

FAITH REASON AND SCIENCE

(Reflections upon a lecture given by Pope Benedict XVI at Regensburg University on 12 September 2006)

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Let us follow the pope in his discussion of the relation between faith and reason. The first point that the pope wished to make was that to act without reason or against reason is contrary not just to our human nature but also to God's divine nature. This is the same point that had been already made long ago by the Byzantine emperor, who had particularly in mind what he believed to be Mohammad's command to spread by the sword the faith he preached. The pope is interested in exploring the argument of the Emperor in proving that spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. "God", he [the emperor] says, "is not pleased by blood - and not acting reasonably (σὺν λόγῳ) is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death..."

Whether this command "to spread by the sword the faith he preached" is to be found in the Koran or not is a matter of interpretation, regarding which I at least am not competent to give an opinion. However, so far as the discussion of the point is concerned, namely the relation between God and religion and reason, it is in any case beside the point. Neither is it to the point to enter into a discussion of the history of religious wars and forced conversions by Christians or Muslims.¹ Regardless of what people may have believed in the past, or how they may have behaved in relation to this question, what we are now discussing is the rationality of such belief and behaviour, and its consequent compatibility with the will of God. This is a question surely that we can discuss for its own sake.

Now, I venture to suggest that there would be few today who would disagree with the Emperor's conclusion that the spreading of the faith through violence is something unreasonable, and even fewer religious people who would disagree that it is contrary to God's nature. So far as Christianity in general, and the Catholic Church in particular, is concerned, whether one believes that the basic principle of freedom of

religion (which excludes such coercion) was faithfully applied in the past there is no doubt that it is fully subscribed to today.

So we can assume that there is general disapproval amongst religions and their adherents of the use of violence in their dealings with people of other religions or of no religion at all. But it is to be noted that the argument that supports such a position is that such violence is irrational and God does not condone irrational behaviour.

The particular problem in regard to which the pope sought to introduce his subject was therefore this very live question of violence perpetrated in the name of God and religion. However, this leads into the more general issue, namely, whether it is possible to put any rational limits upon God's power in relation to his creation. We may be able to satisfy ourselves that such coercion or violence is irrational or inhuman. But does this mean that God could not command it, so that we would then become obliged to act in this way?

If to act against reason is contrary to God's very nature, then the answer is that God could not so command us. Against this there is the obvious objection that we are here talking about human reason and we are not entitled to subject God's actions to our way of thinking. God's ways are not our ways. The objection appears to be a very plausible one to a religious person. It can be and often is motivated by a profound awe regarding the majesty and power of God. Indeed, the considerations of the infinity of God's power and the fact that the divine understanding infinitely transcends human reason have led many sincerely religious persons to deny the proposition that what is discernible to human reason can put limitations on God's actions in relation to us.

As the pope notes in his lecture, this sort of thinking was present in theology in the late Middle Ages when "there arose with Duns Scotus a voluntarism which, in its later developments, led to the claim that we can only know God's *voluntas ordinata*. Beyond this is the realm of God's freedom, in virtue of which he could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done. This gives rise to positions which clearly approach those of Ibn Hazm and might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness".

Those who are acquainted with the full text of the pope's lecture would be aware that Khoury [the authority from which the pope took the quotation from the Byzantine Emperor] "quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out Ibn Hazm went so far as to

state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practise idolatry.”

It will be seen, therefore, that it is not only Muslims but also Christians who, no doubt both well motivated, fall into the error of condoning what is evil from a human point of view, if they believe God commanded it. It is against this image of a God whose “transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions”, from whatever side it comes, that the pope is arguing.

The error, then, is one that even good people are liable to who focus simply upon the infinity of God's being and power compared to which we are as nothing and without which we can do nothing. But it basically proceeds from a mistaken notion of human reason and its relation to the divine reason. For God's power is not to be thought of as divorced from his infinite wisdom (and love), into which, besides his almighty nature, we also have some insight. For if our created existence and power is but a reflection of the divine, so is our created reason and will made in the image of God.

Admittedly, so far as our thinking amounts to no more than an opinion regarding something, whether in the theoretical or practical order, it may be regarded as merely human, or fallible; and consequently does not provide us with any clue as to the mind of God. But, if there is any objective truth in the things that enter our minds, we know that the way we think comes from the way things are, which comes from the way God thinks about them. For he has made them the way they are. Where we can have objective certitude, then, we have some insight, slight though it is, into the mind and nature of God.

