

The Road from Regensburg

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Ecumenical and inter-religious developments in the search for a modern apologetic

POPE BENEDICT PICKS UP THE THEME

In his sermon at Mariazell, while on a three-day pilgrimage to Austria, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the modern tensions arising from religious truth, interreligious sensitivity and the fear of intolerance. He affirmed that the church can and must proclaim Christ as the universal saviour. "This does not mean that we despise other religions, nor are we arrogantly absolutising our own ideas," he said. Rather it means the church will never accept an "attitude of resignation" toward the truth, the assumption that truth cannot be known. It is this attitude that "lies at the heart of the crisis of the West, the crisis of Europe." *Catholic Online, 10 September 2007*

OF ISLAMIC INTEREST

Another charitable Open Letter to the Pope

On the Anniversary of the Open Letter to the Pope by 38 top Muslim clerics in response to the Regensburg lecture more than 130 Muslim scholars have issued another one. The organisers claim that this reaching out for common ground with Christians is unique in the history of Islam.

The Letter assumes a certain equation of the authoritative role of the Qur'an in Islam to that of the Bible in Christianity. It analyses passages from the Qur'an and the Bible to back up their invitation "as Muslims (to) Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also most essential to our faith and practice: the *Two Commandments of love*"

The command to love God with "full devotion... of mind and heart" follows, the letter says, from the Qur'anic "There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, He is the sovereignty..." and from the Biblical quotation of the Old Testament by Jesus "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37). Love of neighbour as "generosity and self-sacrifice" follows from the Qur'anic "Ye will not attain righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love" (3:92) (with examples of charity being given in 2:177) and from the Biblical "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:38).

"Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of neighbour form a common

ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded... Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us..."

The letter was signed by prominent Muslim leaders, politicians and academics, including numerous Grand Muftis. One of the signatories, Dr Aref Ali Nayed, a senior adviser at the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme at Cambridge University, whose post-Regensburg reflections we have summarised in both previous editions of this column, told the BBC that the document should be seen as a landmark. "There are Sunnis, Shias, Ibadis and even the... Ismailian and Jaafari schools, so it's a consensus," he said.

<http://www.acommonword.com/> October 2007

The Letter's Genesis: "Scriptural not secular dialogue needed"

The final form of the above letter published in October 2007 was presented at a conference in September held under the theme of "Love in the Quran," by the Royal Academy of *The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan

The previous May the Institute's Chairman HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan welcomed the World Economic Forum C-100 meeting by stating that dialogue based upon moderate religious "orthodoxy" and the scriptural "love thy neighbour" was necessary to win over the Arab Muslim man-on-the-street. The 9-11 Commission and the Rand report encouraged discussion among westernised academics, Muslim or otherwise. But "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that issueth from the Mouth of God". Moreover "secular modernists command no following on the Islamic street", their contribution only "drives the moderate traditional majority of Muslims into the embrace of the fundamentalists."

He criticised the media for not reporting the 38 (now over 100) Muslim scholars "cordial" 2006 Open Letter to the Pope, and criticised both the Pope's "inflammatory" Regensburg address and his attempted apology: "His holiness just said 'I am sorry you feel bad', not 'I am sorry I did it'". *Islamica Magazine*

Leading Cardinal on dialogue versus violence

As the Islamic observance of Ramadan drew to an end in September, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, sent a message to the world's Muslim population, stressing the duty of all believers to bear witness to the Almighty. The French cardinal, who was appointed to the post in June, almost a year after Pope Benedict XVI's controversial speech in Regensburg, argued that dialogue between Christians and Muslims is "the tool which can help us to escape from the endless spiral of

conflict and multiple tensions which mark our societies.”
Catholic World News, 28 September 2007

The Regensburg Balance

Samir Khalid Samir SJ, a priest and professor of Oriental Studies at St. Joseph's Seminary in Lebanon said a clash of civilisations between Christianity and Islam is inevitable. With reference to the Regensburg lecture, which pointed out that in the West we have a form of rationality that lacks a spiritual content (reason without faith), whilst in Islam we find a type of spirituality that has turned into violence (faith without reason), he suggests the solution lies in the hands of believers who are not fanatical.

