

**Comments for Panel:
“Reason, Revelation, and Freedom: Benedict XVI’s
Regensburg Speech”**

James R. Stoner, Jr.
Louisiana State University
poston@lsu.edu

Delivered at a conference on “The Free Society: Foundations and Challenges,”
sponsored by the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions,
Princeton University,
May 15, 2007

Comments for Panel: “Reason, Revelation, and Freedom: Benedict XVI’s Regensburg Speech”

I am not a theologian nor a particularly close observer of the Vatican, and I am so little expert on the ways of the Middle East that I didn’t even notice when John Agresto apparently almost landed Brad Wilson, Stan Brubaker, and me in a Turkish prison, as he alluded to last evening – but I have to admit that I was aware ahead of time that Benedict XVI was going to Regensburg the second week of September last. I had had the good fortune to spend a few hours in Salzburg last August, and visiting one of that charming city’s magnificent churches, I noticed a poster announcing that the Holy Father would soon be nearby – “Wer glaubt ist nie allein,” it proclaimed, “One who believes is never alone” – and I even clipped a notice from the diocesan paper organizing a trip across the Alps to attend an open mass. Well, even that exaggerates a bit my foreknowledge: “Regensburg” was on the poster, but I didn’t know it was the home of the university where the pope had taught in his youth, nor, though the dates of the visit were recorded, did I calculate that they encompassed the fifth anniversary of the attacks on America of September 11, 2001.

And yet, the day after that fifth anniversary, as if to say to the secular authorities in the West, “you’ve had five years to try this your way, now I’ll try mine,” Pope Benedict XVI captured the world’s attention with a lecture – with a university lecture! – and reoriented, or offered us a chance to reorient, our thinking about the relation of Christianity, Islam, and the secular West. I will comment a little later on what I see to have been the high politics of the Regensburg lecture, but I want to begin, as we began our conference yesterday, with the academic side of things.

The pope titled the lecture “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections,” and it begins almost nostalgically, remembering “the days of the old university made up of ordinary professors,” without assistants and secretaries, he says, but with much direct exchange with students and, even more particularly noted, with colleagues from different disciplines.¹ He mentions in particular a custom known as the *dies academicus* (I’ve failed to track down other documentation of this custom and would be grateful to learn from anyone listening who might know about it or have participated in one), which was apparently not a *dies irae* but an occasion once a semester “when professors from every faculty appeared before the students of the entire university, making possible a genuine experience of *universitas*... – the experience, in other words, of the fact that despite our specializations which at times make it difficult to communicate with each other, we made up a whole, working in everything on the basis of a single rationality with its various aspects and sharing responsibility for the right use of reason.” The pope goes on to add that the university of Regensburg had two faculties of theology – presumably one Catholic and one Protestant – and he even recounts a joke

¹ “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections” [Regensburg Lecture] (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html), para. 1.

from an atheist professor that the school devoted not one but two faculties to something that did not exist. “Even in the face of such radical skepticism,” he adds, “it is still necessary and reasonable to raise the question of God through the use of reason, and to do so in the context of the tradition of the Christian faith: this, within the university as a whole, was accepted without question.”

Thus at the outset of the lecture, Pope Benedict presents us with, not exactly a paradox, but surely a subtle, supple understanding of the possibilities of human reason: On the one hand, it aspires to grasp the whole, even the truth about God as well as about man and the world; on the other hand, this is a task beyond any man’s reason, to be approached rather through dialogue. Here is a German professor, to be sure, but no Hegelian with the owl of Minerva on his shoulder. Human reason can aspire to a vision of the whole, but it is not the property of an individual, and moreover, it is approached, he says, in lived experience, not, by implication, through the publication of a written master text.

