"The Great Task of the University': Reflections on the Regensburg Address of Pope Benedict XVI"

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OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

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In his 1990 apostolic constitution on the university, *Ex corde ecclesiae* (“From the Heart of the Church”), Pope John Paul II made this comment about cultural dialogue:

A Catholic University must become more attentive to the cultures of the world of today, and to the various cultural traditions existing within the Church in a way that will promote a continuous and profitable dialogue between the Gospel and modern society . . . . Catholic Universities will seek to discern and evaluate both the aspirations and the contradictions of modern culture, in order to make it more suited to the total development of individuals and peoples.²

The passage focuses mainly on the dialogue of cultures within Catholicism but leaves room for a dialogue with other religions as well. In neither case did the former pontiff offer a theological foundation for cultural dialogue within the context of a Catholic university. These lacunae have now been addressed by the lecture that Pope Benedict gave when he returned to the university where he began to teach in 1969 and became the Vice President in 1976. Pope Benedict augments the vision from *Ex corde ecclesiae* and places the new problem of intercultural dialogue at the very center of the tasks of a Catholic university. The Regensburg address became known quickly throughout the world through the violent outbursts it caused in certain quarters of the Muslim community. By looking at the address as a whole, one quickly realizes that these reactions are not based upon the entirety of what was communicated in the address but only a single citation quoted out of its original context. In other words, the address as a whole is not only not intended as an affront to Muslim belief but offers a cogent rationale for ameliorating the very situation that quite tragically arose in its aftermath.³ I will

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1. This essay grew out of two separate presentations made during the 2006-2007 academic year at The Catholic University of America. No attempt has been made to remove the references to the largely Catholic audience, which consisted of students and colleagues at this institution, or the personal mode of address.

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3. See note 16 below.
offer my own reflections on the main lines of Benedict’s theological argument in the Regensburg address. I will focus on the nature of a theological dialogue with Islam, the relationship of nominalism and violence, and the practical foundations for intercultural dialogue at the university.

**Theological Dialogue with Muslims**

Should a Christian enter into a dialogue with a Muslim about matters of faith while bracketing one’s own Christian belief? This question, I believe, is pivotal to understanding both the theory and practice of inter-religious dialogue. The Regensburg address offers wise counsel on how to think about this problem. Pope Benedict cited what he himself took to be a marginal point in the “conversation” between besieged Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian. I am not talking about the now famous remark about how Mohammed spread the faith he preached by the sword. Any historian will tell you that it would have been very odd indeed for a Byzantine emperor writing during the siege of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks to have avoided that topic. In any case, the quotation from the Emperor about preaching by the sword represents neither Benedict’s own view of Islam nor the central reason for the Pope’s citation of this text. I will focus, as does Pope Benedict, on an even more revealing statement from the Emperor’s treatise:

> God is not pleased by blood, and not acting with the logos (σὺν λόγῳ) 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 . . . .

Like all good German professors (Benedict remains—even as Pope—an honorary professor at Regensburg), the Pope notes that he wants to make a point that is not central to the treatise itself. The Pope shows little interest in reviving the form of Byzantine apologetics defended by the Emperor. He does not even mention the Emperor’s defense of the Trinity, which according to Jaroslav Pelikan takes up half of the treatise.

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Benedict’s motivation in citing the Emperor’s views on Islam derives from his unmodern theology of the incarnate Logos.”7 The positive view of dialogue that Pope Benedict espoused at Regensburg could be construed as a Christian return to the model of Socratic humanism. This particular form of humanism shines through with the citation of Socrates himself (from the Phaedo) at the very end of the lecture: “It would be easily understandable if someone became so annoyed at all these notions that for the rest of his life he despaired and mocked all talk of being—but in this way he would be deprived of the truth of existence (die Wahrheit des Seienden) and would suffer a great loss.”8 Socrates raised the question about the truth of existence knowing that he would be despised and mocked for introducing such an absurd topic. The Emperor’s admonition to act with the logos in the midst of a siege and Socrates’ courage to ponder the truth of existence describe a single stance. In both cases, intellectual fortitude is necessary in order to raise the question about the meaning of human existence. Socrates may not have been a Christian, but he lived and died for the sake of the truth. Pope Benedict is so convinced of the universality of this Socratic stance that he suggests—here I am referring to Benedict’s statement about the Platonic Cartesianism of the philosopher of science Jacques Monod—that a mutated form of it can be found within natural science today. What, you may ask, do scientists today have in common with Socrates? There are, for example, Socratic scientists who believe that their task is to uncover the wonder and beauty of the universe or even what Eugene Wigner calls the “indescribable effectiveness of mathematics.”9

