

EDITORIAL

It is somewhat disappointing that there are few who are prepared to defend wholeheartedly what the pope had to say on 12 September 2006 during the course of a lecture to the representatives of science at the University of Regensburg. The content of the words quoted (widely and blatantly misrepresented as the pope's own sentiments) seem too strong to be excused. We believe that the pope deserves a fairer hearing than what he has generally received. We use this editorial to attempt to provide such.

It would be a great shame if the main message of the pope's discourse upon the relation between faith and reason was lost in the quite extreme reaction to his quoting certain words of a fourteenth century Byzantine emperor. The opening remarks quoted, which all will be aware of, the pope himself immediately noted within the lecture itself were "astonishingly harsh", or words to that effect (depending upon which translation of the original German one refers to). This is itself should have alerted one to the fact that the pope distanced himself from them – which distancing he has since reiterated.

What the pope was obviously interested in was not what the Emperor said in his initial statement but what he had to say regarding the role of reason in religion (the very subject of the pope's talk). It was perhaps unfortunate that the emperor's subsequent discussion of the point of interest was prefaced by a general critical comment about Mohammed. But if one is going to quote something one can hardly avoid giving the whole content of the conversation. In any case it is quite unfair to hold someone responsible for the views expressed by another, unless he clearly endorses them. Can anyone imagine this sort of thing happening in the case of some other professor? Should the learned author from whose book the pope took the quote be held to be reprehensible for using the same words?

To people who read the newspapers, however, these quoted words are virtually the only words from the lecture of which they are aware. This perhaps might have been expected given the conditions of modern reporting of such matters. One celebrated Australian journalist says that he studied the lecture for hours and could not make sense of any of it; that is, of all but the words quoted. Such is the mental world cultivated by modern journalism that the capacity for connected thought in both reporter and reader is continuously diminished and eventually all but lost.

The gap between the world of journalism and the real world continues to grow.

One is reminded of the description of Chesterton (himself a journalist) almost 100 years ago of the method of reporting a speech becoming common in his day. Does it sound familiar? “The present method is this: the reporter sits listening to a tide of words which he does not try to understand, and does not, generally speaking, even try to take down; he waits until something occurs in the speech which for some reason sounds funny, or memorable, or very exaggerated, or, perhaps, merely concrete; then he writes it down and waits for the next one. ... The strong words all are put in; the chain of thought is left out.”

Chesterton’s general summing up of the degeneration of the journalistic art is also worth quoting in full: “As it is, however, this misrepresentation of speeches is only a part of a vast journalistic misrepresentation of all life as it is. Journalism is popular, but it is popular mainly as fiction. Life is one world, and life seen in the newspapers another; the public enjoys both, but it is more or less conscious of the difference ... But the people know in their hearts that journalism is a conventional art like any other, that it selects, heightens, and falsifies. Only its Nemesis is the same as that of other arts: if it loses all care for truth it loses all form likewise. The modern who paints too cleverly produces a picture of a cow which might be the earthquake at San Francisco. And the journalist who reports a speech too cleverly makes it mean nothing at all.” (from *On the Cryptic and the Elliptic*)

Sadly, this popular journalism, become fiction for us in the West, is not without the potentiality for great harm, especially when the reporting extends beyond the people who have grown used to such a degeneration in the standards of journalism. It becomes quite dangerous when the misrepresentation is such that it sparks fanaticism or violence, as in fact has occurred in relation to the reporting of the pope’s lecture. It is ludicrous to suggest that the pope was responsible for the extreme reaction to his speech. His fault, apparently, was in not taking sufficient notice of this potential for distortion in the news reporting of his lecture.

This reporting succeeded only in the sense that it distracted attention away from the main subject of his talk, which was concerned with the relations between faith and reason, and religion and science. In this regard the lecture ought to be seen, and no doubt will be in due course, as one of the best expositions (and in such a confined compass) of the problem and the principles of its solution while at the same time placing it perfectly within its proper historical context.

Given his temperamental preference for the approaches of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure over that of St. Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics, one may be surprised at the emphasis the pope puts on reason in the context of faith. But he draws this indispensability of reason to the integrity of faith straight out of the Scriptures. This is not to be wondered at for the God of faith and the God of reason are one and the same, just as the God of salvation and the God of creation are one.

But, as becomes clear during the course of the lecture, it is important to have a proper understanding of human reason and its full power and range, in order to avoid the opposite errors of fideism and scientism. As regards our knowledge of God, fideism underrates reason's power; whilst scientism arbitrarily limits its range.

The pope begins with the relation between religion and reason but he ends with the relation between reason and modern science. The former is becoming a matter of deep concern with the rise again of violence in the name of religion. But it is what he has to say on the latter which particularly interests us here for it goes to the heart of our problems in a highly secularized society.

A more detailed analysis of the content of the lecture appears in this issue under the title "FAITH REASON AND SCIENCE".