There follows in the lecture the quotation from a scholarly edition of a medieval dialogue that received all the attention. I’ll say a little more about this later, but formally the lecturer’s point was simply to establish the proposition that “not acting reasonably is contrary to God’s nature.” A practical teaching is meant to be conveyed – “spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable” – and the scholarly editor is cited on the differences between Byzantine Christianity and Islam regarding God’s rationality and transcendence.² But for all its drama, in the lecture and of course afterwards, the contrast with Islam is not central to the remainder of the talk. Instead, the pope concentrates on what he calls the encounter between *enlightenment* (“Aufklärung” in the German) and religion. This, he says, is not an accident of Christianity’s appearing in the Hellenized eastern Roman empire, but is essential to Christian culture: the faith arises amidst, and is joined from its first writing to, Greek thought, that is, to philosophy, to *logos*. “The inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance... from the standpoint of... world history... [T]his convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.”³ Most of the rest of the lecture involves an interesting discussion of the history of this encounter or “synthesis”; barely alluding to its mature expression in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, Benedict mentions various attempts afterwards to break the bond of faith and reason, first in the voluntarism of Duns Scotus, then in three waves of modernity, so to speak: (1) the Protestant Reformation, which issued in Kant’s rejection of metaphysics; (2) nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal theology, or what we Americans call the Social Gospel, which aims “to bring Christianity back into harmony with modern reason” by reducing it to a “humanitarian moral message”;⁴ and (3) what he calls a coarse and imprecise cultural pluralism, which dismisses reason as culturally Greek and so accidentally Christian. He then proceeds to insist that he is not talking of turning back the clock to before the

² *Ibid.*, para. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, para. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 11.

Enlightenment, praises modern science both for its benefits and its ethos (“the will to be obedient to the truth,” “an attitude which belongs to the essential decisions of the Christian spirit”), but insists that reason in all its fullness cannot be restricted to the “empirically falsifiable.” Whatever the dominance of the positive sciences in our day, the university is not true to reason unless it restores theology, not necessarily to the queenship but “within the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences, not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but precisely as theology, as inquiry into the rationality of faith.”⁵ Actually, not only theology needs restoration, but philosophy, too – both are sources of knowledge, he says (he doesn’t call them “humanities” or present them as luxury goods for moments of leisure). And he even closes by quoting Socrates in the *Phaedo*: “It would be easily understandable if someone became so annoyed at all these false notions that for the rest of his life he despised and mocked all talk about being – but in this way he would be deprived of the truth of existence and would suffer a great loss.”⁶

Now it turns out that a year before his election to the Holy See, Joseph Ratzinger, theologian, had engaged in a dialogue or encounter with Germany’s leading postwar political philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, at the Catholic Academy in Munich. The exchange, now published under the title *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Revelation*,⁷ was on the very question of our own conference, “The Free Society: Foundations and Challenges.” Habermas spoke first and posed his topic as a question: “Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?” Citing John Rawls, Habermas starts with the premise of a republican society, with active citizens engaged in deliberation about the common good – the theme of communication and legitimation of the state through communication has been central to Habermas’s work throughout his career. The question here is what to do about religion, which against the expectations of twentieth-century rationalists like Habermas, has survived; indeed, he himself calls modern society “post-secular,” and respect for rights by the constitutional state now requires respect for the religious rights of those who remain or become religious. Habermas insists like Rawls on the neutrality of state authority, but he acknowledges, if not the historic influence of Christianity on constitutionalism, at least its influence on philosophy and its questions and categories. Modern reason, he recognizes, is sufficiently self-critical to turn on itself: “When reason reflects on its deepest foundations, it discovers that it owes its origin to something else.” This does not undo what he calls “the ethical abstinence of a postmetaphysical thinking,” but it does give credibility to the religious alternative. To Habermas, perhaps unlike to Rawls, though he cites the latter again, neutral state authority’s “guarantee of ethical freedom to every citizen” allows religious citizens “the right to make contributions in religious language to public debates,” while the secularists translate what they say “into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole.” With these words he concludes, perhaps expecting Ratzinger then to preach.⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 15.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, para. 16.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006)

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 31-32, 40, 46, 43, 51-52.