“Their openness to all that is human can be the basis on which to build, along with others who may or may not believe, a better world,” said Samir. “This is the test of the 21st century, one that involves accepting the challenge posed by freedom that cleanses without falling into a free-for-all; one that welcomes the challenge of modernity whilst neither reneging nor regretting the past; one that takes up the challenge of democracy without sliding into disorder and violence.”
Asia News, 7 September 2007

An Islamic tendency to irrationality?

Peter Mullen, a London based high-Anglican minister, has suggested in *The Catholic Herald*, that the practical relevance of the Regensburg lecture concerns the modern reality of extremists of both Islamic and secular persuasion. He accepted the criticism that the scholar Ibn Hazm, whom Pope Benedict quoted concerning God being beyond reason, is on the fringe of Muslim thought.

This criticism is made by the (now) over 100 Muslim scholars in their 2006 *Open Letter to Pope Benedict* which states: “figures such as al-Ghazali (d.1111 CE) and many others are far more influential and representative of Islamic belief than Ibn Hazm (d.1069)”. Our January 2007 editorial “Fostering the Regensburg insight” offered the following quote from al-Ghazali: “(God) willeth also the unbelief of the unbeliever and the irreligion of the wicked and, without that Will there would neither be unbelief nor irreligion... In creating unbelievers, in willing that they should remain in that state... in willing in short all that is evil, God has wise ends in view...”

Catholic Herald, September 2007

Divine Will trumps Reason?

Mustafa Akyol the Muslim columnist whose interesting and prominent reflections upon the Regensburg address we reported in the last edition of this column, has, perhaps unwittingly, made a point which is of relevance to the above mentioned

alleged primacy of the will of Allah over his reason.

It was in the context of calling people to remember to interpret the Koran through the “scholarly tradition called ‘tafseer’... (with its) basic rule: A single verse or passage cannot be understood in itself: it has to be evaluated according to the general goal and principles of the holy text, and the way it was implemented by the prophet.”

As an example of this Akyol claims that the Koran properly interpreted does not condemn non-Muslims. The Koran “actually says that the existence of different religions on earth is in accordance with the divine will: ‘Had God willed,’ the Koran reminds, ‘He could have made you one community.’ (5:48)” This attribution of division and contradiction directly to the will of God is an aspect of Islam which the Pope at Regensburg was arguing was a serious weakness of that tradition.
Turkish Daily News

Surveying written Islamic reactions to the Regensburg lecture

The Quarterly *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* has recently published an article entitled “The Muslim Reactions to Pope Benedict’s Regensburg Address” by Ana Belen Soage of the University of Granada. Her survey of fairly immediate reactions ranged from the calm suggestions in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* that Muslims accept the Pope’s ‘apology’ and attempt to put over a better picture of themselves to the world, through to Islamists such as Sheik Mus’ad Anwar who preached that “Islam is a self-evident truth and... does not need any proof... Do we ask for proof of daylight?”.

London based Arab publications, sponsored by Saudis, contained suggestions that it was ironic that Western cultures which oppressed and pressurised Muslims lectured them on the supposed violent meaning of “Jihad” (*Al-Sharq al Awsat*), that Western Christianity is scared of losing its dominance to Islam (*Al-Sharq al Awsat*) and that this Pope has provided an opportunity for developing long-term dialogue between Islam and the West (*Al-Hayat*).

The very popular *al-Jazeera* website contained a piece suggesting that the Pope’s speech was hypocritical because the Catholic Church had fought modern reason since the advent of science. It also had a piece by Nabil Shabib a Syrian writer and analyst who lives in Germany. He observed “everything Benedict XVI said does not... change the fact that... the deviation of Western civilization from human values is on the verge of destroying it, and that Islamic civilization is about to re-emerge – to the benefit of the whole of humanity.

The website ran a poll in which over 25,000 people took part. 70% thought the Pope was involved in Western anti-Islamic conspiracy, 22% thought he was just a fanatic; only 7% thought he was misunderstood.

Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions March 07

Fostering reason in Islam

In an article titled, *Islam Needs an Age of Reason*, Muslim writer and author of *The Trouble with Islam Today*, Irshad Manji, urges Muslims to question the *modus operandi* of their faith. Manji, a well-known critic of radical Islam and traditional interpretations of the Qur'an, who publicly supported the Pope's comments on the faith at the Regensburg lecture last year, advocates a revival of critical thinking, known as *ijtihad* in Islamic tradition. She claims that Islam today is on the back foot as mainstream Muslims have lost their gift of 'independent reasoning'.

