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Among the commentaries from the Muslim side on the lecture by Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg, two are emblematic. The first was published on September 13 in the most important liberal Italian newspaper, "la Repubblica." Its author is Khaled Fouad Allam, an Algerian-born Italian resident, professor of Islamic studies at the universities of Trieste and Urbino, and widely read and listened to in Catholic circles. The date of this commentary should be noted. The article was published the morning after the pope's address in Regensburg, when much of the Muslim world had not yet unleashed the onslaught of invective and violent acts that would fill the newscasts of the following days, and force the Islamic voices not in agreement to be silent.

The central thesis of Allam's commentary is that Benedict XVI has legitimately brought up "an immense problem concerning the real position of the Qur'an toward the question of violence"; that on this question the Qur'an "can be read according to opposite interpretations"; and that therefore "it is necessary to break the terrible chain of fundamentalism" that ignores the Qur'an's condemnation of violence and "proclaims itself the only bearer of the truth."

The second commentary is by an Arab theologian and philosopher, Aref Ali Nayed. The complete version has not yet been released, but [www.chiesa](http://www.chiesa) is publishing a large portion of it below, with the gracious permission of the author.

For Nayed, unlike for Allam, violence and intolerance are foreign to Islam. And the pope offends this religion when he asks it to espouse, not violence, but reason.

Nayed is also known and listened to within the Catholic Church. Born in Libya, he is currently the managing director of a technology company headquartered in the United Arab Emirates. He studied hermeneutics and the philosophy of science in the United States and Canada, has taken courses at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and has given lectures at the Pontifical Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. He is a consultant for the Interfaith Program of the University of Cambridge. He is a devout Sunni Muslim, and describes himself as a "theologian of the Asharite school, Maliki in jurisprudential tendency, and Shadhili-Rifai in spiritual leanings."

At the beginning of his long essay – in the pages not reproduced here – Nayed says he agrees with Benedict XVI "on the importance of deepening and widening the notion of Western Reason so as to include the contribution that revelatory religiosity can make." But otherwise, his criticisms of the pope outstrip his expressions of appreciation by a long shot.

Nayed reproves Benedict XVI for, among other things, trusting experts on Islam who are "hostile" toward this religion. And among these he cites Jesuit fathers Christian Troll and Samir Khalil Samir, whom the pope called to introduce the study seminar with his former students at Castel Gandolfo in September of 2005, on the concept of God in Islam.

Rather than from them, Nayed suggests that Benedict XVI seek insight from "Catholic orientalist" he sees as better disposed toward Islam, such as Maurice Borrmans, Michel Lagarde, Etienne Renault, Thomas Michel, and also the Arab Christians Michel Sabbah, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and Georges Khodr. Nayed laments, moreover, that Benedict XVI removed archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald from the presidency of the pontifical council for interreligious dialogue. But Nayed directs his most radical criticisms – theological, philosophical, and historical – against Benedict XVI where he analyzes, point by point, the lecture in Regensburg beginning with the citation pope made of a medieval text by the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus.

It is from this point that the lengthy extract from Nayed's essay, reproduced below, begins.

Here are the two commentaries, one after the other:

### **1. "The Qur'an must be put back into the hands of every Muslim..." by Khaled Fouad Allam**

The attacks on the Twin Towers perpetrated by Al Qaeda, the massacre of the children in Beslan by a Chechen fundamentalist group, and the massacres in Algeria for which the GIA has claimed responsibility – are these a product of Islam as such, or are they a product of the present historical condition of Islam? Is violence really genetically embedded in Islam?

Pope Benedict XVI tried to respond to this serious and disturbing question from his former place as a professor in Regensburg by citing suras and verses from the Qur'an, and stories about the prophet Mohammed.

The Holy Father cited a famous verse from the longest sura in the Qur'an, the 'Cow' sura, composed of 286 verses. This is a sura which – to clarify the pope's assertion – is not part of the suras of Mecca, but rather of those of Medina: "No coercion in matters of faith."

It must be recalled that the Qur'an is composed of 114 chapters called suras, and is subdivided internally according to the origin of the suras. The suras called Meccan correspond to the beginning of the Qur'anic revelation, and

depict a solitary Prophet, one without the awareness of forming a community, a development that would take place from 622 until 632, the date of the Prophet's death.

