Judgment at Regensburg

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During his apostolic journey to Germany in September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI aroused considerable controversy for remarks concerning Islam in the opening of his lecture, “Faith, Reason, and University: Memories and Reflections,” that he delivered at the University of Regensburg to representatives of science on September 12, 2006. The author reflects on the context and repercussions of the address for interreligious dialogue as its anniversary approaches.

Pope Benedict XVI’s address delivered at the University of Regensburg still garners public attention. There has been much speculation as to what Benedict XVI might have intended in the arena of Christian-Muslim relations in the speech. At his August 5 press conference preceding the visit to Germany, the initial question asked about the issues on which he would speak there, and he replied that he was not going to choose very specific themes. He mentioned how he had allowed the liturgies planned for the event to provide the basic theme of rediscovering God through the human face of Jesus and of searching “for cooperation among peoples and possible ways that can lead us to reconciliation and peace” (2006a). To a specific question on peace in the Middle East, he focused almost entirely on the war in Iraq. He also elaborated on the diverse Protestant communities in Germany and the specific needs of ecumenical dialogue with German Protestants. Only at one point did he intimate a theme that would recur in the address at Regensburg, and this was in response to a question on the church’s voice in the public arena of political and scientific discussion. Benedict XVI felt...
that the church has “to stress better what we want that is positive” and that this must be “in dialogue with cultures and religions.” He described how “the African spirit and the Asian spirit too are horrified by the coldness of our rationality.” Those engaged in secular activities, he told the reporters, should understand “that the Christian faith is not an impediment but rather a bridge for dialogue with other worlds.” Furthermore, he said, “It is not right to think that a purely rational culture has an easier approach to other religions just because it is tolerant.” Religion, he described, as the “centerpiece” and “a point of departure and arrival.” For today’s “intercultural environment,” he said, “pure rationality separated from God is insufficient.” The use of “intercultural” should be noted.

The theme of Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg was actually the final point given above but put differently, the ominous “dehellenization” of Christianity or the efforts that split apart the “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry.” His lecture was devoted to articulating this special relationship between faith and reason in Christianity, to identifying three stages, “although interconnected, they are clearly distinct,” in dehellenization, and drawing conclusions (2006b). He did not argue for “rejecting the insights of the modern age,” nor did he intend to criticize “the scientific ethos” described as “the will to be obedient to the truth.” He called for a broadening the concept of reason and for “reason and faith [to] come together in a new way,” thus allowing a recovery of reason as logos, the self-communicating reason that is intrinsic to the nature of God. (He had explored these same theses prior to his election as Pope; see reference at Benedict XVI, 2004.)

Hence, we can presume a reason for a reference to the “Conversations of Manuel II Paleologus,” the late Byzantine emperor, who challenged a Persian Muslim in the seventh conversation: “Not to act reasonably, not to act with logos, is contrary to the nature of God” (Benedict quotes from Khoury’s edition). Benedict reiterated this point some months after Regensburg in the annual papal address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2006: “The meeting with the university was dedicated—as befit the place—to the dialogue between faith and reason.” He said his lecture was about how “faith in that God who is in person the creative Reason of the universe must be accepted by science in a new way as a challenge and a chance” (2006e). With regard to the references to Islam in that September address, he said very little in late December:

In Regensburg, the dialogue between the religions was only marginally touched on and in a twofold perspective. Secularized reason is unable to enter into a true dialogue with the religions. It remains closed to the question of God, and this will end by leading to the clash of cultures.

The other perspective concerned the affirmation that the religions must encounter one another in the common task of putting themselves at the service of the truth and thus of the human being.
By then, Benedict XVI did not wish to reopen discussion of the controversies that his introductory remarks at Regensburg had ignited. His trip to Turkey in late November had been successful despite considerable hype in the press beforehand. The November 27, 2006, cover of *Time* read, “The Pope Confronts Islam: How Benedict XVI’s first visit to a Muslim nation could reshape the debate between Islam and the West.” In Turkey, Benedict had assured Mr. Ali Bardakoglu, who heads the Directorate of Religious Affairs and is the country’s highest Muslim official, that the “best way forward is via authentic dialogue between Christians and Muslims, based on truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better, respecting differences and recognizing what we have in common” (2006d). He led into this statement by repeating what he had said to Muslims in Cologne in August 2005: that “our interreligious and intercultural dialogue . . . cannot be reduced to an optional extra; . . . it is a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.”

