

"Greek Reason at Regensburg" by Dimitri Krallis



Dimitri Krallis holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and is Assistant Professor of Byzantine History in the Department of History/Hellenic Studies of Simon Fraser University in Canada.

Left: Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos

Suddenly Byzantium is in the news. Who is this Emperor the Pope talked about, what did he really say, and why is Benedict XVI interested in him? Those questions have been asked since September 12 by the media all around the world and yet no convincing answer has been produced. The only thing on which we can agree is that many people in the Islamic world have been insulted. We do not, however, seem to fully understand what the Pope intended to say. Here I will attempt to explain what the Pontiff really meant.

In an analysis of the speech in his popular blog, Juan Cole, Professor of History at the University of Michigan, noted that the Pope must indeed have intended to critique Islam. Using a quotation from a Byzantine Emperor, the Pope found someone else in whose lips to place what he believed himself. Professor Cole notes that the indirectness of the statement (expressed by the 14th century Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos) does not really absolve the Pope of any responsibility for offending Moslems. Cole explains that the Pope referred in his speech to the surah 2, 256, which, according to the Pontiff, comes from the period when Muhammad was weak. Cole's textual analysis leads him to the conclusion that Ratzinger wanted to argue that tolerance was only acceptable in Islam in periods of weakness. The implication of this assumption would be that Islam is otherwise a religion of violence. This is a possible reading, yet it misses a subtler point that the Pope is making which has much broader significance and would be insulting to a far wider gamut of people, if understood broadly, while at the same time creating very strange bedfellows.

Let me explain. A number of years ago George W. Bush noted famously: "I do not do nuance." This statement characterizes more than the President of the U.S. It is a comment on the general state of public opinion and the people forming it in the press around the world, for the Pope's speech is a monument of suggestion and nuance. So what does the Pope say, and in what context does he say it? This second question is in fact as important for understanding his statements as the actual content of the speech. The Pope was addressing an academic audience at the University of Regensburg and was discussing the perceived clash between the spirit of rational enquiry that permeates university culture, on the one hand, and faith itself, on the other. In this speech addressed to academics and students, the Pope described the

meeting between the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II and an unnamed Persian authority on religion (Persian is conceivably a classicizing way of saying Turkish on this occasion). During that meeting the Byzantine Emperor sparred with his interlocutor over a wide range of issues pertaining to Christianity and Islam. The Pope focused on a small part of the dialogue where Manuel noted that Islam's main contribution in relation to the other two religions of the book was basically the notion of violent conversion. Manuel wished to argue that violent conversion was against the very notion of reasoned choice that was supposed to be an essential part of the conversion process. The following is the excerpt from Manuel's dialogue appearing in the Pope's prepared speech in a translation offered by the Vatican:

God 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....

Talking to an academic audience, the Pope emphasized this point in order to make a much broader statement that took him away from Manuel II's argument per se. Reason is essential in the quest for the divine. In making this claim, the Pope was here addressing the perceived contradiction between faith and reason and was explaining the process of intellectual compromise that allowed universities to keep departments of theology next to departments of philosophy and science.

Up to this point the Pope's argument does not seem to store much of a punch. He does continue, however, and he becomes more biting. Only, ironically, his bite is not aimed at Islam, which seems to only be his incidental target. The Pope goes on to note that the connection between reason and Christianity was essentially a Greek intellectual project. Manuel II understood the importance of reason as part of the process of conversion because he was a philosophically trained Greek. Who, however, was responsible for the fact that we no longer recognize this link between faith and reason? How did we come to think of Christianity as opposed to reason? The Pope offers an answer. It was the tradition of the Reformation, which sought a more literal and absolute reading of the Christian texts and, in so doing, purged Christianity of its links to Hellenic culture. According to this reasoning, Protestant Christianity with its all-powerful God, the predestination narrative, and the emphasis on the purity of the Word, loses the subtlety of a rational quest for the divine. This quest the Pope makes the sole attribute of a peculiarly Western tradition. In developing this argument the Pope leaves far more unsaid than what he actually expresses. He stresses the links of Christianity to classical culture and in some ways develops the theme of Athens versus Jerusalem which is supposedly a central aspect of the church's attempts at self-definition. The Pope is alluding, through his reference to logos, to the formative aspects of Greek culture and is creating an analogy which sees Greek culture and its modern European counterpart, humanism, opposed to "eastern" forms of religion.