In the Medina period, in which the first Islamic community was structured, the revelation continues. For Muslims, this means that prophecy continues to inspire the community. The suras called Medinan are the ones that structured Islam from the juridical, political, and social point of view, and are of a less eschatological character than the Meccan ones.

The difference between the Meccan and Medinan suras is, therefore, extremely important, because various debates on this point have arisen within Islam. For example, a few years ago a famous Sudanese theologian and intellectual, Mohammed Taha, asserted that the Medinan suras, which are the most political suras of the Qur'an, correspond to the mental and psychological context of seventh-century Islam, and that the prophet Mohammed, never having seen the definitive compilation of the text of the Qur'an, would probably not have included the Medinan suras in the Qur'an, but in another text.

Following these assertions, the Sudanese regime condemned Taha to death for apostasy, and he was hung in 1983.

The Holy Father is thus bringing up an immense problem concerning the Qur'an's real position toward the question of violence.

The problem is truly complex, because the text of the Qur'an cannot be thought of like an ordinary book: it requires a special approach to be clarified and interpreted. The famous Averroes, in his treatise entitled "The harmony of religion and philosophy," asserted: "There exist in the divine law, the Qur'an, passages that have an ulterior meaning, which men must interpret through rational demonstration, and cannot be interpreted literally."

The tool of commentary on the Qur'an is essential. Already centuries ago, classical theology had brought to light the contradictions within the Qur'an among verses that cancel each other out, and resolved the issue by asserting that when two principles contradict each other, the positive principle overrides the negative one.

The famous verse cited by pope Benedict XVI can be read according to two opposite interpretations.

According to classical theology – and according to theology of the liberal strain – this verse should override all the verses that incite violence. But today, in a situation characterized by the monopoly of neofundamentalist theology, it is that verse which is in fact abrogated, in the sense that many don't take it into account at all, like the Salafi, for example.

The problem is therefore not so much what the Qur'an contains, but what inspiration human beings draw from it, from revelation. Because all societies produce violence, but not all of them resolve the question of violence using the same methods. Christianity, for instance, as brilliantly demonstrated by René Girard, resolves the problem of violence through the figure of Jesus Christ and his crucifixion.

But in Islam, everything rests upon the ability of individual human beings to choose between good and evil, as a verse in the Qur'an says: "God does not change men's way of life until they first change."

But for this to happen, the Qur'an must be put back into the hands of every Muslim – which means breaking the terrible chain of fundamentalism that proclaims itself the only bearer of the truth.

## **2. "The image of a violent un-reasonable Islam is foundational for the lecture of Benedict XVI..." by Aref Ali Nayed**

[...] After his fairly benign lecture opening, Benedict XVI suddenly conjures up a most troubling legacy:

"I was reminded of all this recently, when I read the edition by professor Theodore Khoury (Münster) of part of the dialogue carried on – perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara – by the erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam, and the truth of both."

It is not clear how Paleologus' dialogue "reminded" Benedict XVI of "all this". I would have liked to believe that Benedict XVI was reminded of the value of reasoned discussion, based on common humanity, by the fact that a Christian and a Muslim were having a reasoned discussion even in the midst of a siege. Alas, I think a more likely reading is that Benedict XVI was reminded of the presumed intimate relationship between Christian faith and reason by the fact that a Christian, faced with a violent Islam, still focused on the equation of his faith with reasonableness.

Benedict XVI very much starting with a "siege" setting resurrects a scene from the siege of Constantinople, with all its associated symbolism: "It was presumably the emperor himself who set down this dialogue, during the siege of Constantinople between 1394 and 1402; and this would explain why his arguments are given in greater detail than those of his Persian interlocutor. The dialogue ranges widely over the structures of faith contained in the Bible and in the Qur'an, and deals especially with the image of God and of man, while necessarily returning repeatedly to the relationship between – as they were called – three "Laws" or "rules of life": the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Qur'an. It is not my intention to discuss this question in the present lecture; here I would like to discuss only

one point – itself rather marginal to the dialogue as a whole – which, in the context of the issue of ‘faith and reason’, I found interesting and which can serve as the starting-point for my reflections on this issue.”

It is strange that Benedict XVI selected an admittedly “marginal” point from an obscure medieval dialogue, written at a particularly abnormal and tense moment in history, to find a “starting-point” for his reflections on “faith and reason”. One could imagine an infinitely large number of possible, more direct and sensible, starting-points.