In referring back to his address in Cologne while he was in Ankara, Benedict XVI was attempting to explain why he links intercultural with interreligious on some occasions or expands the term “religion” into “civilization” on other occasions, whenever he refers to interreligious dialogue in a major way. For example, in his first speech as Pope, following the morning liturgy on April 20, 2005, he had pledged to “make every effort and dedicate myself to pursuing the promising dialogue that my predecessors began with various civilizations because it is mutual understanding that gives rise to conditions for a better future for everyone” (2005b). The words were addressed “to everyone, even to those who follow other religions or who are simply seeking an answer to the fundamental questions of life and have not yet found it.” The words came after the Pope’s reference to progress on the road to ecumenism and how that theological dialogue is necessary. From the beginning, Benedict distinguished between ecumenism and interreligious relations by identifying ecumenical dialogue as necessarily theological and by associating interreligious dialogue with intercultural dialogue.

On April 25, 2005, when greeting Muslims who had attended his installation, Benedict expressed “appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians, both at the local and international level” (2005a). Then he shifted to more general language, assuring that the church would “continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions in order to seek the true good of

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every person and of society as a whole.” He concluded with a reflection on peace, “a duty to which all peoples must be committed,” and urged all to become “artisans of peace in a reciprocal commitment to understanding, respect and love.”

Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue

It seems, then, that Pope Benedict did not intend “and” when connecting interreligious and intercultural dialogue to mean “both,” but rather he wanted “and” to indicate they are one and the same reality. This became clearer in the papal address to Muslims in Cologne on August 20, 2005 (2005c). Cologne was his first formal meeting with Muslims although the major reason for the trip to Cologne was to connect with World Youth Day. The day before meeting Muslim representatives from Germany, he was in the Roonstrasse Synagogue with 500 Jewish representatives, identified as only the second time a modern pope has entered a Jewish place of worship.

By contrast, Benedict met ten Muslims (seven men and three women) at the residence of the archbishop of Cologne, where he had also met Protestant and Orthodox leaders the day before. In the ecumenical meeting, he discussed questions arising from the theological dialogues. By contrast, an advance copy of the papal address to Muslims revealed a rather strongly put message on terrorism. After broaching the topic of the spread of terrorism, Benedict inserted two statements that were not in the original message:

I know that many of you have firmly rejected, also publicly, in particular any connection between your faith and terrorism and have condemned it. I am grateful to you for this, for it contributes to the climate of trust that we need.

These intervening sentences softened his message a bit; otherwise, after mentioning the spread of terrorism, he would have moved directly to a description of the effects of terrorism: grief, despair, poisoning of relations, destroying trust, and making use of all means, including religion, to oppose peaceful efforts. These words were there, but only after he first reached out to Muslims as partners in rejecting terrorism. Then, before giving another description of terrorism as a perverse and cruel choice, he introduced more words of outreach not in the text distributed in advance, “Thanks be to God, we agree on the fact that terrorism of any kind is a perverse and cruel choice which shows contempt for the sacred right to life and undermines the very foundations of all civil coexistence.”

These and other last-minute changes made the address more inviting to a common position. The thrust of the message is the same in both versions, namely, the dignity of the person and defense of human rights are unmistakably the “clear voice of conscience.” This is the sort of philosophical and public dialogue Benedict
intended by his words to Muslims and others the previous April. In his Cologne address, he lamented so much fighting between Christians and Muslims in the past and acknowledged the need for reconciliation in two long paragraphs that lead to a citation of a fair amount of *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3, the extended passage of Vatican II on Muslims:

The Church looks upon Muslims with respect. They worship the one God living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves whole-heartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God. . . . Although considerable dissensions and enmities between Christians and Muslims may have arisen in the course of the centuries, the Council urges all parties that, forgetting past things, they train themselves towards sincere mutual understanding and together maintain and promote social justice and moral values as well as peace and freedom for all people.

Then, Benedict underscores this passage with words not in the advance copy of the address: “For us, these words of the Second Vatican Council remain the Magna Carta of the dialogue with you, dear Muslim friends, and I am glad that you have spoken to us in the same spirit and have confirmed these intentions.”

What, then, is not to be reduced to an “optional extra”? (2005c; cf. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 20). Further clues are available in Benedict’s address to the Roman Curia at the end of 2005. As usual for these end-of-the-year curial speeches, the Pope reflects on the major church events of the year, which for 2005 were: the death of John Paul II and a consideration of his contribution to modern discussion; the World Youth Day in Germany; the synod of bishops on the Eucharist; and finally the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the end of Vatican II. He offered some extended comments on the last topic that are insightful for how he views Vatican II and specifically the interreligious dialogue launched by the council.