It is only in this sense, then, that we mean to say that God cannot do what is contrary to reason. We can then say something about the nature of God, even if only in negative and relative terms. God cannot contradict himself. But to say that he can do something against reason (in the objective sense) amounts to saying that, so far as we know, he may do something irrational and contradictory.

This has particular practical application in regard to our understanding of our human nature and the laws governing its functioning, which is the basis of our knowledge of the moral law. We

understand ourselves best, even if that knowledge has its limitations. But we know that we have been made to love God above all things. God could not command us to hate him. We know that we have been so constituted that we must love God. This includes loving the things that God has made. So far as our own actions are concerned there are certain laws, called natural laws, which we can discern with our reason (and are expressed in our conscience).² Being so objectively understood or reasoned to, they not only express our human mind on the matters concerned but also the mind of God. That is why the Ten Commandments merely confirm our natural law obligations; and the gospel does not abolish such laws but imbues them with a new spirit.

The moral laws are based upon an understood insight into our own human nature. They are a matter of reason and certain knowledge about ourselves and our place in the world; not a matter of mere opinion. The God who made us so would be contradicting himself if he commanded anything immoral.

But this is developing the pope's argument further than he did (not being able to do so because of the time constraints of his talk). The even further development of the argument does indeed involve difficulties that need to be addressed in their proper place. But the fundamental conclusion remains that it is contrary to God's nature to do anything opposed to reason. From this it is not to be concluded that God's power is limited by such a restriction. Expressing it as a restriction is only a necessity of human language in talking about God, in the same way that we say that God cannot do two contradictory things.

Reason, then, and science too, properly understood as the pope pointedly notes, are intimately related to faith and religion. How is it then that in modern times they have come to be seen as opposed or at least as operating in two quite disparate parts of human consciousness? How was it that what he sees as the "inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical enquiry [which] was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history" should have been reacted against so violently?

The pope traces the modern separation of faith from reason to a program of dehellenization of Christianity which "first emerges in connection with the postulates of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Looking at the tradition of scholastic theology, the Reformers thought they were confronted with a faith system totally conditioned by

philosophy, that is to say an articulation of the faith based on an alien system of thought”.

Though the pope does not directly allude to it here, it is perhaps no coincidence that, at about the same time, there also happened to be a kind of dehellenization of Reason itself, in the name of Science. This has taken the form of the promotion of the particular sciences (Mathematics and the Natural Sciences) at the expense of Metaphysics or Philosophy.

The Protestants’ reaction was itself a protest against what they saw as the infiltration of Christianity by Greek Metaphysics. As the pope puts it, “Metaphysics appeared as a premise derived from another source, from which faith had to be liberated in order to become once more fully itself.” The new mathematical and empirical scientists’ reaction was a rejection of any attempt to understand the world and reality as a whole. So we had Metaphysics, reason in its perfection according to Greek Philosophy, caught up in the opposition between religion and science that has characterized the modern era. In truth, though, such opposition to reason moved from positions which were rather fideistic than religious, scientific rather than scientific.

Kant’s ingenious compromise only cemented this false antithesis so successfully that we are still struggling to overcome it, not only in religion but also in science. Thus, so far as faith is concerned, the pope says: “When Kant stated that he needed to set thinking aside in order to make room for faith, he carried this programme forward with a radicalism that the Reformers could never have foreseen. He thus anchored faith exclusively in practical reason, denying it access to reality as a whole.” Liberation theology and more generally the attempted shift of theological concern from orthodoxy to orthopraxy, are only the most recent expressions of this anti-metaphysical religious mood.

“The liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”, the pope goes on to say, “ushered in a second stage in the process of dehellenization, with Adolf von Harnack as its outstanding representative.” This stage developed further the kantian anchoring of faith in practical reason and reduced the Christian message to a merely humanitarian one. “Jesus was said to have put an end to worship in favour of morality. In the end he was presented as the father of a humanitarian moral message.” One is reminded of Aristotle’s comment that if humanity were the highest object of study then Politics (i.e. sociology in modern terms), not Metaphysics, would be the ultimate science.

We are now in a third stage of deHellenization which regards the Greek philosophical influence upon Christianity as that pertaining to a particular culture only, which might just as well be that of some other culture. Just as in modern thought no truth is acknowledged beyond the facts of the particular sciences, so no transcendent good is seen in any particular culture. We have now entered the stage of total relativism, already nascent in the rejection of the metaphysics of reason along with the sometimes flawed particular conclusions of Greek philosophy and science.