Many an alternative starting-point could have helped Benedict XVI make his main points about faith and reason without using a disfigured straw-man Islam. The connection between the medieval dialogue and the main point of the lecture is so strained and distant; invoking the dialogue unnecessarily damages Christian-Muslim relations. This is at a time when we truly need the healing of these relations. Then, of all the sections of the Emperor’s book, the Pontiff chooses to focus on the one concerning Holy War or Jihad: “In the seventh conversation-controversy edited by professor Khoury, the emperor touches on the theme of the holy war. The emperor must have known that surah 2, 256 reads: ‘There is no compulsion in religion’. According to the experts, this is one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat. But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur’an, concerning holy war.”

It is also interesting that Benedict, invoking the authority of anonymous “experts”, summarily dismisses the clear and still normative Qur’anic ruling “There is no compulsion in religion” by claiming that it was only upheld by Muhammad (peace be upon him) in times of weakness! Instead of cherishing this ruling, and challenging Muslims today to live-up to it, the Pontiff dismisses an important Islamic resource for reasonableness and peace by seeing it as a fake Islamic stance that was only ever held because of temporary weakness! This is most unfortunate. The no-compulsion verse has never been revoked and has always been binding. At no point in history did Muslim jurists legally authorize the forced conversions of people of other religions. This vital verse was foundational for the tolerance that Muslims did concretely demonstrate towards Christians and Jews living in their midst. It is very dangerous for the Pontiff to dismiss a Qur’anic verse that actually formed, and still forms, a juridical and historical guarantee of safety to Christians and Jews living amongst Muslims.

Furthermore, the disheartening claim by Benedict XVI that Muhammad (peace be upon him) whimsically changed Islam’s principles and juridical teachings, depending on his weakness or strength, is simply an echo of prejudiced unfair views that have surfaced again and again in Christian and Western polemics against Islam. Wiser and fairer advice could have saved Benedict XVI from adopting such prejudices. The image of an opportunist Prophet, which Benedict XVI invokes in passing, is deeply painful and offensive to Muslims. How would Benedict XVI feel if Muslims pointed out that the Catholic Church only became tolerant of Muslims and Jews after it lost its power in Europe, and that this tolerance was really granted by secular states and not by the Church, but opportunistically claimed by it. Such a point is likely to give pain and offence. Imagine, then, the pain and offense we Muslims feel as Benedict XVI claims that our beloved Prophet is an opportunist who teaches one thing when he is weak, only to reverse it when he gets stronger. Benedict XVI goes further: “Without descending to details, such as the difference in treatment accorded to those who have the ‘Book’ and the ‘infidels’...”

Again, Benedict XVI strangely dismisses, in passing, yet another Islamic resource for tolerance towards Christians and Jews. Islam has always distinguished between “the People of the Book” (Christians and Jews), and mere Pagans. The People of the Book living in Muslim communities were always granted the right to worship in peace largely based on this important distinction. It is very important to note that some of the hateful discourses of recent pseudo-Islamic terrorists have worked very hard to dilute the distinction between Christianity and Paganism (by calling Christians ‘Cross-Worshippers’) precisely in order to remove the juridical protection granted to Christianity and Judaism under Muslim jurisprudence. Benedict XVI seems to imply that such distinctions are minor and only obscure Islam’s purported intolerance. Benedict XVI then goes on to quote one of the most disturbing passages in the emperor’s discourse: “He addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness which leaves us astounded, on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: ‘Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached’.”

This hateful and hurtful passage is what the media picked up the most, and what most of the popular Muslim reactions have reacted to. Tragically, Benedict XVI, having invoked this piece of hate-literature back from its historical dormancy, fails to distance himself from the opinion of its original author. He does use such languages as “brusqueness”, “leaves us astound” and “expresses himself forcefully”. However, none of these expressions constitutes a negative judgment or rejection of the opinion of the original author. As a matter of fact, they may even be read as indicative of a subtle support of a supposed bravery that may be a bit reckless.

When someone gratuitously invokes a very obscure text that expresses hateful things one has a moral obligation to explain why he goes out of his way to invoke it, and a further obligation to respond to it, and to dismiss the hate expressed in it. Otherwise, it is very reasonable to assume that the person invoking the hurtful text does mean it, and does share the views expressed in it. To claim that no hurtful intent was present, and that Muslims simply did not understand the text, agonizingly adds insult to injury. This is why the quasi-apology of Benedict XVI was not considered adequate by many Muslims. All the Vatican’s statements to date, including the address of Benedict XVI express regret for the fact that Muslims supposedly misunderstood the Pontiff’s Lecture and have reacted badly to it.

