

The “Regensburg Address”

In early September of 2006, Pope Benedict XVI gave an address to the faculty at the University of Regensburg in Germany, where he once taught theology. Entitled “Faith, Reason and the University—Memories and Reflections”, his talk became an occasion for strong protests from members of the Muslim community and others. At issue was his reference to a Byzantine emperor’s negative characterization of Muhammad. Mistakenly thinking it reflected the Pope’s own view, many were outraged at the perceived insult to their faith. The Pope himself was quick to address the misunderstanding at his next weekly Angelus prayer, saying:

“At this time, I wish also to add that I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg, which were considered offensive to the sensibility of Muslims. These in fact were a quotation from a medieval text, which do not in any way express my personal thought.”

The offensive passage was (in the Pope’s own words) only his starting-point for reflections on the issue of faith and reason. Seen in light of the particular question whether is it right to convert by means of violence, the Pope asks what place reason might have in such ethical and theological discussions in general, and what might we then mean by “reason”?

Can reason be a “common ground” from which to address differences of opinion in ethical and religious matters? Recognizing a Christianity based upon Christ, the *Logos* (meaning both “reason” and “word”), the Pope answers the question decidedly in the affirmative. God is a God of reason: “not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature”. He acknowledges that not all religions, and not even all Christians, have seen reason in as good a light.

The talk goes on to address what *sort* of reason can supply this “common ground”. Two candidates appear: the reasoning of the Greek philosophers, or what has come down to us in our day, modern scientific reasoning. The Pope spends some time describing the gradual severing of Christianity from the thought of the Greeks (a process he calls “dehellenization”), as well as the historical development of the modern paradigm for scientific inquiry. Not one to dismiss the achievements of science (“The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly: we are all grateful for the marvelous possibilities that it has opened up for mankind and for the progress in humanity that has been granted to us.”), he nevertheless does not see *such* reasoning as supplying the “common ground” he is looking for. For one thing, it is limited only to matters capable of being empirically verified (or falsified). The solution, he argues, is a “broadening [of] our concept of reason and its application.” Not all reasoning is scientific reasoning, and where the issue concerns matters outside the limits of science, we do well to have recourse to philosophy and theology to answer our questions. As he says: “We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons.” In sum, the address argues, just as we should not simply *replace* modern scientific reasoning with other forms, so, too, should we avoid simply *identifying* science with reason. “For philosophy and, albeit in a different way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding.”