

Judaism and Dialogue on the Role of Reason

by Ruth Langer

Professor of Jewish Studies, Theology Department

Associate Director, Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

Boston College, USA

In his 2006 address at the University of Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI argued for the intrinsic relationship between faith and reason. Not only is reason critical to theology's quest to understand matters of faith, but the reason generating empirically demonstrable truth cannot stand alone without the moral and ethical guidance gained from God's revelation, the *logos*, also a form of reason. The addressees of his talk were not only the university community or Christians. Pope Benedict concluded by saying, "It is to this great *logos*, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures."

To Pope Benedict, this was a genuine invitation, but was it one to which my community, the Jewish community, could, should, or would respond positively? In general, the problems that the pope sought to address are ones that we share and that persist: a world that has pushed aside religion and its moral authority and a world convulsed by violence, often generated by interreligious rivalries. However, the pope's presentation of the categories of the problem are so specifically Christian that any actual dialogue needs to begin with demonstrating our points of difference, not of commonality. I offer this response as one who is indeed engaged in dialogue, most frequently with Catholic theologians. I speak only for myself and not for the larger and complex Jewish community.

The pope's diagnosis of the challenged role of religion in the contemporary university was and remains fundamentally correct. Public universities in the United States and most private ones increasingly question religion or theology as a category of academic inquiry, excluding it from its historically central role as a category of human culture. Today interest in and funding of the humanities in general are challenged, only exacerbating this reality. This is not entirely dependent upon, but is influenced by the empirical sciences' all too frequently rejection of religion as a source of understanding the world because its teachings generally cannot be demonstrated through controlled experiments. The pope correctly points out that while science may provide factual answers about human origins, it cannot answer "why," and it does not address the question of human destiny.

The pope only indirectly addresses the scientists' dismay at the destructive forces loosed by religion in our world. He perhaps alludes to them in his references to *jihad* and his rejection of using violence for the sake of religion, but this is not central to his discussion. Yet, this concern needed to be answered in 2006 and remains an issue today. Yes, religious authority, like any authority, can be, has been, and is abused to the ill of society – but this is misuse of religion's teachings and is not a reason to denounce all of religion any more than unethical applications of scientific findings should be permitted to stymie all scientific progress. Indeed, the moral aspect of religions, their consciousness of sin and the need to repair this sin, means that once sin has been identified, the means of rectifying behavior are ingrained in their systems. The repair work of Christian-Jewish relations is one stellar example of this transformation of a formerly abusive interhuman relationship into one of growing respect and peaceful interaction.

Central to Pope Benedict's talk, though, was an argument that "the breadth of reason" creates the meeting point for intergroup understanding. Presumably, he understands this reason to be essential to our common humanity and therefore a place from which practitioners of different academic disciplines and of different religions can begin a common discourse. However, it is precisely here that I have difficulties. Because I, and my understanding of my Jewish tradition, do not define religious reason in the same way that Pope Benedict did, this is not an invitation to which I can simply respond affirmatively. To begin with, the pope's understanding of religious reason is not universal; it is instead profoundly embedded in Christian history and theology. Indeed, the specifically Christian nature of his definition of reason is central to the entire speech. He begins by refuting the claim that "acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature [is] merely a Greek idea." He does not deny that the origins of the idea lie in Greek philosophy, but argues that John, in his modification of Genesis 1:1, created a "profound harmony" between *logos* as reason and biblical understandings and "thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and torturous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis." In other words, it is the Christian understanding of God, and God's self-communication as *logos*, a fundamentally Trinitarian understanding, that elevates and animates human reason. This means that Pope Benedict's invitation to join the "great *logos*" is effectively an invitation to participate in a Christian understanding of God and the world and not an invitation to dialogue that is sensitive to the self-understanding of those to whom it is issued. This is a problem.