Such an approach simply accuses Muslims of lack of understanding and over-reaction. This approach, instead of meekly and humbly admitting the hurt one has caused, blames the ones being hurt for taking the insult the wrong way! Many devout Catholics have, unfortunately, seen Muslim rejections of the quasi-apology and Muslim's emotional reactions to the words about their Prophet (peace be upon him) as indicative of Benedict XVI's correct and heroic stance.

Benedict goes on: "The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. 'God', he says, 'is not pleased by blood – and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death...'"

Interestingly, if one consults a reliable classical Qur'anic exegesis book (Tafsir) for an exegesis of the verse "There is no compulsion in religion", one would find explanations that are very similar to the emperor's point about the heart or soul being the abode of faith. All Muslim theological treatises have a section on faith (Iman). There is unanimity amongst all Muslim theologians that faith resides in the abode of the heart or soul and that no physical compulsion can ever affect it.

It is interesting to note that Benedict XVI was for many years the prefect of the faith of the Catholic Church. The prefect of the faith is the distant modern version of the Inquisition. The Inquisition seldom respected the sanctity of the human heart in matters of faith. Tragically, for Muslims and Jews, especially in Spain, the Church used a dizzying battery of physical torture techniques to get Muslims and Jews to convert to Christianity. The Inquisition never heeded such advice as that of the emperor: "To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death". We could all learn from this advice.

It is Qur'anically normative for Muslims to call to the path of God through wisdom, wholesome advice, and proper discussion. There is no sanction in Islam for torturing people into conversion. Indonesia and Malaysia have more Muslims than all Arab countries combined. No Muslim army ever entered these lands. How did Islam spread there?

Nevertheless, it will be dishonest or naïve to claim that no Muslim army ever conquered any land. However, creating a domain where God can be freely worshiped does not entail converting the inhabitants of that domain by force of the "sword". Muslim conquests seldom translated into forced conversions. The evidence is clear: Muslim dominated lands still have Christian minorities. How many Muslims or Jews were left in Spain after the Catholic Ferdinand and Isabella re-conquered it?

Interestingly, Muslims, as immigrants, were only ever able to re-enter Europe under the multi-cultural policies of secular Europe. If the Catholic Church had its way would that have been possible? Benedict XVI himself is famous for rejecting Turkey's plea to become part of Europe for lack of the right religious and cultural credentials.

In some past Vatican statements Muslims were sometimes called upon to forget the past (when it comes to the Inquisition or the Crusades). In Islam, acknowledgment and regret are necessary pre-conditions of true repentance and forgiveness. Benedict XVI, by self-righteously invoking the hurtful accusations of a long-dead Emperor, is, astonishingly, oblivious to the use of torture, cruelty, and violence in the history of the Catholic Church, not only against Muslims, but against Jews, and even fellow Christians.

The violence inflicted, or supported, by the Catholic Church extended all the way to modern times through the support of European colonial conquests of the rest of the world. Missionaries, especially Jesuits, went hand-in-hand with colonialists into the Americas, Africa, and Asia. In my native Libya Italian fascists armies and death squads used to be blessed by the local Catholic authorities in the cathedral's square before they went to hunt Libyan resistance fighters. This was happening as late as the 1930's. The Ethiopian soldiers the fascists force-marched in the front of the Italian armies bore big red crosses on their chests just as the Knights of Saint John did when they slaughtered Tripoli's inhabitants back in the 1500's.

The image of a non-violent hellenistically "reasonable" Christianity contrasted to a violent un-reasonable Islam is foundational for the lecture of Benedict XVI. This self-image is amazingly self-righteous and is oblivious to many painful historical facts. It is very important for our world that we all begin to see the poles that are in our own eyes, rather than focus on the specks in the eyes of our brethren.

Benedict XVI further says: "The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature. The editor, Theodore Khoury, observes: For the emperor, as a Byzantine shaped by Greek philosophy, this statement is self-evident. But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. Here Khoury quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out that Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry."

Benedict XVI's "decisive statement" is: "Not to act in accordance to reason is contrary to God's nature". This statement is very complex, and is open to many interpretations and discussions. What is amazing is the swiftness and ease with which it is used to make up what amounts to, a deeply disturbing, false contrast between a peace-loving-reasonable Christianity and a violent-loving-unreasonable Islam!