But, as the pope points out, so far as faith is concerned: “This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision. 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. True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. **Nonetheless, 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.** (highlighting mine)

So far as human reason is concerned, so fundamental and universal is the mature Greek heritage that, in modern philosophy, various attempts have been made to rehabilitate reason as conceived by the Greeks, some such as that by Nietzsche falling back into unreason, others such as Heidegger rejecting the best of the Greek philosophical heritage and thus not being able to overcome the paradoxes of the pre-Socratics. Not all such attempts however have been without success, as can be seen in Husserl’s Phenomenology, which owes much to Aristotle transmitted through Brentano.

However, generally speaking, the anti-metaphysical mood remains, affecting not only the relation between faith and reason but also that between philosophy and science. As the pope notes, “only the kind of certainty resulting from the interplay of mathematical and empirical elements can be considered scientific ... Hence, the human sciences, such as history, psychology, sociology and philosophy, attempt to conform themselves to this canon of scientificity.” The pope further notes, “by its very nature this method excludes the question of God, making it appear an unscientific or pre-scientific question. Consequently, we are faced with a reduction of the radius of science and reason, one which needs to be questioned.”

It is indeed something that is being questioned more and more. But unfortunately, insofar as people have reacted against the sterility of scientism and the menace of technologism they have opted for a more radical scepticism and cynicism. But what is needed is not the rejection of reason and science but the restoration of their true breadth and grandeur.

“The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby. The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur - this is the programme with which a theology grounded in Biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.”

“We will succeed in doing so [overcoming the dangers posed to humanity] only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons.”

Therefore, the pope is calling upon all, especially the great religions, to come to the defence of reason, not positivistic reason (and the forms of philosophy based on such, long held in the West as universally valid) but reason according to its full stature and dignity. For, the former restricted reason, as we have seen, necessarily excludes the question of God, and “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.”

It will be seen, then, that the principal object of the pope's lecture is an “attempt, painted with broad strokes, at a critique of modern reason from within”. It has involved defending reason against those who would devalue it in the mistaken belief that they are thereby exalting the power of God - and these people are not necessarily confined to one religion.

There are indeed many reasons for division amongst religious cultures, but there is a common enemy against which all should unite. That is the all pervasive modern secularist society, whose religion is “science”, or positivistic reason, which propounds a truncated notion of reason and science in an attempt to prevent people from facing the full truth of being human.

It is not a matter that we can continue to ignore. “This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity, as we see from the disturbing pathologies of religion and reason which necessarily erupt when reason is so reduced that questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it.”

¹ It is important to note that we are here discussing the use of force as it is clearly contrary to reason. This is the strict meaning of violence. There is a use of force that reason allows, as in self-defence, and in the right circumstances even commands, as in coming to the rescue of someone under attack by another. The proper authority, too, has the right to enforce the law and to punish the offender, which, in the case of the unrepentant, involves the exercise of force against one's will, which is a wider notion of violence. So too, in regard to the moral law, God is an enforcer, not in the crude sense that signifies brute force, or an irrational use of force, but in the sense of correction which is consistent with the loving implementation of a wise rule. (It is a sobering thought that, for one who refuses to repent, such correction may be everlasting)

Wars may therefore sometimes be defended, or as Chesterton neatly puts it "the only defensible war is a war of defense". Religious wars, too, may be justifiable on the same basis but it is hard to imagine any circumstances that would justify them under modern conditions.

The problem with evaluating morally the use of force in the past in the name of religion is in determining to what extent it was rationally justified as necessarily defensive or a legitimate enforcement of public order, or at least subjectively perceived to be so justified.

However, forced religious conversions are never justifiable, for being contrary to reason, as explained by the Emperor (and reaffirmed by all today), one cannot appeal even to the will of God for their justification. For, one of the things about which we can be very clear is that it is incompatible with human nature to try to force a person's free will, and most especially as regards what concerns one's ultimate end or belief in God.

² Here too we have to observe a distinction between the objective and the subjective aspects of our knowledge of things. Without any objectivity in what we know about our nature and the moral laws that are consequent on this self awareness we are not human at all. As regards the most fundamental moral principles therefore we are not without a conscience that does not excuse objectively immoral behaviour.

Nonetheless, in regard to particular laws or applications there is the possibility of "invincible ignorance" in which case one's subjectively fallible human condition has to be taken into account.