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Reason, Islam and Christianity
A Debate Raised by Benedict XVI

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Abstract. The debate sparked off by Benedict XVI's speech in Regensburg has not only relaunched relations between Islam and Christianity, but has also provoked an internal debate in all around the world. In these lines we offer a summary of some interventions that have appeared so far, which serve to rethink and relaunch the current dialogue between faith and reason, modernity and Christianity, non-Christian religions and the Catholic Church. In this article, we will look at the responses that emerged after the speech and other subsequent interventions, which have made this a "globalised discourse." Rationality must be found not only in the sciences but also in philosophy, religions, ethics and art.

Keywords: Faith, Reason, Islam, Christianity, Enlightenment, Agnosticism.

"I hope that the reader of my text will immediately understand that this sentence does not express my personal assessment of the Koran, for which I have the respect due to the holy book of a great religion." (Benedikt XVI 2006, 16, n. 3) These words were written in the wake of the controversy surrounding the famous quote from his speech in Regensburg on 12 September 2006, interpreted by someone as a response to 11-S, 2001. As a German Cardinal explained, the speech "was not focused on Islam, but

on a topic that the theologian Joseph Ratzinger had dealt with since the beginning of his career in 1959: the relationship between faith and reason" (Lehmann 2006, 132–3). In principle, this was primarily a university lecture, aimed more at a Central European audience (see Blanco-Sarto 2007, 767–82), but however, it is also true that these words have sparked an interesting global debate, which has also relaunched the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The relationship between Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca, that guides to Rome, has a history, and we will try to give an account of some of the voices that have intervened in this debate. We will see now the reactions (from Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Agnostic points of view), just for showing that – after some violent reactions – never has been so much dialogue in the intellectual level between these collectives and the Catholic Church. In this case, the German Pope acted as a prophet more as an analyzer.[1]

1. An Agnostic and a Cardinal

Jürgen Habermas (b. 1928) claimed that modernity had broken "the synthesis between faith and reason that had reigned from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas." Nevertheless, he thought that "secular reason" should still keep in touch with "theological reason," and "the religious side must recognise the authority of 'natural' reason." Moreover, "this modern reason will understand itself better when it clarifies its own position with regard to the current religious consciousness". Thus, the philosopher of Frankfurt admitted a certain rational content in religion, while at the same time affirming that "faith has something opaque to knowledge that can neither be denied nor simply tolerated." Perhaps this is why the German philosopher judged Benedict XVI's position in Regensburg as "antimodern." (Habermas 2007, 30)

[1] On this point, for example, see Metz 1989, 733–8; Collado 2023, 65–85; García-Cuadrado 2023, 355–85. This position has itself been criticised in Habermas 1997, 98–111, as it was explained in Benedicto XVI 2023, 38–49. I am very grateful to the *Institut Benedikt XVI.* in Regensburg, Germany, for letting me to visit its library and work there in Autumn 2023.

> Pope Benedict XVI – he concluded – has given the old confrontation between the Hellenisation and de-Hellenisation of Christianity an unexpectedly modern-critical turn. [...] He refutes that there are good reasons for the polarisation between faith and reason that has in fact occurred in European modernity. [...] *Fides quaerens intellectum*, however laudable the search for the rationality of faith may be, it is not very useful to eliminate from the genealogy of reason common to Christians, believers of other religions and non-believers these three Dehellenisations [nominalism, kantism and historicism], which have contributed to reason's understanding of itself. (Habermas 2007, 30f.; see Ruiz Aldaz 2007, 825–6)

Within days, Italian Cardinal Camillo Ruini (b. 1931) criticised the German philosopher's modern and enlightened stance, and unravelled what he thought was the key to his critique.

> What kind of alliance does Habermas propose. [...] It is not a question of bridging this gulf again, but of understanding that secular reason would overcome the very opacity of its relationship with religion, if it took seriously the common origin between philosophy and religion, which in turn goes back to the revolution of the image of the world that took place in the first Christian millennium.