The reason for the swiftness and ease is the fact that such a contrast is a famous one taken from what we maybe called "contrast tables" that are often simplistically invoked in some missionary and polemical discourses. The idea of such tables is to put Christianity at the top of one column and Islam at the top of the other. One then goes on to fill the table with such polarities as: love-law, peace-violence, freeing-enslaving, women-liberating-women-oppressing, and so on.

Such tables are reminiscent and are related to the tables the Athenians, the Romans, and even the German Idealists (who do have an influence on the Bavarian Pontiff) often developed to contrast the "Civilized" with the "Barbarian", the "European" with the "non-European". Unfortunately, for their proponents such tables never work. They are grossly over simplified and create contrasts at a great cost to truth and fairness. In Islam, just as in Christianity, it is not human calculative reason that is salvific, but rather the free underserved grace (Rahma) of God. One of the many graces that God gifts to human beings is the gift of reason. Reason as a gift from God can never be above God. That is the whole point of Ibn Hazm; a point that was paraphrased in such a mutilated way by Benedict XVI's learned sources. Ibn Hazm, like the Asharite theologians with whom he often contended, did insist upon God's absolute freedom to act. However, Ibn Hazm did recognize, like most other Muslim theologians that God freely chooses, in His compassion towards His creatures, to self-consistently act reasonably so that we can use our reason to align ourselves with His guidance and directive.

Ibn Hazm, like most other Muslim theologians did hold that God is not externally-bound by anything, including reason. However, at no point does Ibn Hazm claim that God does not freely self-commit Himself and honors such commitments. Such divine free-self-committing is Qur'anically propounded "kataba rabukum ala nafsih al-Rahma" (Your Lord has committed Himself to compassion). Reason need not be above God, and externally normative to Him. It can be a grace of God that is normative because of God's own free commitment to acting consistently with it.

A person who believes the last proposition need not be an irrational or un-reasonable human-being, with an irrational or whimsical God! The contrast between Christianity and Islam on this basis is not only unfair, but also quite questionable.

Granted that the Pontiff is striving to convince a secular university that theology has a place in that reason-based setting. However, this should not go so far as to make God subject to an externally-binding reason. Most major Christian theologians, even the reason-loving [Thomas] Aquinas never put reason above God.

When Muslim theologians make a similar move, they should not be accused of irrationality or un-reasonableness. Such misunderstanding is the direct result of simplistic contrast tables of which scholars like Theodore Khoury are apparently fond.

Benedict XVI should not trust his views on Muslim theology to scholars like Khoury or Samir Khalil Samir. Their views of Islam and Muslims are often most unfair. He may not want to consult with Muslims, and may not even trust them to know their own doctrines; but he should, at least, consult some serious scholars who are not necessarily from an Arab Christian minority or a very narrow Catholic Orientalist group.

Benedict goes on: "At this point, as far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we are faced with an unavoidable dilemma. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true?"

Benedict XVI's way of phrasing this issue is again open to many interpretations and engagements. This is not the place for unpacking a very loaded question. Suffice it to say that talk of the "nature" of God is itself problematic.

Talk of reasonableness and unreasonableness is also quite problematic. What is this reason we are talking about? Is it a human faculty of understanding? If so, what kind of understanding? Is it cognitive? Is it emotive? Is it spiritual? Or is reason, rather, some sort of an ontologically primary agent or emanation, as the Neo-Platonists often taught? What sort of reason and reasonableness are we talking about? Such questions need further and deeper reflections. However, interestingly, the ambiguity and vagueness of the word "reason" allow for the amazing leap of unifying the Greek and the Christian by appealing to the very Hellenistic Prologue to the Gospel of John.

As Benedict XVI puts it: "I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: 'In the beginning was the Logos'. This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts with Logos. Logos means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason." Here we come close to getting a definition of what Benedict XVI means by reason: "a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication". This is indeed close to what John speaks of. However, is this the same reason as the reason of the Greek Philosophers? I think not. Reason for most Greek philosophers was more associated with pure contemplation or

theoria, than with creative activity or poesis. Furthermore, for most Greek philosophers it was being as such or to on that was truly “self-communicating”. Reason for most of them was a human capacity to receive this self-communicating being.

