

Benedict's Narrowing Logos: The Bible, the Greeks, the West

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I remain grateful to Pope Benedict for his concern, as cardinal and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and then too as Pope, to preserve and promote the role of reason in the life of faith, faith and reason disciplined and focused by one another. I agree with the premise of the Regensburg lecture: God is not entirely beyond the reasonable; the Christian life does not benefit from an abandonment of reason; without a due integration of reason and faith, we are more prone to misunderstanding and violence. As the Emperor Manuel is quoted as saying, "Not to act reasonably, not to act with *logos*, is contrary to the nature of God." Acting reasonably is consonant with the nature of God, and conducive to a more peaceful religion.

Since in the Regensburg context Benedict evinced his readiness to speak as professor and to be responded to as professor, I feel it accordingly appropriate simply to engage his lecture on the merits of what he did and didn't say, without treating the speech as a papal declaration with implications for the wider Church as such. Although I will mention at the end of this piece his ancillary comments on Islam that caused global controversy, those will not be the focus of this reflection, lest that unfortunate segment of the lecture distract us from the main message of the whole of it. Rather, I wish to explore the substance and implications of his primary narrative, on reason in Christianity, and to express my discomfort and puzzlement at his steps from unobjectionable comments on faith and reason to what is, in my judgment, too close an identification of that dynamic with its Greek and then Western European instantiation. I agree that the Hebrew-Greek, and Christian-Greek encounters were very important and are formative; I do not think, however, that Benedict recognizes how the crucial interrelationship of faith and reason is not peculiar to a Christian Europe, and does not in some final way reach exclusive perfection there. Christianity's synthesis of faith and reason is crucial, but this does not make Christianity the unique, special, singular religion of peace.

Benedict observes that Greek reason and Biblical revelation have gone hand in hand from very early on, in a way evident in Biblical texts not only from the time that Logos became prominent in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, but even as early as the Book of Exodus: "In point of fact, this rapprochement [between faith and reason] had been going on for some time. The mysterious name of God, revealed from the burning bush, a name which separates this God from all other divinities with their many names and simply asserts being, "I am", already presents a challenge to the notion of myth, to which Socrates' attempt to vanquish and transcend myth stands in close analogy." This comment does not of course mean that the author of Exodus borrowed from the Greeks; it is only an analogy. We can easily see how this significant moment in the story of Israel was transformative with respect to the religion of the Hebrews. Something new indeed happened, when Moses encountered God on the holy mountain. That being so, however, Benedict might well have made more of the point that this analogy is operative in many other contexts too, for example in West and East and South Asia, in

Hinduism and Buddhism as well as Judaism and Islam. All these took myth seriously, even while both critiquing myth and extending the great narratives of their traditions to new circumstances.

The Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, is of crucial significance for Benedict: from the logos per se to the actual play of words, Hebrew into Greek. The Septuagint is “more than a simple (and in that sense really less than satisfactory) translation of the Hebrew text.” Rather, he boldly insists, “it is an independent textual witness and a distinct and important step in the history of revelation,” a step which furthered the encounter of faith and reason “in a way that was decisive for the birth and spread of Christianity.” For in it we find a “profound encounter of faith and reason,” “an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion.” The fact of the synthesis already present in the Septuagint suggests to Benedict that Manuel II, emperor in the East, was fundamentally correct: “From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act ‘with *logos*’ is contrary to God’s nature.”

But Benedict is not done, since he intends to maximize the decisiveness of this encounter: “This inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history - it is an event which concerns us even today.” Here Benedict would have done well to be more expansive in order to explain his thinking, since it is not self-evident that this rapprochement was unlike any other in “world history.” Putting aside the obvious fact that all such events are in a way unlike all others, here Benedict had more work to do. Staying with the expansive language of analogy, he easily might have pointed to parallel examples: the translation of the Buddhist Scriptures from Pali and Sanskrit into Tibetan and Chinese beginning in the first millennium CE; the rapprochement of Tamil and Sanskrit, no less dramatic than that of Hebrew and Greek, among South Indian Vaishnava Hindus before and after 1000 CE; or even, most pertinently, the translation of the Bible into hundreds of other languages around the world.

Benedict continues on his way, his interest narrowing still further, from faith and reason, to the Hebrew-Greek rapprochement, and then to the European settlement of Christianity, even to the world-historical significance of the European realization of a Christianity that found its full identity only and finally in the West (completed when “the Roman” is added to the Graeco-Biblical): “Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, *finally* took on its *historically decisive* character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.”

