

“The Weaponization of Reason”

by William T. Cavanaugh, DePaul University, Chicago, USA*

In his commentary on the Regensburg lecture, Christopher Hitchens contended that Pope Benedict XVI had “really ‘offended’ the Muslim world, while simultaneously asking us to distrust the only weapon—reason—that we possess in these dark times” (“Papal Bull,” *Slate.com*, Sept. 18, 2006). For Hitchens and other militant secularists, reason is the opposite of faith. Reason must be liberated from faith not only for the advance of science but also for the advance of peace. The standard secularist assumption—which Hitchens lays out in his 2003 book *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*—is that religion is inherently absolutist, divisive, and irrational, and therefore has a peculiar tendency toward violence that secular ideologies and institutions do not share. The solution to violence is therefore to keep reason untainted by faith by promoting the separations that secularism is known for: science from religion and state from church or mosque.

Hitchens’ reference to reason as a “weapon,” however, might be more revealing than he intended it to be. Hitchens excoriates medieval Christendom for being spread and maintained by “every kind of violence and cruelty and coercion,” but he is a fervent backer of violence in the name of secularism: “And I say to the Christians while I’m at it, ‘Go love your own enemies; by the way, don’t be loving mine’... I think the enemies of civilization should be beaten and killed and defeated, and I don’t make any apology for it” (quoted in Chris Hedges, *I Don’t Believe in Atheists* [New York: Free Press, 2008], 23). Hitchens was an enthusiastic supporter of the Iraq War, which Cardinal Ratzinger opposed. Reason is apparently after all not the *only* weapon secularism has at its disposal; reason comes equipped with cluster bombs, tanks, white phosphorus, mortars, bombers, guided missiles, and so on. In his article “Bush’s Secularist Triumph” (*Slate.com*, Nov. 9, 2004), Hitchens applauds what the Iraq War has done for secularism, which is “a possible way of democratic and pluralistic life that only became thinkable after several wars and revolutions had ruthlessly smashed the hold of the clergy on the state. We are now in the middle of another such war and revolution,” and there can be no compromise. “It is not possible for me to say, Well, you pursue your Shiite dream of a hidden imam and I pursue my study of Thomas Paine and George Orwell, and the world is big enough for both of us. The true believer cannot rest until the whole world bows the knee” (*God is not Great*, 31). The true believer he has in mind is the Islamist, but the true believer in liberated reason must also not rest until the whole world has been converted to secularism, by force if necessary.

I am using Hitchens as my example here, but there are countless others whose indictment of religion inures them to the violence that secularism can do. Cardinal Ratzinger’s and Pope John Paul II’s reservations about the U.S. invasion of Iraq certainly look prescient in light of the

chaos that has become of the Middle East since the Iraq War. The broader and deeper point, however, is that Benedict XVI had a vision of reason that could resist its weaponization, a vision he tried to summarize in his Regensburg address. In attempting to bring together reason and faith in a holistic synthesis, Pope Benedict was trying to resist both irrationalist forms of faith that lead to fanaticism and truncated forms of reason that require a kind of hostility and intolerance toward the world's great faith traditions. Benedict's controversial comments on Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus were intended to refuse any conception of God that floats free of reason. If God's nature is rational, then "To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind," in the emperor's words. At the same time, Benedict refuses the violence of a reductive and excluding type of reason: "Yet the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their most profound convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures."

Most of the attention the Regensburg lecture received focused on what was perceived as an attack on the irrationality of the Islamic view of God. Pope Benedict could have avoided this negative reaction by leaving out the emperor's harsh words about the "evil and inhuman" things Mohammed brought. Benedict is also probably wrong in consigning the Qu'ran's injunction against "compulsion in religion" to the earlier, Meccan, suras, with the implication that the more developed Islam fully embraced religious coercion. The scholarly consensus seems to be that Surah 2, in which the injunction appears, is from the later, Medinan, period. Pope Benedict is right to argue against the kind of voluntarism that unmoors God from reason, but he could have done more to avoid the impression that such voluntarism is hard-wired into Islam, which exhibits a great deal of complexity and variation across time and space. The seventh paragraph of the address more helpfully presents voluntarism as a problem in the thought of Duns Scotus and Ibn Hazm, not Christianity or Islam as such.

Unfortunately, the controversy over the Pope's comments on Islam have only fed the secularist narrative about the intractability of conflict between religions and the necessity of freeing reason from the darkness of faith. Reason in the secularist view is a remainder that is left behind once faith is stripped away. As Charles Taylor has shown in his magisterial book *A Secular Age*, however, such "subtraction" theories of secularization are mythological. Secularization is not in fact the subtraction of religion from some natural secular substrate, nor is reason what remains when the pure fancy of faith is done away with. The secular realm and secular reason are not uncovered but invented; they are new things, byproducts of certain kinds of political and cultural changes, which Taylor traces to certain mutations within European Christianity. There is nothing natural or inevitable about the reduction of reason to the empirically falsifiable. Benedict makes a plea not just for adding back faith to reason, but recognizing a broader type of reason that can include questions about God and about human purpose and meaning.

As Pope Benedict suggests, a reductive conception of reason quarantined from faith is not only truncated and inadequate; it is easily turned violent. If questions of purpose and meaning are excluded from what is considered reasonable, then choosing an answer to such questions becomes arbitrary, and “the subjective ‘conscience’ becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical.” Though Benedict does not do so explicitly, it is not hard to connect the dots between such an arbitrary view of human meaning and violence: if we cannot have reasoned arguments about human meaning, we can only hope to coerce one another into accepting our worldview. The secularist imagines that this is only a problem for the religious person who refuses to privatize human meaning. But the attempt to privatize worldviews is itself a worldview, one for which zealots like Hitchens are ready to do considerable violence. One can perhaps forgive the average citizen in today’s Middle East, trying to find shelter from the storm, for not seeing Western attempts to impose secularism through war as peacemaking, rational, and neutral. Pope Benedict helps us see the conflagration in the Middle East for what it, at least in part, is: the violent confrontation of two mirror images of faith-without-reason and reason-without-faith. It is certainly the case that any long-term peace in the Middle East will need to avoid intolerant and sectarian forms of government. Any long-term peace, however, will also need to avoid the weaponization of reason, and allow, as Benedict writes, “reason and faith come together in a new way.”

*William T. Cavanaugh is Professor of Catholic Studies and Director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University, Chicago, USA. His degrees are from the universities of Notre Dame, Cambridge, and Duke. He is the author of many articles and six books, including *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and most recently *Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World* (Eerdmans, 2016). His books and articles have been translated into ten languages.