

Insensitive, Provocative, Courageous ... or W

Some Reflections on Pope Benedict's Lecture

by Colin Chapman

What can one say that hasn't already been said about the Pope's lecture and the furore that has followed it? Probably very little – which is why I will confine myself to seven questions:

1. **W** The title of the lecture was 'Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections'. The last sentence ends with the words 'the great task of the university', and the lecture presents a rationale not only for the existence of the university but also for the place of theology as an academic discipline within the university. With phrases like 'the reasonableness of faith', 'the right use of reason', and 'coherence within the universe of reason', he is arguing that theology has a legitimate place in a European university today, and mounts his defence in the face of what he no doubt sees as the two major challenges facing Christianity in Europe today: secularism and Islam.

2. **Did the Pope know what he was doing?** It's been reported that the lecture was entirely the Pope's own, and that it wasn't checked by any of his advisers in Islamic affairs. If they had seen it beforehand, they would no doubt have pointed out that most Muslim scholars believe that the Qur'anic verse 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2:256) comes from the later, Medinan period, not from the Mecca period, as the Pope said. They would no doubt have warned him that the quotation of the Emperor's words – without further

comment or explanation – could easily be misunderstood, and that he needed to distance himself from the Emperor's sentiments much more clearly. The Pope must have felt that he was on home ground – both because of the location of the lecture and the familiarity of the main subject. But by straying out of his own areas of expertise, he probably had little idea of how his words would be heard by many Muslims.

3. **W** **to Muslims?** Although he wasn't directly addressing Muslims, he must have had them in mind in what he was saying. The offending quotation from the Byzantine Christian Emperor comes near the beginning, and this is the final paragraph of the lecture: "Not to act reasonably (with logos) is contrary to the nature of God," said Manuel II, according to his Christian understanding of God, in response to his Persian interlocutor. It is to this great logos, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures. To rediscover it constantly is the great task of the university.' In these words the Pope is deliberately rejecting the language of 'the clash of civilisation', and inviting 'our partners' – which in the context probably means secular Europeans and Muslims – to dialogue on the basis of reason, and he's utterly confident that Christianity can hold its own in any reasonable dialogue of this kind.

4. **W**

about Islam? Most of the reports that we have heard suggest that he takes a fairly hard-line approach to Islam. Ruth Gledhill, writing in *The Times*, quotes a Roman Catholic who says that the Pope believes that Islam cannot be reformed as it is incompatible with democracy. She also quotes the President of a Catholic university in Italy who says that the Pope believes that the reform of Islam is impossible 'because it is against the nature of the Qur'an as it's understood by Muslims'. If this is where the Pope is starting from in this thinking about Islam, there's bound to be tension between his more negative approach to Islam and the more irenic approach that has been developed in official catholic documents since Vatican II.

5. **W**

such rage? One comment that I've read explains the rage in terms of 'the insecurity Muslims feel due to lack of intellectual knowledge and being left behind in every aspect of life'. It goes on to compare Muslims to 'a patient suffering from acute depression. He/she has no pride, feels unloved, has no job, has nothing. Any little remark can spark the anger and the patient become violent.' If there are elements of truth in this diagnosis, I suspect that it also expresses some of the arrogance that is so evident in the attitudes of many westerners towards Muslims and Islam. So instead of the condescending approach which says 'It's all their fault, it's entirely their problem', perhaps we in the West should wake up to the fact that centuries of western imperialism, the continuing Israeli-Palesti-

nian conflict, Afghanistan, Iraq, and more recently, the ridicule and scorn reflected in the Danish cartoon controversy – all of these things (things that we in the West have done to them) have helped to create what a *Guardian Weekly* editorial calls 'a global tinderbox'. As one who has lived for some years in the Middle East, I can only say that I understand perfectly the sense of humiliation that is felt so keenly by Muslims and why the West is accused so often of arrogance – the Arabic word being *istikbar*, which means literally 'making oneself big'.

6. **Are we allowed to raise the difficult questions?**

This is where George Carey makes some powerful points towards the end of his Beach Lecture at Newbold College. 'Allow me to ask an awkward question,' he says, 'which I believe was hovering in the background of the Pope's thesis and which many westerners are asking frequently these days: "Why is Islam associated with violence?"' He goes on to speak about 'the urgent need for reciprocity' and raises the issue of the Law of Apostasy and the problems it creates for Muslims who want to convert to another religion. After a period in which Christian leaders engaged in dialogue with Muslims have shied away from the concept of reciprocity, I for one am delighted to see that more are recognising that it could be an important principle in dialogue. Michael Nazir-Ali in his *Conviction and Conflict: Islam, Christianity and World Order* sees value in this approach, provided it's not translated into a simple tit-for-tat mentality. One good result of this controversy is that difficult questions of this kind are being brought to the surface in a very public way

and all kind of political correctness are being challenged. At the same time it may be worth remembering some words of Roger Hooker that arose out of his many years of experience with Hindus and Muslims as a CMS mission partner in India: 'I say what I can, not what I want'. Our typical western approach, which is usually in a hurry and thinks in terms of agendas and goals, isn't generally so good at building relationships and often wants to force the pace – sometimes even going for the jugular.

7. W The Pope has no doubt launched himself into a sharp learning curve in these areas sooner than he expected. Because of the way he used the quotation – without any repudiation of the harsh view it expressed – he has been forced to enter into face to face dialogue with Muslim leaders. In the lecture he was calling for the very calm, rational dialogue that is supposed to take place in the university. But he has stirred up a less than rational debate on the streets and in the media of the world. One can only hope that the Pope will be willing to listen to some of his own advisers in

this field who have been working patiently behind the scenes for many decades in very real dialogue with Muslims in different contexts, and that his unguarded remarks won't undo some of the excellent work they have done. Anglicans are engaged in highly significant dialogue with Muslims in different contexts – like the Anglican–al-Azhar dialogue. This furore has shown that we can't always dictate either the subject or the venue for dialogue. And in case we think that dialogue is just a fancy word for what theologians and church leaders do, it's nothing more than two people meeting face to face and talking together.

So was the Pope insensitive, provocative or courageous? Perhaps all of the above – which is all the more reason why Christians throughout the world can be involved in picking up the pieces – simply by talking to every Muslim that they know.

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