Therefore, the great unifying vision of Benedict, which brings together the Greek with the Christian, turns out to be a move made possible through the ambiguities of such rich and loaded words as “logos” or “reason”. Of course such moves have often been practiced in the past within the theological, exegetical and spiritual traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Of course, a great deal of medieval discourse depends precisely on this kind of ambiguity-fueled leaping. However, it is quite strange that this medieval leaping tactic is being used to bridge the gap between the cool rationalistic reason of the German University, and the logos of the Catholic Church!

Benedict XVI, then makes an astoundingly Hegelian statement: “John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis.” Benedict XVI claims that John spoke the “final word” on the biblical concept of God. He also makes the Hegelian claim that biblical faith took a “toilsome” and “torturous” path to culminate in this Johannine synthesis.

I will leave it to Christian theologians of various denominations and schools to comment on such a claim. In light of the cumulative findings of historical-critical researches into the Bible, it is very strange that it is still possible to make such critically debatable statements about a biblical faith that is supposedly making a long journey to culminate in a Greco-Christian synthesis.

I am sure Jewish scholars will also find difficulties with the implicit claim that Torah threads of faith are “toilsome” and “torturous”, and that John was needed to make it all culminate into true and final biblical faith. While Hegelian synthesis and culmination sounds wonderfully exciting to the one with the culmination results, it is sure to bother all who are being culminated! Then, yet again, the argumentation leaps into Hegelian speculation, but this time introducing a dangerously “European” claim to Christianity: “In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos is God, says the Evangelist. The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. The vision of Saint Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us!’ (cf. Acts 16:6-10) – this vision can be interpreted as a ‘distillation’ of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry.”

The Asia versus Macedonia contrast is used to justify the strange claim that there is an “intrinsic necessity” of rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry. Thus in Europe and not in Asia, and with European reason and not with Asiatic Reason Christianity comes to unite with “Greek inquiry”. This Hegelian talk suffers from the same Euro-centric tendency of much of Germanic idealist philosophy.

This tendency is very dangerous indeed for it demotes versions of Christianity that manifest themselves in non-Greek and non-European milieu (for Example South American, African, and Asian theologies).

It also makes a claim to reason in general, and to Greek reason, in particular, and appropriates it to make it purely Christian. Thus the historical facts of even clear, let alone partial, Jewish-Hellenistic syntheses (as in Philo of Alexandria), and Muslim-Hellenistic syntheses (as in Al-Farabi, Ikhwan al-Safa, Ibn Sina) are simply denied as impossible. Only the Christian is united with the Greek in a Johannine Hegelian European culmination.

Muslims, like Christians and Jews, before and after them, worked out many profound philosophical and theological systems the aim of which was the harmonization of the claims of human reasoning and the truths of divine revelation. The philosophers just mentioned were not alone. Theologians of the Mutazili, Ashari, Maturidi, Ithna Ashri, Ismaili, Ibadī and even Hanbali schools all strived to articulate their faith in as reasonable a manner as possible. Even introductory texts of Islamic philosophy and theology make this clear. The intricate dialectical and logical works of the great Abdul Jabbar, Ashari, Baqillani, Jwaini, Ghazali, Razi, Maturidi, Nasfi, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Sabain, amongst others, are testaments to the keen Muslim interest in reason and reasonableness when it comes to articulating matters of faith. Even the most conservative of Hanbalites, Ibn Taimmiyah, wrote important works on non-Aristotelian logics and has anti-Aristotelian arguments akin to those of Sextus Empiricus!

Benedict XVI, in the closing section of a long passage, that would fit very nicely as a preface to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Religion* or *Philosophy of History*, goes on to claim: “A profound encounter of faith and reason is taking place here, an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion. From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act ‘with logos’ is contrary to God’s nature.”

The Septuagint is, thus, accorded a primacy that I am sure will sound strange to many Christian ears. The synthesis of biblical faith and Greek reason is simply accorded ultimate value as the culmination of a process through which all other ways of religiosity are relegated to things subsumed and superseded. Yet Benedict XVI, being a scholar of medieval theology knows that he can not deny certain facts: “In all honesty, one must observe that in the late Middle Ages we find trends in theology which would sunder this synthesis between the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit. In contrast with the so-called intellectualism of Augustine and Thomas, there arose with Duns

Scotus a voluntarism which, in its later developments, led to the claim that we can only know God's voluntas ordinata. Beyond this is the realm of God's freedom, in virtue of which he could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done. This gives rise to positions which clearly approach those of Ibn Hazm and might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness. God's transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions.”