In short, Ruini thinks that there is no need for a mere confrontation between faith and reason but a true dialogue (see Ruini 2008, n. 4). According to him, Habermas proposed "to reduce Christian faith and theology to the perspectives derived from the geocentric and anthropocentric thinking" of modernity, thus forgetting that faith and theology are both – theocentric and anthropocentric – at the same time and inseparably. Moreover, "the synthesis between faith and reason does not only exist from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas," Ruini claims, "but from the beginning of Christianity, and even in Judaism itself, as Benedict XVI pointed out." This is why Benedict XVI "spoke of 'enlarged reason,' which could well be taken back to Habermas' 'communicative reason,' with the clarifications made above". (see no. 3)

Habermas, concludes Ruini, "claims with personal and intellectual sincerity an alliance between theological reason and enlightened and

then secularised reason, but in reallity he conceives this alliance on an unequal basis." Indeed, while theological reason should accept the authority of post-metaphysical secular reason, the latter – even without constituting itself a judge of religious truths – would "ultimately" accept as "rational" only that which can be translated into its own language, and therefore – after all – not the religious truths themselves in their transcendence (the God who reveals himself), and in their substantial and decisive content. "In short, Habermas does not come out of the 'enclosure' in itself in which J. Ratzinger sees the limit of reason as only empirical and mathematical" (no. 4).

But this would be an asymmetrical relationship between faith and reason, and, in this sense, the role of religion is only an environmental one. Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI was open to secular reason, even if it has to be "expanded" in a new reason: an open, universal reason, which completes the modern reason, understood as purely mathematical. This "mystery-friendly" reason, this new reason would give rise to a "new Enlightenment." (see AA. VV. 2007a; Blanco-Sarto 2005, 114–21; id., 2007, 771–8) The dialogue has continued, although these points of contention have not been addressed. On 13 September 2007, Habermas spoke also at the *Società di Filosofia politica* in Rome, with a paper that seemed to some to be an attack on secularism and a certain rapprochement with the position defended by Benedict XVI (see Monda 2007).

Rationality is not only to be found in the sciences – it was said in Regensburg – but also in philosophy, religion and art. Religions, Habermas argued, should nevertheless respect democracy, and the secular authority of science. The question arose as to "what secular reason could learn by becoming aware of its genealogical relationship to the Judaeo-Christian heritage". Thus, "in a post-secular world," he concluded, "we cannot so easily act as if God did not exist." (Israel 2007) God and reason should also be present in agnostic and not necessarily believing approaches, Ratzinger had previously suggested, and proposed Pascal's formula to his atheist friends: *etsi Deus daretur*. Otherwise, one could fall into an inhuman secularism, and not only an atheistic one. In other words, summed up the philosopher Vittorio Possenti, "often the formula of *etsi* leads to

those of *etsi religio non daretur* and *etsi ecclesia non daretur*, and even *etsi natura humana non daretur*." (Possenti 2007; see also Dohmen 2007; Benedicto XVI 2023, 38–49, 92–6)

2. A Global Speech

Indeed, in the "Global Village" in which we live, the message has transcended the confessional and geographical sphere in which it was spoken. From Paris, the philosopher André Glucksmann (1937–2015) asserted that, by placing the challenge of violence at the heart of the dialogue between religions and the debate between believers and non-believers, the speech "goes to the heart of the matter, where the fate of the 21st century is being decided." (Glucksmann 2007, 93) Moreover, by bringing up the subject of reason, "the Regensburg speech is implicitly based on the force that brought down the Iron Curtain and brought down the Berlin Wall." (Glucksmann 2007, 105) The attempt – Glucksmann summarises – is to achieve this desired dialogue between reason and religion, analogous to the way Christianity once achieved the union – in the Pope's words – between "biblical faith and Greek questioning". "The alternative between reason and violence does not set religions against each other, but sets each one against itself." (Glucksmann 2007, 98–9)

The voice of reason and the voice of God cannot be contradictory, Glucksmann also reminded us. So, faith must think and reason can also believe without losing – quite the contrary – any of its rights, since it would rather extend them. "The owl of Minerva," he says brilliantly, "which sees in the dark and flies by night, must keep vigil leaning on the shoulder of the man of faith." (Glucksmann 2007, 107) Precisely in order to avoid the follies of reason – Hiroshima or Auschwitz are reminded there – reason must allow itself to be guided by revealed truth. Weak thinking, a reason that renounces the search for truth, becomes a closed and even "suicidal" reason. A strong reason – not fundamentalist, therefore – is required not only to overcome relativism in order to know good and values, but also to know evil. "Nihilism strives to make evil invisible, unthinkable, unspeakable. Against such mental and global devastation,

the Regensburg discourse appeals to 'biblical faith' and 'the questions of reason' to renew without hindrance an alliance that I hope will be definitive and successful." (Glucksmann 2007, 113). Nihilism would therefore not only be atheistic, but also irrational.

