

REGENSBURG

Carissimi,

Five years ago September 12th Pope Benedict delivered a scholarly lecture on the role of reason vis-à-vis religion in the modern world at the University of Regensburg in Germany, where he once taught theology.

The Pope had some very pointed comments to make concerning the various stages of assault upon human reason. His lecture was mostly directed to the West – the modern, liberal, secular, culturally eviscerated West. He said the “decline of Reason” in the Occident came about in three chief stages.

First was the Protestant Revolt, which hoisted the fanatical flag of fideism, proclaiming “Faith Alone!” It continued with what is called “liberal theology,” which mushes Divine Revelation around until it is completely unrecognizable, like a kid who is trying to make it appear that he’s eaten all his potatoes (I might add that they tended to be German potatoes). And finally, the third stage in the assault on Reason proceeded from Scientific Positivism, which says that only sense experience yields certitude (even though no one can sense Positivism itself).

Christianity, he taught, was formed by unique triple blending of Jewish Religion, Greek Reason and Roman Order. Jerusalem, Athens and Rome. Faith and Reason are rightfully complementary and mutually enriching. Faith without reason is fideism. Reason without faith is rationalism. Both do violence to the human intellect. Only Catholicism is the harmony of Faith and Reason ultimately found, and therein the human intellect can soar to the heights of truth with both wings.

The Pope had something to say about Islam, too. And he used the writings of an erudite Greek Emperor to serve as a launching pad. The Emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, was steeped both in Greek philosophical thought and Christian Faith. And he said God, Who is Reason Itself, is not pleased with conversion by the sword. In fact, it is contrary to God’s very nature. And this is a real point of contention with Islam.

Pope Benedict quoted this Emperor (whose land was under siege by the Muslim Turks) to the effect that Mohammed, Islam’s founder, had brought nothing new into the world save things evil and inhuman, “such as his command to spread Islam by the sword.”

The Holy Father pushed the argument further by citing a revered Muslim scholar from Middle Ages, Ibn Hazm, who upheld “voluntarism.” This means that Allah can will whatever he wants, even bad things. Christianity rejects this for what it is, an amateur attempt to protect God’s omnipotence. In short it is a philosophical absurdity, since God is Truth and not just Power.

The lecture provoked the unreasonable and uncontrolled rage of the Muslim world, since they took umbrage at the suggestion that Islam was somehow unreasonable and quick to become enflamed with uncontrolled rage.

To illustrate their point concretely, Muslims the world over held huge protests and held up signs that said things like, “Islam will conquer Rome!!” “Behead the Pope!!!” and “Kill the Roman Dogs!!”

They burned the Vicar of Christ in effigy; they wrecked Catholic churches; Al Qaeda said they were sending men to murder the Pope; and finally, they actually murdered a nun in the Middle East named Sister Leonella.

There was no news of liberal theologians or positivists chanting in the streets. They prefer to undermine Reason, and by extension, Christian Civilization, quietly and calmly. They prefer to put on CDs of whales moaning and waves crashing on the Oregon coast before they pull out the hypodermic needles to anesthetize before they euthanize. No, the secular humanist foes of reason abhor fanaticism.

So one can appreciate the complexity of the Pope’s task. When he at last offered some conciliatory words it was along these lines: “I am sorry for the reactions, you didn’t really understand me,” and, “The question lent itself to possible misunderstanding.”

But in effect the Vicar of Christ held his ground. His essential point was that the Catholic Faith is in fact the defender of Reason. Why? Because the Catholic Faith puts forth the proposition that God, Who is Reason Itself, became Man and dwelt among us. The Church then is the bulwark of Truth, a pillar of fire shining in the darkness of the world. Jesus Christ, God-made-Man, is the Guarantor of the goodness and intelligibility of the created order.

Thus, on this 10th anniversary of the attacks of September 11th, it would behoove us to recall that the Church is facing a two-front battle: Islam (which denies the Incarnation) and Secular Fundamentalism (which also denies the Incarnation). Which is more dangerous is matter for another discussion.

-Don Francesco