During the recent controversy over whether Muslim women in Britain should wear the veil, Dr. Taj Hargey, chairman of the Muslim Educational Centre in Oxford, wrote "In contrast to a blind acceptance of specific 7th-century tribal Arabian dress and cultural norms, which have no eternal scriptural endorsement (as believers are required only to be modest), modern Muslims should revive the Islamic principle of *ijtihad* to interpret the faith for themselves."
Media for Freedom, 4 September 2007

Our religions are based on reason

The Iraqi-born imam Seyed Ali Ghazvini, of the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno, California, described Christianity and Islam as two rational faiths in the June edition of the Fresno *Community Alliancenewsletter*. 'Islam makes reasoning one of the main foundations of religious principles,' and so 'has displayed its extraordinary capability to take advantage of the constructive aspects of other civilizations and incorporate it in its political, social and cultural structure.'
California Catholic Daily, 27 September 2007

Praise for philosophical Ayatollah

Sandro Magister has praised Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani, 78, the highest religious authority for Shiite Muslims in Iraq for his brave and Aristotelian stand against suicide bombers and Iranian-style theocracy. Al-Sistani affirms that only good citizens can create good society. He was one of the few Islamic leaders who after the Regensburg speech "expressed esteem and friendship for the Pope".
<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/160142?eng=y>

Intelligent Design?

Mustafa Akyol (see left) makes a point that *Faith* magazine would share with his *Intelligent Design* school, whilst differing from the manner of proof and other conclusions, "... the idea that... evolution happened only via Darwinian mechanisms – and, especially, in a completely random way – seems to be a philosophical presupposition, not an empirically established fact."

Turkish Daily News

Soul and Image of God

In an article for Qatar's top selling English daily newspaper, *The Gulf Times*, Abdul rehman al-Sheha, author of *Misconception on Human Rights in Islam*, wrote: "The human soul is given, since its creation, to recognise the existence of its Creator, who has also created this Universe which demonstrates the greatness of its Creator."

The Gulf Times, 27 September, 2007

The SORS and the war against the family

A pro-life Catholic and Muslim have co-authored an article in the *Muslim Weekly* outlining the success of the gay agenda since the war which has reached its high point in the recent Sexual Orientation Regulations. Giles Rowe and Majid Katme point out how, despite prior guarantees, harassment provisions have been attached which can be used against religious leaders who preach that homosexual sex is wrong. The article highlights how conservative movements in Europe have supported such provisions, losing their traditional values.

Muslim Weekly

Right to convert

The Islamic Council of Norway and the (Lutheran) Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations jointly declared that everyone is free to adopt the religious faith of their choice, at a gathering on 22 August 2007.

Ekklesia, 28 August 2007

Contributions from Lisa Gregoire and Carlos Fuentes.

OF CHRISTIAN INTEREST

Science and religion discussion

The fourth joint Christians in Science and American Scientific Affiliation conference took place in Edinburgh this summer, attended by over 300 members. Professor Alister McGrath spoke on "New Frontiers in Science" covering anthropic phenomena in physics and biology and the renewal of natural theology. Professor Simon Conway Morris spoke on "Does Evolution have a deep structure?" and offered evidence for direction in evolution. There were numerous other talks on the frontiers between evolution, neuroscience and Christian revelation.

PreCiS Newsletter, Summer 07

Templeton and post-modern culture

Last July the Templeton Prize of about £800,000 was awarded to Professor Charles Taylor, 75, a Canadian philosopher and expert of Hegel. Around that time he wrote the following:

“We are engaged in creating (we hope) a peaceful world order, based on a flourishing globalised economy, collective security and the rule of law. But this world order, if we are fortunate enough to achieve it, will inevitably be very focused on the procedures and structures of government, of adjudication; it will be concerned with economic prosperity and equality within the narrow limits of toleration of our damaged planet; it will be concerned with the control of violence.

“...Unconsciously, we narrow our focus... What gets lost from sight are other things that motivate human beings: their search for meaning, for a sense that their world is not out of control, for a conviction of their own worth, and beyond this, for a sense of their own moral goodness. Briefly put, we lose sight of people’s spiritual motivations.” *Forbes.com*

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