In a speech by the linguist Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017), he also referred to the Regensburg speech, and proposes two enemies of it: the "defenders of pure reason" and the "supporters of pure religion". "The soul is reasonable, so it must be approached by reason, not with weapons, but with words," sums up (Todorov 2008, 222). He proposed Averroes and Aquinas as the Islamic and Christian synthesis between faith and reason, against the fideistic and rationalistic approaches on both sides. Todorov stated while qualifying in an apparently neutral way: "The Pope is right when he condemns violence in the service of ideas, however just they may be in the world", so "it is true that Muhammad was a violent warrior, but he was not always so, and the supporters of other ideologies were too." (Todorov 2008, 226).

The Hebrew jurist Joseph Weiler (b. 1951) reviewed the relationship between peace, reason and religion. "Reason is peaceful by definition," (Weiler 2007, 173) taking on board the above suggested extensions of modern reason.

> Benedict XVI "does not attack – affirms Weiler – only the secularist and impoverishing vision that limits reason to the sphere of 'science.' Without fear, he affirms with the same logic that the use of the word 'religion' does not confer an *imprimatur* of legitimacy. Religion is also subject to the discipline of reason. This also applies to the Christian faith itself." (Weiler 2007, 187)

At the same time, he recalled the "scandal of the cross", which entails a greater demand for peace on the part of Christianity: "His [Jesus'] 'vengeance' is the cross". The logic of Christianity goes a little further than that of pure reason or mere unfinished business. Weiler also pointed out the simultaneous relationship and transcendence between ethics and religion: "On the one hand, religion does not have a monopoly on morality and ethics". On the other hand, "to reduce religion to social action is an impoverishing reductionism. The essential religious categories (those

which in the secular world have no equivalence or correspondence) are holiness and sacredness." (Weiler 2007, 179)[2]

3. Islam and Reason

The debate also reached Islamic thinkers like Aref Ali Nayed (b. 1962), professor at Cambridge University, recalled the intellectual achievements and rational development of theology within Islam, such as the *kalām* books, treatises on the systematic theology of the Muslim faith. He also recalled the opposition of Muhammad's religion contained in the *sūra* 2,256: "No violence in matters of faith", quoted by Benedict XVI himself in his speech. Nayed in turn stated that "for Muslims, according to the Koran, it is obligatory to embark on the path to God by means of wisdom, comprehensive education and rational argumentation." (Nayed 2006, 49) However, instead of quoting the holy book to prove this, he alludes more to certain historical episodes interpreted in a certain light. Along with statements that could be described as surprising (e.g., "the Bavarian pope is under the influence of German idealism" or the "Hegelian tenor" of his statements), Nayed rightly defends the existence of a rational and non-violent Islam. And concludes his intervention with the following words: Benedict XVI "considers the Greek and European elements as essential to the Christian faith. I consider this aspect problematic and think that this speech should draw the attention of Muslims, Christians and Jews alike." (Nayed 2006, 54)

Muhammad Haddad maintained that the Ratisbonian text "is a discourse to which Muslims can also subscribe, replacing [the terms] 'Catholicism' with 'Islam'," (Haddad 2007, 133) and he recalled the rational enlightenment that took place in the Islamic sphere during the Abbasid dynasty and with the philosophers Avicenna and Averroes, between the ninth and twelfth centuries. His conclusion is more oriented towards a possible dialogue mediated by reason. For his part, the French philosopher Rémi Brague (b. 1947), an expert in Jewish and Arabic thought,

[2] See also Domingo 2007, 227–31; Martín Algarra 2007, 273–81; Pié-Ninot 2007, 1–10; Villar 2006, 54–7; Brants Reyes 2007, 947–54.

pointed out that, for example, "a thinker who knew perfectly well how to reason, like Ibn Khaldun, explained that – in matters of religion – reason must be silenced (*'aql*). In Christianity, this kind of tendency has been marginal." (Murillo 2007, 573) Brague concludes, after maintaining that the Bible demands rationality, that "a strong reason is needed; I would even say – without being afraid of words – a metaphysics." (Murillo 2007, 581).