Benedict reflected on the hermeneutic of reform as a more valid interpretation of the council than the hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture (for a differing view, see O’Malley). He traces the implications of this for the issues raised by the new questions of Vatican II; namely, questions of the relationship of faith to science; of the relationship between the church and the modern world; and of the relationship between Christian faith and world religions. The latter he outlines entirely in the context of tolerance, freedom, and the modern state, and then he concludes that “the steps the council took toward the modern era, which had rather vaguely been presented as ‘openness to the world,’ belong in short to the perennial problem of the relationship between faith and reason that is re-emerging in ever new forms” (2005d). Curiously, but not surprising to us now in hindsight, he mentions how, in the thirteenth century, Aristotelian thought through Jewish and Arab philosophers came into contact with medieval Christianity. He summarizes the
thrust of his argument: “This dialogue [between faith and reason] must now be developed with great open mindedness but also with that clear discernment that the world rightly expects of us in this very moment.” Benedict XVI is reading Nostra Aetate through the lens of philosophical sharing and public discussion of the issues raised by two other texts of Vatican II, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World and The Declaration on Religious Liberty. By doing so, he is downplaying any connection of Nostra Aetate with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Decree on Ecumenism and emphasizing engagement in public policy over theological discussion.

The Regensburg Event

When Benedict XVI returned to Germany in September 2006, some might have expected a reference to Islam, considering recent public discussion of European identity and the growing Muslim population and of Turkey’s application for membership in the European Union in light of questions of identity, especially as argued earlier by Benedict XVI. Those who might have seen a copy of the address in advance were probably the only ones anticipating the sort of reference that was made. Before Benedict XVI spoke at his former university, most of the world had never heard of Emperor Manuel II Paleologus, who reigned at the end of the fourteenth century and in the final decades of the Byzantine Empire. Now, millions know something of him and his account of a dialogue with a Persian Muslim. In thinking of a way to introduce his critique of modern reason and the proposition that faith and reason need to come together in a new way, he might have recalled the work of a fellow professor in Germany, Adel Theodore Khoury, who had once been head of the theology department of Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. In fact, he says, “I was reminded of all this [the ability to raise the question of God through the use of reason] recently, when I read the edition of Professor Theodore Khoury. . . .”

Instead of making a passing reference to the dialogue translated and explained by Khoury, Benedict devoted several paragraphs to the text, offered a controversial reading of a passage in the Qur’an, and, unfortunately, allowed the line between narration and accusation to blur as he quoted directly an insult hurled by the Byzantine emperor at the character of Muhammad. In Benedict’s own words, the “startling brusqueness” of the emperor’s challenge to his Muslim interlocutor, which in the revised text of the lecture the Pope identified as “a brusqueness that we find unacceptable,” morphed into a contemporary challenge to Muslims rather than remaining a lesson from the past (Clooney). In Cologne, Benedict had sadly remarked to Muslims after briefly recounting how relations have not always been marked by mutual respect and understanding, “The lessons of the past must help us to avoid repeating the same mistakes.” The lesson, it seems, would be to avoid the polemical language of past.
In the address, Benedict quoted directly the words of the emperor: “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.” Five days later, in an extraordinary and unprecedented move, Pope Benedict apologized for offending Muslims, stating earnestly that the remarks do “not in any way express my personal thought.” He said this very clearly and directly: “At this time, I wish also to add that I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg, which were considered offensive to the sensibility of Muslims.” L’Osservatore Romano carried his apology on the front page in Arabic and other languages.

In introducing the challenge of Emperor Manuel II, the Pope refers to a passage in the Qur’an, surah 2:256, that strongly disagreed with the Pope’s cited interpretation: “There is no compulsion in religion.” He then says, “according to experts, this is one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat.” In the text issued later with endnotes, the sentence has changed to “According to some of the experts, this is probably one of the suras of the early period. . . .” In fact, Professor Khoury says this much in a note on this surah at another place in the conversation, namely, that this surah comes from a period preceding the battles of Muhammad and that the final teaching on jihad in surah 9, in passages after the successes of Muhammad, ought to be consulted (see also Paret). Pope Benedict adds a note to the insulting words of the emperor that “in quoting the text of Emperor Manuel II, I intended solely to draw out the essential relationship between faith and reason” and that “on this point I am in agreement with Manuel II but without endorsing his polemic.”

Response to Regensburg

Unfortunately, too much had been said, and arguments were advanced on Islamic interpretations of the Qur’an and positions on war and violence, besides the repetition of an insult that characterized centuries of polemics and of lack of dialogue and listening. Considerable response was provoked.

One would expect those who do not support dialogue and reconciliation to take political advantage of what was said. They were listening and reading the papal comments from the arena of politics and public values. Even those who could be counted as friends and partners in dialogue reacted negatively and publicly, including Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed al-Tantawi of al-Azhar University. Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss Muslim scholar and long appreciated for his desire for a respect for the values of Western democracies and willingness to engage the Islamic tradition in contemporary reflections, made the point that these challenges from such an important spiritual leader need to be addressed with respect and require a response that is accurate and intelligent.
Ramadan also released a statement on September 20 criticizing the violent reactions by Muslims to the speech.