But Cardinal Ratzinger defies such expectation, for, though he speaks as a theologian, he says very little from the specific point of view of faith. He speaks in the language of reason, and without a question mark: *His* title is “That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State.” He distinguishes power under law from violence and terror, includes within the latter the atomic bomb as well as religious fanaticism, raises the question whether religion must “be placed under the guardianship of reason,” even whether “the overcoming of religion...[is] necessary progress on the part of mankind,” raises as well the use of science to manipulate human nature by experimenting with human beings – and so raises doubt as well “about the reliability of reason.” There are pathologies in religion, he acknowledges, but also pathologies of reason – hence the need for dialogue between them, so that reason and religion can “purify and help one another. They need each other, and they must acknowledge this mutual need.” Thus his conclusion: “This basic principle must take on concrete form in practice in the intercultural context of the present day: There can be no doubt that the two main partners in this mutual relatedness are the Christian faith and Western secular rationality: one can and must affirm this, without thereby succumbing to a false Eurocentrism.” He does not quite promise a revival of natural law – “the victory of the theory of evolution,” he writes, has “capsized” the view of nature it once relied on – but he nevertheless concludes that there are “essential values and norms that are in some way known or sensed by all men,” and he thinks these norms – call them “human rights”; I think he would – will be shown more “brightly” through this “relatedness” and will, in his words, “once again become an effective force in mankind,” “hold[ing] the world together.”⁹

Now I think the dialogue with Habermas helps illuminate the politics of Benedict’s Regensburg lecture. Let me just sketch a few thoughts. First, I don’t buy the general consensus in the press that the pope was caught unawares of the likely Muslim response to his quotation of Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus to the effect that in “what Muhammed brought that was new... you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”¹⁰ It’s an old adage that a gentleman never offends anyone... unintentionally – and I for one suspect that Benedict knew he risked Muslim outrage, even violence. Why would he do this? First, he actually tamed a certain kind of Muslim outrage: Leading clerics successfully spread word among the masses that violent outburst on the day of anger (*dies irae?*) called in response would only prove the pope right, and on the whole the protests were peaceful. Few in the West had dared to offend Islam since 9/11, maybe even since Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* – think of the combination of rudeness and cowardice that accompanied the Mohammed cartoons in Denmark – but Benedict forced a sort of dialogue by starting an argument. Prove that what the old emperor said isn’t so, he seemed to challenge Islam. As one step toward dialogue, he successfully elicited an

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 62-66, 77-79, 69-71, 79-80.

¹⁰ “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections,” para. 3.

important response from major Islamic imams and scholars, published in *Islamica Magazine*, clearly differentiating themselves in a public way from radical Islamism.¹¹

Second, I thought the pope handled the outcry afterwards quite deftly. He responded to the drumbeat for an apology by saying he was sorry *not* for what he said but how it was heard. Then he met with diplomats from Muslim countries, speaking to them in French, quoting the words of Vatican II which he called the “Magna Charta” of Islamo-Christian dialogue, exploiting his double identity as head of state as well as head of Church, reminding them of the need for reciprocity concerning religious liberty and thus putting them on the defensive yet again.¹² We heard in the last session a quotation from the Far East to the effect that to defeat the enemy without the use of force is consummate skill – I think here we see an example, or at least an able first step.

Finally, I think the key to the address is in its positive if implicit call for an alliance between Enlightenment rationalism and the Christian Church against the agents of irrationalism, whether from radical Islam or from sources within ourselves, and since he says “Christian,” not “Catholic,” he anticipates, too, a dialogue among Christians, East and West, Protestant and Catholic.¹³ This alliance is not Machiavellian nor a mere technique, but a deep confidence in the goodness of reason and its source. I think the pope is authentic in speaking of *dialogue*; the question of science – its authority, its limits, and its possibilities – remains unsettled in Benedict’s writings, for example. In short, without commenting on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Benedict puts in perspective the deep structure that ought to guide our diplomacy and interventions – and indicates the task before the West if we are to prove ourselves worthy of victory, indeed if we are to be able to preserve ourselves and who we are.

¹¹ “Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,” *Islamica Magazine*, issue 18 (2006), pp. 25-32 (online at http://www.islamicamagazine.com/issue18/openletter18_lowres.pdf); signatures by this printing numbered 100.

¹² “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Ambassadors of Countries with a Muslim Majority and the the Representatives of Muslim Communities in Italy,” September 25, 2006 (online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060925_ambasciatori-paesi-arabi_en.html).

¹³ See Joseph Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), ch. 1.