In Byzantine studies the divide between Athens and Jerusalem has been used to make a distinction between the supposedly more Hellenic iconophiles and the "eastern" iconoclasts, who may have been influenced by Islam. The greatest moment in this clash was the iconoclast controversy that dominated the greatest part of the eighth and ninth centuries. According to scholars the iconoclasts ? a faction in the empire that viewed the veneration of icons in the churches as idolatrous ? were adherents of Jerusalem who were influenced by Islam's eastern, aniconic tradition. The iconophiles on the other side were more Hellenic, closer to paganism, and therefore more comfortable with religious representational art.

The story is even more complicated. East clashes with West, iconic with aniconic, reasonably perceived Logos (in Greek logos means word but also reason) with inscrutable God. While on the surface Islam clashes with Christianity, there is also a much more important cleavage exposed, one between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, on the one hand, and the broader movement of the Reformation on the other. Note that Byzantine iconoclasm has been described by some Byzantinists as an early Reformation. In this new divide Hellenism, Byzantium, reason, and Catholic Christianity are on the one side. Blind faith, literalism, Islam and more significantly the Reformation are arrayed on the other.

In a different historical context the Pope's attack on the Reformation could be consigned to the realm of theological polemics. On this occasion, however, we are entitled to ask if there is something much deeper going on. Given a political environment which allows for the clash in the Middle East to be viewed as a clash of fundamentalist visions of the world, American Christian (and basically Protestant) on the one side and Islamic on the other, the Pope's speech seems to have a very different target than Islam itself. Manuel II, in the guise of a philosopher king, rationally trained and tolerant, is not the new face of "Orientalism." He is rather the poster-child of an old Christian humanism settling scores with theologically and politically intolerant strands of Christianity. Ironically, the Pope may be making a very indirect statement of great interest: current Islam and the Protestants like Bush and the American Christians in general are in fact two faces of the same coin and equally dangerous.

Another motivation for this speech and for highlighting this dichotomy between European rational Catholicism and American Protestantism could be the debate within the European Union on the place of Christianity in the foundational document of New Europe. The Pope was speaking in Germany, whose new Christian Democrat-led government has made it known that it would not be adverse to the inclusion of a statement on Europe's Christian traditions in the European constitution currently drafted. Yet the Pope is aware that there is resistance among the European secular elites to such a mention. By casting Catholicism as a force allied to humanism and post-Enlightenment rationalism, the Pope appears to be mollifying secular Europeans. He is telling them that they should not fear a development whereby Europe's relationship to religion would ape the American confusion in the rapport between the church and the state.

What is therefore surprising in the uproar which followed the speech is not that elements in the Islamic world took offence, but rather that its real targets totally missed the point. The Pope's speech was essentially about a dialogue that is taking place in the West; it was only marginally about the East. Islam is only incidentally the target in what is a statement of broader significance. Oddly enough this very conservative Pontiff appears to be siding with the humanists and the representatives of the Enlightenment. This is not, therefore, a speech to be taken up by the new Christian "crusaders" for they are its ultimate targets. (Note how in our days the Crusading narrative is essentially a Protestant narrative.)

Now this speech also has some implications for the study Byzantium which has to be undertaken outside the process of rapprochement between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. With this speech the Pope made an interesting opening by claiming Byzantium, as Hellenism's medieval repository, as part of the Western tradition. Thus he essentially removed the stamp of the "other" from Byzantium. The Byzantine Empire, as of last week, is no longer alien but rather an essential component of a very idiosyncratic and admittedly selective Western tradition. The new "other" is to be found within the West itself and needs to be addressed. Could it be then that the bleak image of Byzantium as a theocratic state (the legacy of historian Gibbon) can be remedied with this emphasis on Byzantine humanism?

As for me, I feel somewhat vindicated for boldly claiming to my students that careful reading of ancient documents will allow them to be good readers of modern narratives. The Pope's speech is a good example of the possible uses of a more "Byzantine" way of looking at the world and its texts.

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