Those Muslims who attended the special session with the Pope on September 25, 2006, at Castel Gandolfo were mostly ambassadors (2006c). The Vatican Secretariat of State had taken charge of handling the negative responses to Regensburg. Cardinal Paul Poupard, who had been named president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue some months earlier while retaining his position as president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, was also present and had opened the meeting with a few statements. Cardinal Poupard mentioned how Benedict was calling “us all, at the dawn of this new millennium, to work together towards a new symbiosis of faith and reason in a trusting and peaceful dialogue between religions and cultures that have within them at the very heart of their differences the testimony of the human person’s specific openness to the highest mystery, the mystery of God.”

Cardinal Poupard’s appointment was not without some controversy. The former head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue since 2002 and before that had served as secretary of the same office since 1987 was Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald. A member of the Missionaries of Africa, Fitzgerald had studied Arabic, had taught Islam, and published on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations long before his appointment to the Pontifical Council. Rather than leaving this specialist on Islam as head of the office for interreligious dialogue, Benedict XVI had appointed him his ambassador to Cairo and delegate to the League of Arab States and called upon a cardinal at retirement age to take the post temporarily (see Borelli 2006a and 2006b). With the Secretariat of State handling the situation, Fitzgerald’s services were unexpectedly even more valuable in Cairo. More recently, he has been helpful in trying to arrange a visit of Sheikh Tantawi of al-Azhar University with Benedict. Rather than being a demotion or punishment for handling dialogue with Muslims incorrectly, the appointment of Fitzgerald can be better understood as a step in the shift in emphasis by Benedict XVI regarding interreligious dialogue.

That well-reasoned response to Benedict from Muslims, for which Tariq Ramadan called, first came in any organized fashion in the form of an “Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI” and signed by thirty-eight Muslim leaders and scholars about a month after Regensburg. Respectful in tone, it combines theological and philosophical statements, offering some exegesis of surah 2:256, underscoring the importance of reason in the Islamic tradition, and taking on other points from the introduction to the speech at Regensburg. They say toward the end, “We share your desire for frank and sincere dialogue, and to recognize its importance
in an increasingly interconnected world.” They cited *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3, and a speech of John Paul II recalling his famous 1985 address to tens of thousands of Muslim young people in Casablanca. In Turkey at the end of November, Pope Benedict would refer to the words of John Paul II spoken in Ankara in 1979 that called for developing the spiritual bonds that unite Christians and Muslims as he had referred to the words of John Paul II in Casablanca in 1985 when speaking to Muslims in Cologne.

**The Future of Interreligious Dialogue**

Ankara might have been the end of the journey from Regensburg in one sense, but some confusion remains on the sort of interreligious dialogue that will be emphasized during the rest of the papacy of Benedict, on whether the desires of Muslims for a real exchange of views with the Pope will be met, and on other matters. Recent articles in the secular press reveal considerable confusion about the message of Pope Benedict XVI on a number of issues, including “salvation outside of the Church” (see, e.g., Kramer and Shorto).

The legacy from 1965 and the first steps of the Catholic Church in the arena of interreligious dialogue in general and dialogue with Muslims in particular are quite remarkable. Considering the buildup to Vatican II, some have been at this work for fifty years. That is what is at stake after Regensburg. Either we begin a serious theological dialogue with support from the Vatican or we give up all hope that what has happened in a few meager steps in local churches, at universities, and in conferences and funded dialogues will continue to grow into something significant for both Catholic teaching and Muslim positions. Theological dialogue has always been difficult for the Vatican with Muslims because of the international sphere in which it would take place. Rather, the policy of the pontifical council has been to encourage dialogue where it can happen and to promote through its efforts ongoing relationships with international leaders. Now, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue does little else than support external efforts.

If anything, the whole affair has shown the opposite, namely, how important theological dialogue in an interreligious context is. The desire of Sheikh Tantawi to visit Rome, the sincere reply of the religious leaders and scholars in their “Open Letter,” and the continuing good will of Muslim leaders, despite the offense they take more regularly from religious and political leaders, are all evidence that Muslims want to engage in serious theological discussion. Of course, the pressing problems of contemporary society require more immediate attention than the slow and careful pace of theological dialogue when representatives of various religions enter into deeper understandings of their own and their partners’ religious traditions. Reciprocity between Christians and Muslims regarding religious freedom and justice is one matter and something we should expect from one another in all political and social contexts. Reciprocity regarding the sharing of faith with one
another through study and theological dialogue is another matter. In the context of theological dialogue and spiritual sharing, demanding reciprocity is out of place. Instead, reciprocity is a gift that comes to us, to paraphrase the Pope in Turkey, “via authentic dialogue between Christians and Muslims, based on truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better.”

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