Without question, *Nostra Aetate* gave legitimacy to pre-Christian Judaism, but one of the ongoing questions has been whether Catholics can understand the subsequent evolution of Judaism to be theologically justified as well. Jews certainly understand evolving post-biblical Judaism to be a legitimate continuation of the biblical covenant, but this is not explicitly stated in official Catholic documents (though many make statements that only make sense with this presumption). This post-biblical Judaism has its own engagement with its biblical heritage, one that does not include the New Testament. The form of post-biblical Judaism to survive and become dominant in the medieval world also did not privilege an engagement with Greek forms of reason. Instead, it developed its own rich intellectual heritage, operating with a system of logic and argumentation that requires significant acuity to learn, but is utterly foreign to those trained only in western thought. Yes, there were great medieval thinkers who brought the two systems together, but the theological texts produced never gained pride of place in the Jewish intellectual enterprise. Defining "reason" exclusively according to the terms of Hellenism, and even more so, of Christianized Hellenism, leaves Jews theologically on the outside and even irrational.

To Jews, God also communicates through the divine word, but that word is Torah. Torah has its first and most concrete form in the Pentateuch itself, and through the generations Jews have found God through this text (and secondarily with the rest of the Bible). The rabbis, after the birth of Christianity, called this process the "Oral Torah" and organized their logical discussions of its categories either according to interpretations of the biblical text (*midrash*) or according to categories of God's instructions for how to live (*halakhah*). The critical question for the rabbinic project is not the abstract philosophical one, of knowing God, but a concrete one, of knowing how God wants us to live our lives. Rabbinic reasoning processes, not shaped significantly by Hellenism, enable humans to move from the concrete written word of God to the more fluid, adaptable oral one.

Halakhah applies to every aspect of life, from the most mundane to the most ethereal. It shapes observant Jews' search for knowledge, including applications of science, use of reason, and most importantly the ways that we interact with God, our world, one another and ourselves, i.e., our ethical and moral behavior.

Judaism does not natively make category distinctions between these realms, so the pope's argument for the application of moral reasoning to scientific reasoning is superfluous. However, as a result, and like Pope Benedict, Jews can readily be critical of an empirical science that is heedless of God. Jewish scientists can and should be guided by applicable elements of God's teachings, and this is not a distinct category of living a life before God. In many ways, Pope Benedict seems to be reaching for just such a synthesis. A dialogue with the Jewish model might strengthen his argument.

Pope Benedict writes that "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." While standing alone, this sentence might seem unproblematic, in the context of the pope's larger address, it is problematic from a Jewish perspective. Contrasted to scientific reason that excludes the divine, his ideal "universality of reason" explicitly requires the values of a Hellenized Christianity – as he indicated through a series of arguments against forms of de-hellenized Christianity. It is therefore not universal from the perspective of non-Christian religious cultures as it excludes their paths to the truth.

In addition, the singularity of this "universal reason" raises other issues. Judaism teaches that, within some limits, Torah itself can be validly interpreted simultaneously in many different ways (limitations arise mostly regarding practical applications of Torah, but not regarding matters of theology). More importantly, Judaism does not teach that God has equivalent expectations of all humanity. Torah's detailed commandments are for Jews; God does want to be in relationship with all others, but the textual witnesses are ambiguous at best as to whether all should ultimately become Jews or whether each people's relationship with God is or will be on terms appropriate to them. In any case, Judaism does teach that there is righteousness among the nations of the world, and that this righteousness merits its practitioners "a share in the world to come," rabbinic language of salvation. Judaism thus emphasizes the value of the diversity of our world and does not seek universal common denominators.

The fundamental problems that the pope sought to address at Regensburg still remain. Perhaps his invitation was not heard as it might have been because its terms were easily perceived by those coming from outside of Christianity as an invitation to participate in Christianity. Jews, especially, because of their history of being the objects of Christian mission, of Christians not respecting their integrity as Jews or valuing their Judaism, greet such an invitation with deep reserve. Interreligious dialogue is critical in our world, but as something that will build understanding across cultures, not as something that will encourage people to submerge themselves into the majority culture and its ways of thought and belief. In order to issue an invitation to dialogue successfully, one must learn enough about the other that one can know where these differences lie, so that the invitation can be issued in terms that will be successful. From an inner-Christian perspective, there may be a presumption that "reason" is a sufficiently neutral category that successful dialogue can be constructed about it. As the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel II Paleologus discovered in his dialogue with a Persian, in dialogue with Islam, it is not so simple. The same could be said for dialogue with Judaism today.