In spite of the voluntarist tendency present in different schools of Islamic thought on God as described by Thoury, (2006, 77–95) the Arab philosopher Sari Nusseibeh (b. 1949) confronted the pontiff's lecture with the contributions of Ibn Khaldun, Averroes and Al-Tawhidi. These, according to Nusseibeh, attempted to overcome the doctrine of double truth by arguing that, if knowledge is properly established at the corresponding level, "contradictions disappear immediately." (Nusseibeh 2007, 119) Is it not enough, however, that there is no contradiction between knowledge obtained by faith and knowledge obtained by reason respectively? Is there not also a more positive and enlightening mutual relationship? Nusseibeh suggests a harmonious relationship between reason and revelation analogous to that of Christianity. This union of Greek *logos* and biblical *dabar* is "something fundamental for the Church and its message." (Nusseibeh 2007, 123) In fact, he recalls that Greek reason has also triumphed in the Muslim world, and that the classical works of Hellenic civilisation were duly translated into Arabic, even before they were translated into Western languages.[3]

Nusseibeh thus proposed a harmony between reason and love – *logos* and *eros* – which the Arab philosopher bases on the Hellenic "pre-Socratic, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic" influences. (Nusseibeh 2007, 121) At the same time, however, it is true that the truth-faith-reason correlation is not always resolved in a positive way in Islamic thought: not all reason reveals the truth, nor is it in total harmony with revealed reason. In the end, he eloquently states, "even a murderer (such as those responsible for 9/11) can be rational – in the strict sense – and act rationally." (Nusseibeh

[3] Quite different is the approach set out in Sale 2008, 419–32; Peregrín Gutiérrez 2007, 185–202.

2007, 135) This is why the Arab philosopher distinguishes between "rational" and "reasonable", i.e. endowed with "intellectual serenity understood as a psychological disposition and as a moral feeling." (Nusseibeh 2007, 136) The reasonable would correspond to open and "expanded" reason, while the rational could simply be a reason lacking such openness.

> This 'reasonableness' of a religious faith is what should allow pluralism, democratic dialogue and also 'mutual understanding.' These are the values – it seems to me – that the Pope was proposing in his speech, in a world that perceives itself as threatened by the fanaticism of polarisation and the spectre of violence. (Nusseibeh 2007, 139)

Wael Farouq (b. 1974) carried out an analysis of John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998), where reason was presented as the main opponent against the various manifestations – weak or terrorist – of nihilism (see no. 46; García-Cuadrado 2023, 355–85). At the same time, he brought up there the unity between *logos* and *eros-agape* proposed by Benedict XVI himself in *Deus caritas est* (no. 10). This allows Farouq to enter fully into texts of Arabic tradition and to offer some parallels with the Christian message. "The context of the discourse we have just mentioned does not refer to the violence of Islam, but invites us to make Islam – as the great religious tradition of humanity, rich in great experiences and convictions – a source of knowledge." (Farouq 2007, 53) In the following pages, the Egyptian professor cited abundant examples of studies on the importance of reason in the Islamic sphere: An-Nu'mān, Ibn Haldūn, Al-Ğāhiz, Ibn Manzūr... He then concludes as follows: "Language (langue), reason (memory), time: these terms found the identity of Arab reason from the very beginning." (Farouq 2007, 83)

4. Towards Dialogue

In Germany, the issue was discussed in greater depth, because "Islam has always been a strong advocate of spreading its teachings with arguments." (Bhutta 2007, 223) In fact, to get correct information about any religion, it is important to turn to the Koran of that religion and look at

its basic teachings and beliefs: “Call to the way of your heart with wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and argue with them in the best way.” (16,126) Indeed, this sacred book “repeatedly calls on people to use their intellect and reason, to think and reflect.” (Hameed 2007, 209) The opponent should allow himself to behave unjustly, that he himself must then be harsh and insulting, and by no means repay like with like: “He who is mighty in strength taught him.” (53,6).