This passage, while serving its author's ultimate goal of undermining the theologies mentioned in it, does at least show that Benedict XVI is somewhat aware that other possible theologies do exist, and that Muslim theologians were not alone in caring about the affirmation of God's sovereignty against human pretensions to govern Him with human criteria.

Unfortunately, he goes on to totally undermine such theologies as not being the true “faith of the Church”. It is also very interesting that, in a follow-on passage, Benedict XVI, for a moment, does affirm a love that transcends knowledge, but then re-interprets that affirmation by claiming it is logos that loves. Thus he synthesizes logos and reason. It turns out to be reason that actually loves.

Then, in clear and unambiguous terms, we see the actual foundational claim of Benedict XVI, and the ultimate reason for his troubles with Islam: “This inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history – it is an event which concerns us even today. Given this convergence, it is not surprising Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.”

He clearly claims that Europe is the only place where Christianity and Reason culminated in a great synthesis that is European civilization. Thus Europe is Christian-Greek and rational, and Christianity is European-Greek and rational. If Europe-Christianity is to be kept pure, all non-European elements and non-Christian elements must be kept out. This is why Islam and Muslims have no place in this great Hegelian synthesis! This alarming set of neo-colonial ideas supports the thesis of the Barbarous (non-Greek) and non-European nature of Islam. Islam, according to this kind of thinking, is “Asiatic” “non-rational” and “violent”. It has no place in “Greek”, “rational” and “reasonable” Europe.

Now that Benedict XVI has reached his thesis of the synthesis of the Greek and the Christian into a single logos, he proceeds to undermine all attempts to deny this synthesis. He goes on to criticize three phases of what he calls “dehellenization”:

“The thesis that the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith has been countered by the call for a dehellenization of Christianity – a call which has more and more dominated theological discussions since the beginning of the modern age. Viewed more closely, three stages can be observed in the programme of dehellenization: although interconnected, they are clearly distinct from one another in their motivations and objectives.”

It is better for Muslims to leave it to Christian theologians to comment on the extent of the fairness and accuracy of Benedict XVI assessment of the Christian tradition. However, to this Muslim, it does seem astonishing that Benedict XVI seems to sweep all of the Reformers' efforts as a dehellenization that undermines the true synthesis earlier celebrated by him. I will also leave it to Protestant theologians to reply to Benedict XVI's sweeping claims.

Benedict XVI then blames the theologian von Harnack for the second dehellenization. I will, again, leave it to von Harnack scholars to reply to the claims made by Benedict XVI. It does strike me as strange, however, to find von Harnack accused of dehellenization. Following Karl Barth, I believe that von Harnack was Hellenizing rather than the opposite. He may even be seen as reducing theology to a kind of Aristotelian phronesis.

Benedict XVI's the third, and last, type of dehellenization, is worthy of more attention:

“Before I draw the conclusions to which all this has been leading, I must briefly refer to the third stage of dehellenization, which is now in progress. In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was a preliminary inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieu. This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision. The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed. True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.”

Yet again, we are faced with a Euro-centric and Greco-centric arrogant approbation of Christianity. I will leave it to Latin American, African and Asian Christian theologians to address this strange appropriation.

For a Church that is now quite international, the Pontiff is really going out of his way to alienate all who are not into Greek-European culture. He is basically claiming that such Greek and European elements are fundamental to the Christian faith itself. I find the whole claim dangerously arrogant. It is not only Islam and Muslim who are threatened by it. I truly believe that this lecture should alarm Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.

The alarming position is not that of just a professor or a theologian, but of a Roman Catholic Pontiff who leads millions of human beings. It is, therefore, urgent and vital that Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and secular scholars engage the Pontiff and challenge his views not only on Islam, but also on what it means to be a reasonable human being, and what it means to be a European. As for Islam and its Prophet (peace be upon him), centuries of cruel and vicious attacks against them, both verbal and physical, have only made them stronger. The sun shall still shine no matter what dark clouds strive to do. Let us pray for a better world, a peaceful world, a respectful world. Let us engage in a dialogue that is based on mutual-respect, and is elevated above mere polemics. The One God has created us all, and willed for us to be so different, let us learn more about each other, and let us, together, construct a better world, for God's sake.

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