In the passage I just quoted, the second sentence is convincing, but the first requires much more explanation if it is to convince. That Europe thus found an enduring identity is a very important and often forgotten point, which Benedict rightly makes. More broadly, I also agree that we can and should honor the deep and important encounter of Europe and Christianity, without which it would be hard to understand either Europe or the Roman Catholic Church. But Benedict seems to exaggerate in the first sentence, making it sound as if that encounter is a *once only* event, *the* once only event, decisively and definitively unlike any later historical encounter that might occur at any time thereafter. It is not just that the encounter with the Greek world, way of

thinking, and language became part of the identity of the Church: this encounter helped finalize the Church's very core identity since, again, it is in Europe that the Church "*finally* took on its *historically decisive* character in Europe." At this point, the thesis seems less reasoned and reasonable than it should have been. As we know very well, Europe has kept changing, long after its Christian foundations were settled. Parts were immeasurably enriched by the presence of Jews and Muslims — think of Spain, before the expulsions and forced conversions of the 15th century — and now by Africans, Asians, and people from every part of the world. In a different way, the Reformation, in its various forms and stages, changed Christianity even in Europe, and not only for the worse. Globally, the Church has taken on providentially new characteristics in each new place where it has taken root, even during the controversial and ambiguous centuries of colonialism. There is much more to be said here before we can accept the "historically decisive" assessment as exclusive of alternative and later developments of analogous value.

Now it is true Benedict is intending to open a conversation, not close one down. In his mind, once we have allowed reason and faith to "come together in a new way," then "do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today." He urges a deep openness, in defiance of the closed-minded and dangerously reductionist mentality he sees throughout Europe today, and believes that the richer symbiosis of faith and reason will encourage the wider interreligious dialogue:

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... For philosophy and, albeit in a different way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding.

This is excellent, particularly if non-Christian and non-Western "experiences and insights" are truly respected for their profundity, and if Christian philosophers and theologians from outside Europe, and the religious intellectuals of other religions, are permitted to speak of their faith in fresh and unexpected words honored as worthy to be heard beside those spoken by Western Europeans. His vision is in principle generous:

The intention here is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism, but of broadening our concept of reason and its application. While we rejoice in the new possibilities open to humanity, we also see the dangers arising from these possibilities and we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons. In this sense theology rightly belongs in the university and within the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences, not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but precisely as theology, as inquiry into the rationality of faith.

But we cannot tell how this will be allowed to work out in practice, given what Benedict says and does not say in his lecture. Attitude matters.

A comparison and contrast will help here, and we can consider for a moment the teachings of John Paul II in the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. Eight years before Benedict's lecture, he too wrestled with the relation of the Gospel and cultures. John Paul speaks positively of the great opportunity provided by these encounters throughout history:

Jesus destroys the walls of division and creates unity in a new and unsurpassed way through our sharing in his mystery. This unity is so deep that the Church can say with Saint Paul: "You are no longer strangers and

sojourners, but you are saints and members of the household of God” (*Eph* 2:19). This simple statement contains a great truth: faith’s encounter with different cultures has created something new. When they are deeply rooted in experience, cultures show forth the human being’s characteristic openness to the universal and the transcendent. Therefore they offer different paths to the truth, which assuredly serve men and women well in revealing values which can make their life ever more human. Insofar as cultures appeal to the values of older traditions, they point—implicitly but authentically—to the manifestation of God in nature, as we saw earlier in considering the Wisdom literature and the teaching of Saint Paul. (*Fides et Ratio* 70)

The encounters are indeed fluid, and never decisively finished with. In the ongoing course of history, cultures again and again transform the Gospel, and are again and again transformed by it:

Inseparable as they are from people and their history, cultures share the dynamics which the human experience of life reveals. They change and advance because people meet in new ways and share with each other their ways of life. Cultures are fed by the communication of values, and they survive and flourish insofar as they remain open to assimilating new experiences... To everything they do, they bring something which sets them apart from the rest of creation: their unfailing openness to mystery and their boundless desire for knowledge. Lying deep in every culture, there appears this impulse towards a fulfilment. We may say, then, that culture itself has an intrinsic capacity to receive divine Revelation. *Every* culture interacts in this way with the Christian faith: “Cultural context permeates the living of Christian faith, which contributes in turn little by little to shaping that context. To every culture Christians bring the unchanging truth of God, which he reveals in the history and culture of a people...” (*Fides et Ratio* 71)

Of course, John Paul II is not in any sharp disagreement with his cardinal and advisor. He too recognizes the importance of the encounter with Greek thought,

In preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded. Today, as the Gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries. (*Fides et Ratio* 72)

And he too cautions against the temptation to ignore Greek culture altogether:

In engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church of the future, who will judge herself enriched by all that comes from today’s engagement with Eastern cultures and will find in this inheritance fresh cues for fruitful dialogue with the cultures which will emerge as humanity moves into the future. (ibid.)

John Paul II is simply better at balancing insights, in a way that does not needlessly offend. He honors the importance of Greek and Latin culture and thought — which he does not identify with “Europe” — and he readily admits that Western culture is not *the* criterion for the Gospel: “This means that no one culture can ever become the criterion of judgment, much less the ultimate criterion of truth with regard to God’s Revelation. The Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if in engaging a culture the Gospel would seek to strip it of its native riches and force it to adopt forms which are alien to it...” (ibid.) It is interesting that Benedict, speaking here as professor, does not quote at all from *Fides et Ratio*.

