and ways of thinking. With Alexander’s empire, the Greek language and philosophy were the dominant intellectual forces, within which and over and against which the Jews would have to define themselves and proclaim their faith. That Jewish thought was clearly influ-

enced and enriched by the Greek ideas can be seen in the development of the later Wisdom literature within the Bible. But it was not a one-way street. During this time the books of the Hebrew Bible were translated into Greek, and this translation, the Septuagint, made Jewish religious thought available to a wider Greek audience. The monotheism and the universal ethical code that is at the heart of the Hebrew Bible began to make its way into Greek thought. The philosophy of middle and later Platonism is not the same as what we read in the works of Plato. Greek thought by the time of the composition of the New Testament was clearly evolving and moving in the direction of monotheism, which movement was greatly aided by the dissemination of Jewish religious ideas via the Septuagint. Thus the Greek thought that John encountered and made use of in John 1:1 was already seeded with certain key concepts from Israel’s ancient faith. It is within and out of this



congruence that John asserts that the *logos*, “reason” if you will, is God.

Thus the pope discerns an “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry” that was to be decisive not just for the history of religion but for world history as well. In a statement that is startling in its sweep and depth, Pope Benedict says that not only did this convergence of faith and reason take place in Europe; Europe itself, he says, was created by this convergence (together with the later addition of the Roman heritage), and this convergence “remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.”

Greek patterns of thought and philosophy did not become an integral part of the Christian faith without objection. The pope notes that already in the late Middle Ages we see a theological trend, most clearly in Duns Scotus, that would break the synthesis of the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit. Scotus’ doctrine of the primacy of the will, together with his emphasis on the transcendence and otherness of God, is moving in the direction of an insistence that human reason, the human sense of what is true and good, cannot be a genuine mirror of God, whose deepest reality is infinitely above us and thus hidden behind his actual decisions. The Church, however, always maintained “that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy, in which... unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language.”

In what is surely the densest, most difficult section of his lecture, Pope Benedict traces the three historical phases in which “a dehellenization” of Christianity has been progressively attempted and, to a considerable degree, realized. Beginning with the Reformation, and moving into the metaphysics of Immanuel Kant, and into the liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries whose key spokesman was Adolf von Harnack, and ending up with the modern world and its positivist view of science, which understands reason in so narrow a way as to totally exclude religion and questions of faith, relegating them to a vague and totally subjective realm of “con-

science,” the pope marks the journey that has brought the West to its current situation. In the world of post-modern Western thought, a phrase like “the reasonableness of faith” is simply assumed to be a contradiction in terms, and the only conceivable relationship between faith and reason is taken to be opposition, or perhaps total mutual non-involvement. Pope Benedict decries this sundering of faith from reason, this breaking of the synthesis of Greek thought and Biblical faith. He does not at all advocate a return to the past, a pretending that the modern age never happened or never provided anything of value, but he does think that this divorce between the heritage of Jerusalem and the heritage of Athens is not sustainable, and that it needs to be rethought. One of its most tragic consequences is that it leaves the secular West bereft of the intellectual tools necessary for a genuine dialogue with people of faith, whether that faith is Christianity or Islam. Those tools can only be accessed by those who understand that theology and science belong together. “Only thus do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today.” The final paragraphs of his lecture focus on the urgency and necessity of that dialogue, and the role that the universities are called to play in it.

That is what Pope Benedict said. His lecture was mostly an analysis and criticism of certain intellectual developments in the West, but along the way he did point to a tendency within Islam to resort to violence and to justify it by religious reasons. Given the violence of the words and actions of some Muslims in response to the pope’s lecture – a nun shot in the back and killed in Somalia, churches burned in the West Bank, imams declaring that “Whoever offends our prophet Mohammed should be killed on the spot by the nearest Muslim” – no one can seriously deny that Islam has a violence problem or that the dialogue of cultures and religions that the pope called for is both necessary and urgent. Both the modern West and Islam, he said, would benefit from a rediscovery of “this great *logos*... this breadth of reason.” And in religion, this rediscovery begins with seeing that Manuel II



