

Truth, Reason, Freedom

Galatians 5:1, John 8:32, 36

A Sermon for a Sunday in October

Eighteen years ago, in September 2006, then Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech in Germany at the University of Regensburg. It came to be known as the Regensburg Address, or simply Regensburg.

Before we get into what he said, I want to note the honorifics he used to address the audience: "Your Eminences, Your Magnificences, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen."

A salutation that perks one's ears.

Now to the speech itself. It was sixteen paragraphs long. One paragraph was for the introduction, two paragraphs for the conclusion, three paragraphs on Islam, and ten paragraphs on reason.

The speech caused a huge kerfuffle! It was like the blowup after Muslim cartoons were published in Denmark (2005). All the attention was on those three paragraphs on Islam. It was said the Pope made a huge gaffe! How could he be so rude?

Why the outrage? What he had said was that violence has no place in religion. He had included a quotation from someone in the Middle Ages critical of Mohammad's command to spread Islam by the sword. Mentioning that was just too much for many.

Why did Western leaders, as well as Muslims, blow up over this speech?

Some said the Pope was trying to revive the Crusades against Islam. In their point of view the colonial expansion, which came later and which destroyed many of the empires in the places where Islam existed, was the problem.

We, unfortunately, don't learn much history and don't know about the earlier spread of Islam by the sword. In the first hundred years of Islam after Mohammed the Muslim warriors went all across North Africa right up to Paris. In the first eight hundred years they held Spain, and they consider Spain their own country. It's only been five hundred years that it has been Westernized.

For five hundred years Islam ruled much of India under the so-called Mongols. They expanded into what we call Turkey and up into Eastern Europe so much so that in 1529 they had encircled Vienna, right in the center of Europe. One hundred and fifty-four years later, they were driven back (1683), once again they had Vienna in their circling power.

In what passes for interfaith dialogue today, it is commonly said is that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all hold to one God; they all honor Abraham, and they should all stick together.

This, of course, is fiction. We Christians hold to Abraham in a different way than the Jewish people do, and the Jewish Bible, of course, does not include the New Testament. When you find Abraham in the Koran, it's very sparse and very different.

When we talk about religions that hold to one God, monotheism, we forget that there are a couple of other religions that are monotheistic, too, that is, the Sikhs in India, which is a large group, and smaller group from ancient times, the Zoroastrians. Thus, the idea that only Jews, Christians, and Muslims hold to one God isn't true.

Moreover, neither Muslims nor Jews consider us Christians as having one God. They think of us as being polytheists or idolators. After all, we do not hold to Allah or to Jehovah. We hold to the one who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that makes all the difference. Jesus is the one who is equal to and the same as the Father. We talk about the Trinity, and that's a very different kind of thing.

When Pope Benedict called for dialogue in his Regensburg speech, he wasn't talking about the kind of sentimental fiction that goes on in interfaith dialogue today.

Rather, he was talking about the importance of reason, thinking, critical analysis. Remember, ten paragraphs of his speech were on "reason." If we use an analogy from baseball, we could say the Pope was throwing a fast ball or slider because his speech went very differently from what people were expecting.

The speech starts out saying that we all hold to what's reasonable, and what's reasonable also helps us know and tells us who God is, what God is like. He said that there is an analogy between what we think and what God is like. Otherwise, how could we exist? On the basis of that, he said that we should be able to find a common way of living and destroy all those ideas about violence that are in our religions.

It's important to note briefly what the Roman Catholic Church teaches about reason. In 1870 at Vatican I, they defined that you can know God by reason and know enough about him that you know what it's really about. But, if you don't, if you don't know it right, if you don't know what natural law is, and if your conscience doesn't go right, then you have to be guided by the Church and its Magisterium. Thus, it is not that reason itself is final or absolute, but rather the Church. That's why at Vatican I it was also said that the Pope, in certain situations, is infallible on both faith and morals.

These decisions about reason made at Vatican 1 were not talked about in the Pope's Regensburg address. Rather it was simply: We're reasonable. We want to be reasonable. And what about you Muslims? Where do you stand?

