

Regensburg, Human Freedoms and Inter-faith Dialogue

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1. To understand where Pope Benedict is coming from we need to look further back than his Regensburg address. What he said in that academic circle presupposes much else that he has said and written that those scholars would have been well aware of. This includes both his long-standing study of Islam, and his thinking on the relationship between faith and reason.
2. It is well known that he regards relativism as a scourge and threat to authentic humanism and freedom, to morality, justice, peace and even to the pursuit of excellence in education. These values just melt away in what Benedict XVI has dubbed "the wasteland of relativism" where what is true for you might not be true for me. (And why bother with education if one answer is as good as the next – unless, of course, education is reduced only to the empirical sciences?)
3. He traces relativism back to the disjunction of faith and reason and offers three historical reasons for this disjunction: (i) the rejection of metaphysics and its substitution by sola scriptura; (ii) the reduction of faith to morality by those liberal theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries who tended to reduce truth to what could be empirically verified; and (iii) contemporary claims that the Greek framework of the New Testament was just one possibility among others, and dispensable.
4. Benedict is calling for a re-coupling of faith and reason, and regards this as essential for being able to address the problems facing humankind today. He is not so silly as to be advocating any form of theocracy. He enthusiastically accepts the gains of modernity, including the separation of Church and state. His argument is with the separation of faith and reason.
5. To remove faith from the requirements of reason is to expose faith to the unreasonable; it opens faith to a certain arbitrariness, and to anything that reason would exclude from faith – including violence. Violence is incompatible with faith because *reason* does not allow us to demand what of its very nature can only be freely given – the yes of faith. As John Paul II has said: "faith can only be proposed, not imposed".¹ And the Church's authority to teach can only be "at the service of conscience".²
6. It was in this context that Benedict quoted a Christian emperor who had condemned the use of violence for spreading the faith, but who did so in language that Benedict described as "harsh to our ears" and that amounted to "lashing out" – which is not how one describes remarks that one is endorsing. The group he was speaking to would have realised this. But he made an unfortunate mistake in not anticipating how his remarks would be heard in the wider political context.

It would be a bad day, however, for scholarship and for freedom of enquiry and of expression, if it became an offence to quote historical remarks in the context of scholarly reflection.

7. Christians and Muslims have both been guilty of excesses in curtailing legitimate freedoms. The central thesis of the Regensburg address was that there is an intrinsic connection between faith and reason. He says that for the world to rediscover this connection it is necessary for us to engage in inter-disciplinary, inter-cultural and inter-religions dialogue. His predecessor had said:

The task before us is to promote a culture of dialogue. Individually and together, we must show how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice and upholds liberty ¹

8. This means proactively engaging in dialogue on the premise that there are truths that transcend all diversity, and the need to look beyond our own areas of specialisation, and our own belief systems.

A “diversity education” and “diversity policies” that amount to no more than living with plurality falls short of recognising our dependence on one another in *the journey into truth* that is always greater than where we are already. The “culture of dialogue” called for by Pope John Paul II transforms mere plurality into an integrated, enriching pluralism.

Being able to discuss our differences – neither propelled by proselytism nor held back by fear of offending – shows a *deeper acceptance* of one another than merely living with differences.

9. It is precisely this culture of enriching one another that secularism is unable to contribute to, given its entanglement with post-modern relativism. There are sound social and political reasons for promoting inclusiveness, personal choice, and the elimination of intolerance, and there are good reasons for including these ideals in the goals and values of education. But already, discussion on these matters is not a level playing field because those who query some of the claims made under those headings are perceived as intolerant, non-accepting of diversity, and non-inclusive.

We need to ask why fair-mindedness and political freedom can become the first victims when some of the claims made in the name of diversity, mutual respect and freedom are questioned. The relativisation of truth has made it wrong to query another’s “truth”

10. Take “tolerance” as a case study: on its own, the term means accepting the right of other people to act on what they believe is right (within the limits imposed by the common good). In this sense, “tolerance” is a positive value and must indeed be included in education.

But in a post-modern context, the term is perceived within a culture which assumes that the right to act is enough to make the action right. There is no need to evaluate the action by reference to any criterion beyond the individual’s own perceptions, preferences and choices. Each individual’s view is right and true. “There is more than one answer” usually means “there is no wrong answer”.

The absurdity of this is obvious where scientific method applies and where true and false can be verified. But most of life’s big questions about the meaning of life and about moral values lie outside the ken of scientific method. So they are assumed to

belong to the realm of the purely subjective and private, and outside the realm of what we can be sure about; they belong to a “faith” that has become disjoined from reason.

11. The right of individuals to act on their sincere beliefs, divorced from any further question about whether some of those beliefs might actually be wrong, is then perceived as the basis of a “human right”. The next step in this chain is to outlaw those expressions of opinion that question any of these “rights”. To do so is designated as “hate speech”. And so a new kind of censorship gets built into education and public discussion. What was perceived to be greater freedom, mutual acceptance and respect turns out to hinge on greater curtailment of human freedoms, including freedom of expression. That is where the relativisation of truth leads us.

The good news is that authentic freedom, inclusiveness and mutual respect have a much more secure foundation than that, namely objective truth.

12. The illusion that the right to choose is sufficient to constitute a human right results from neglecting a prior moral duty:

Although each individual has a right to be respected in his/her own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known.⁴

This is not about “my truth, your error”: this is about what truth should mean to *all of us*. This is the wisdom enshrined in various ways in ancient cultures and religions, which is why they can give greater breadth to our understanding than can a narrowed-down rationality that has ended up defining individual rights without reference to the prior, common obligation to truth.

13. Let us hope that serious scholars will give as much attention to Benedict’s cogent case for cultural and religious dialogue as others have given to his political mistake.

The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur, is the programme with which a theology based on biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.⁵

Endnotes:

1. *Message for World Day of Peace*, July 2002, para 6.
2. *The Mission of the Redeemer*, para. 39.
3. Inter-religious assembly, 29 October 1999.
4. *Veritatis Spondor*, para. 34.
5. Regensburg Address.