My concern has been that in his lecture, Benedict’s laudable project of showing that reason is not inimical to the Gospel, and that reason and faith stand together in resistance to violence, transmutes into the project of defending what seems for Benedict to be the inevitable fulfillment of Christianity in Western European thought and culture.

What is at stake for him becomes clearer when he takes up arms against the “third stage of dehellenization,” which argues that hellenization — and its sibling Europeanization — “ought not to be binding on other cultures.” Given the smooth flow of his thinking, it seems for him there is at stake to a providential Europeanization that must remain in force globally, wherever the Church is.

Benedict resists what is to him that vain hope of returning “to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation,” even if the hope is to inculturate the Gospel anew in their own non-Western, non-European “particular milieux.” He dismisses such a hope as false (*falsch*), coarse (*vergrößert*) and lacking in precision (*ungenau*), and does so very tersely: “The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed...” And so the main issues were simply resolved early on: “The fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.” Here again is a place where we wish someone in the audience would have asked Benedict for clarifications. Yes, fundamental decisions were made in the Mediterranean world, and then in to the other parts of the continent we now call Europe. And yes, God’s providential decision did indeed play out in the Gospel’s encounter with Greek culture and then in the European cultures formed in encounter with that Gospel. But is it not more prudent and indeed reasonable to think of this as a providential act that has always needed to play out over and again in different cultures? That the work of engaging cultures occurred so importantly in the West need not be taken as a justification for to saying nothing about the engagements of faith and reason, faith and culture, occurring outside of Europe, to the east and south early on, and later on in still farther parts of the world. The story of faith and reason is an ongoing one, and we remain students of God’s work in the world wherever the Church finds itself.

I would be remiss were I not to note that Benedict did not seem prepared to rise to the ideals of faith and reason he proposes, but rather stays too comfortably at home, within a Greek, European, German inculturation of the faith — again, I am thinking of the Benedict who lectured at Regensburg, where he speaks as a professor and must be honestly responded to by other professors. He does not give any concrete examples of what he thinks this “broadening” and these “new possibilities” and “vast horizons” will look like, and examples of his ventures beyond European ways of believing and reasoning are rare in the years of his papacy or at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The notes for his lecture itself give no indication that he read anything but European (French and German) Christian sources in order to explain faith and reason, in the Biblical, Greek, and European contexts. There is no indication that he consulted other views on the meaning of the revelation in Exodus 3, such as a Rabbinic Jewish reading, for instance, or pondered, even as did John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio*, scriptural books such Proverbs, certainly a source of deep reasoning within Jewish tradition that was not merely indebted to the Greeks. Examples matter. While the “empirically falsifiable” is a too narrow confine for divine mysteries, it is a very useful stricture indeed in much of our scholarship, that we be required to give examples of what we are talking about, examples that move beyond generalizations to instances that can be examined and debated. It is hard not to think that he is rather ill-attuned to how Christians outside Europe, and how the faithful in other religions, might see — in faith, reasonably, and without violence — the work of God in the world. He is a man who has lived

through a great age of religious pluralism, but has always seemed more worried about it than pleased by it.

When Benedict did, just once, give an example, we come unfortunately to the ill-fated reference to the imam, the emperor, and his judgment on Islam. It was odd that to begin his lecture, Benedict drew on the complicated account of the emperor and the learned Persian, and said both too much and too little about the emperor's dismissal of the prophet Mohammed:

But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur'an, concerning holy war. Without descending to details, such as the difference in treatment accorded to those who have the "Book" and the "infidels", he addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness[, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable,] on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: "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."

We know from the sad aftermath of the lecture that Benedict was quite surprised by the fierce reactions he received from Muslims, but from Catholics as well. Granting that Benedict did not intend to insult Muslims, it is still worrisome, though not surprising in light of the whole lecture, that he seemed not to anticipate that he would be offensive. Deeply committed to his Euro-centered "reasoning," he could not see how unreasonable and unfruitful — out of context, insufficiently explained — it would be to introduce some comments on Islam by way of citations from the emperor, simply in order to set the scene for a lecture on reason and religion..

Again, it was with a warmer tone than Benedict that John Paul evinced real enthusiasm for the encounter with the East, India in particular:

My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems. In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. (*Fides et Ratio* 72)

Or as Pope Francis said in New York City on September 25, 2015, at the interfaith service at the 9/11 Memorial:

In this place of sorrow and remembrance I am filled with hope, as I have the opportunity to join with leaders representing the many religious traditions which enrich the life of this great city. I trust that our presence together will be a powerful sign of our shared desire to be a force for reconciliation, peace and justice in this community and throughout the world. For all our differences and disagreements, we can experience a world of peace. In opposing every attempt to create a rigid uniformity, we can and must build unity on the basis of our diversity of languages, cultures and religions, and lift our voices against everything which would stand in the way of such unity. Together we are called to say "no" to every attempt to impose uniformity and "yes" to a diversity accepted and reconciled.

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