It's useful to look at this because Muslims hold to the Koran and what Allah says.¹ For Muslims it doesn't depend on what we think; what matters is what Allah has said. One must obey Allah and his holy law. One can say of Moslems that Allah is pure will and not reason. This is a problem: Are they going to live with the rest of us or not?

The Pope's lecture, however, was primarily not about that. Rather, he pivoted and addressed the people of Europe and us, we who are part of Western civilization. The Pope was really talking about the problem we Westerners have in that we are losing our grip on reason, on the importance of solid facts and sober reasoning.

What's happened across the Western world is that reason has been replaced by multiculturalism, the view that everybody has his or her own truth; no one can criticize what is true for someone else, and that's fine. As one wit said: "The difference between us and cannibals is just a matter of taste."

We want to be polite, nice, and non-confrontational. So, we cancel free speech. We self-censor. We don't want to be the one who says: "The emperor has no clothes!"

You may have heard of Kemi Badenoch, a member of the British parliament, an immigrant, black, raised in Nigeria. She recently made headlines for saying: "Culture is more than cuisine and clothes. It's also customs that may be at odds with British values." She went on:

"We cannot be naïve and assume immigrants will automatically abandon ancestral ethnic hostilities at the border or that all cultures are equal. I am struck, for example, by the number of the recent immigrants to the UK who hate Israel. That sentiment has no place here. We must realize the world has changed."

She noted that, of course, not all Muslims hate Jews, but those who hold to political Islam do. Political Islam and Jew hatred go together. When well-meaning Westerners make politically correct excuses for political Islam, they endanger the lives of Muslim reformers and become complicit in suppressing their voices.

We in the West have a problem. It's not simply that the birth rate is declining in Europe and the United States. It's not the birth rate, it's the conviction rate that is the problem. We are heirs of a freedom-loving, life-oriented civilization in which truth matters, reason matters.

What are we to do? In order to think at all, you have to be able to say what is false, as well as what is true. To do that, it is essential to talk freely, to weigh arguments, test evidence. Society cannot be reliably improved through lies, exaggerations, and misleading narratives: it requires knowledge of the real, factual situation we face, in whatever area we seek to improve matters.

¹ Mohammed, who was illiterate, claimed to have received the name "Allah" by revelation, but archeologists have found in desert cemeteries the use of the name "Allah" prior to Mohammed.

Pope Benedict was speaking to this problem.

What do we Lutherans say?

Luther regarded "reason" as the highest gift of God. To be sure, he was critical of a certain kind of thinking, reasoning, which claimed we can see through the world and its structures to God beyond. He said reason can't do that because of sin and evil. Reason is limited, fallible, but it is still the right tool, the best tool, for solving problems here on earth. It's part of loving our neighbor, being aware of how sin works and how life works in fact.

And what about our Christian faith and mission? That then also gets back to what Benedict XVI was talking about. When he talked about reason, he was talking about truth. That is basic to what is life and life eternal.

What is ultimate truth is clearly stated in the Gospel as that cross of Jesus Christ and resurrection which gives us life forever.

It's not reason that does this, as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 1:17-25. It's not reason, but it also isn't anti-reason and pure will, as we might say Islam is.

Rather, this particular event in history, occurring just at the beginning of our common era, is definitive for all of history and all time. It is this event that is the foundation and object of our confession. We make that case very specifically in certain places we remember:

- Acts 4:12: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."
- John 14:6: "Jesus said to him: I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."
- 1 Tim 2:5: "There is one God, and there is one mediator, the man Christ Jesus."

(Also I Cor. 8:4-6)

There aren't other mediators. There aren't all kinds. They're not all the same, and that one mediator is Christ Jesus.

People will say: How can you be so intolerant and so rigid! Actually, it's the other way around. As we look at the decline and chaos of the UK and Europe, it's evident we're only a few years behind them.

We have to ask and proclaim: Where is our hope? What is salvation? We find the answer in him: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). And: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Amen