But is this idea of wisdom in Islam, more or less, as in Christianity and what Benedict XVI called “enlarged reason?” But there must not be necessarily a kind of voluntarism, which brings something irrational in these sentences: “...they understand nothing of His knowledge except what pleases Him” (2,256); “He sets out the truth.” (6,58) So, this knowledge is granted to people little by little, according to its necessity. There is in fact a participation in God’s wisdom, but it seems to be specially through the faith, because of the absolute transcendence and distance between Allah and the men (see Hameed 2007, 203–8). “In the religion there is no violence.” (2,256) In this sense, the role of reason in the knowledge of the reality must be deepen (see Bhutta 2007, 232–4; Andaç 2007, 116–7)

In view of the violent reactions to the Regensburg speech, thirty-eight Muslim leaders immediately endorsed the message contained therein (Later the number rose to one hundred: see Leading Muslim Scholars and Leaders 2006, 25–32; Fischer 2009, 205–17) The manifesto affirmed that the Islamic tradition relates human intelligence to “the nature of God and his will”, so that there is no room for fractures between faith and reason, “even though Muslims distinguish the possibilities and limits of human reason.” At the same time, it criticised fundamentalism and fideism: “Reason itself is one of the many means by which God enables us to contemplate Him and constitutes a way to know the truth”, concludes (no. 30) Since then, the number of signatories has grown, and in 2008, the number of signatories rose to 138. “Although Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions (and some of their formal differences cannot be minimised), it is clear that the two main commandments represent common ground, as well as a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament.” (Interfaith Commision 2009; see Fischer 2009, 247–56)

The Decalogue was once again a common heritage not only of these religions, and the debate between reason and religion has thus transcended the visible boundaries of Christianity. In his speech to the United Nations in New York shortly afterwards in 2008, Benedict XVI again appealed to reason and freedom, to the "common ground" in the following words:

> As we know, the founding of the United Nations coincided with the profound upheaval experienced by humanity when the reference to the sense of transcendence and natural reason was abandoned and, consequently, man's freedom and dignity were seriously violated. When this happens, the objective foundations of the values that inspire and govern the international order are threatened, and the non-derogable and inviolable principles formulated and consolidated by the United Nations are undermined at their base. When faced with new and insistent challenges, it is a mistake to retreat to a pragmatic approach, limited to determining 'common ground,' minimalist in content and weak in effectiveness. (Benedict XVI 2008)

The issue finally came to a head in Rome. From 4 to 6 November 2008, the first meeting of the Catholic-Muslim Forum was held in the Vatican City, which was born precisely as a result of the discussed and debated speech. In the final declaration signed by 288 Muslim representatives, the issue of reason was also alluded to, even though the stated theme was "Love of God, love of neighbor." After mentioning love, creation, human life and dignity, religious freedom, peace and social justice as common heritage, the Final Declaration affirmed that "human dignity arises from the fact that each person has been created by a God of love and out of love, and has been endowed with the gifts of reason and free will, and is thus enabled to love God and others. On the firm foundation of these principles, the person requires respect for his or her original dignity and human vocation." (Catholic-Muslim Forum 2008; see Fischer 2009, 273–84) Thus, in this interreligious dialogue, *logos* and *agape*, reason and freedom are united from their very origin in God, and the debate continued in a larger venue than the *aula magna* of the University of Regensburg. Since then, although the former "work accident," the dialogue between the Catholic Church and believing and non-believing intellectuals has re-

ally increased, as can be seen in the Statement, signed more than a decade later in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, stated the collaboration:

> This Document become the object of research and reflection in all schools, universities and institutes of formation, thus helping to educate new generations to bring goodness and peace to others, and to be defenders everywhere of the rights of the oppressed and of the least of our brothers and sisters. (Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, 2019)

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