Pope Benedict wrote a book on Truth and Tolerance, in which he charts a distinctively Christian path to the all too timely virtue of tolerance.10 I think that the Socratic humanism of the Regensburg address is another example of this same position. For good or ill, it is simply a fact that the Muslim fundamentalist today is a complete other to the modern Christian believer. Even when Muslims and Christians rub shoulders peacefully in pluralistic Western societies, one can still encounter prejudices, ignorance, or an indifference to the wisdom that can be

7. It is interesting in this context to consider the tremendous rift that arose in the mid fourteenth century between the defenders of Hellenism and the defenders of the hesychasts such as Gregory of Palamas. Palamas opponent, Barlaam the Calabrian, opposes Socrates’ maxim “Know thyself” to the maxim of Moses “Take heed unto thyself” in a theological key that resounds strikingly like that of the Pope. Cf. Pelikan, The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 263.

8. Another example is his citation of Rom 12:1, Paul’s idea that Christian worship is by its very nature in accord with eternal Word and with our reason.


found in another’s sacred texts. The Augustinian Pope has little faith in the view that only by emptying ourselves of our most deeply cherished convictions regarding God and the world can we embody a path to peace. Christians and Muslims both can be challenged by the questioning of Socrates. Socrates asks both parties to enter into dialogue with the presupposition that the answer to the question of the truth of existence can be found in their respective holy books. The Pope’s answer to the question of whether a Christian should enter into dialogue by abandoning his or her Christian presuppositions is unmistakably negative. On the other hand, the Pope’s challenge to his fellow faculty at the University of Regensburg is to develop a theology of tolerance that tempers “the startling brusqueness” of Manuel Paleologus II’s questions.\(^{11}\) One can do so, Pope Benedict submits, without also ignoring the timeliness of Christian realism.

**Nominalism and Violence**

This brings me to a second great theme of the address, namely, what theology can provide to address the conditions of violence in the world. If the citation of the Byzantine emperor was merely “the point of departure” for the Pope’s reflections, then the question of how nominalism can beget violence clearly counts as a central concern. By nominalism, Pope Benedict simply means the view that God’s will is active in the world in a manner that by necessity confounds human reason. Interestingly, apart from the fourteenth-century Byzantine polemics, the Pope registers the existence of only one other Muslim nominalist, the eleventh-century Cordoban philosopher of Persian descent, Ibn Hazm. For the most part, his address focuses on a pattern of thinking that takes hold in the Christian West in the fourteenth century, and this starting point is the one that I will consider here.

Nominalism is defined by the Pope in a very specific way, and it is not clear that the fourteenth-century Franciscan thinkers who are often said to have begotten the movement (e.g., John Duns Scotus or William of Ockham) are at all implicated in his definition. I will follow the definition the Pope offers in the address and leave the historical question to those more expert in this field. Nominalism, Pope Benedict states, sets in motion a radical de-Hellenization of the gospel. He offers an erudite genealogy of three successive stages of de-Hellenization: 1) that which arises in the wake of certain late medieval nominalists, 2) that of Enlightenment fideism, which is epitomized in Kant’s defense of practical reason and the explicit attempt at de-Hellenization that took root in late nineteenth-century

\(^{11}\) The Pope states that “he turns to the question in an astonishingly brusque form, one that is for us surprisingly brusque (wendet er sich in erstaunlich schroffer, uns überraschend schroffer Form).” This remark, of course, constitutes the key qualification of the citation that many found so problematic. The qualification, of course, was not reported worldwide.
and early twentieth-century Protestant thinking (e.g., Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity*), and 3) the new and radical form of de-Hellenization implicit in the contemporary postmodern view. Here he refers to the view that all cultural perspectives are equally valid by their very opposedness. This genealogy merits a more intense scrutiny, but I would just highlight what the Pope sees as being squeezed out of the picture at each juncture, namely, Socrates’ posing of the question of being as a question that applies equally to the Christian believer. The Christian recovery of the Socratic insight represented an extremely broad and tolerant approach to engaging in dialogue with the other. The process of de-Hellenization charted by Pope Benedict suggests that the advent of modern freedom may have inadvertently narrowed the scope of all philosophical inquiry. Once freedom represents an abdication of the responsibility to pose the question of truth—Socrates’ question—then the nominalist path has clearly become suffocating.

The second pernicious result of nominalism is the view of freedom that results—both God’s and ours. Nominalists, Pope Benedict states, are so afraid that the gospel will be reduced to nothing more than a spirit of rational inquiry that they claim that God’s absolute power must by definition be understood as a power that could violate the laws of nature. The “capricious God” of nominalism stands radically opposed to any conception of freedom that incorporates an analogy between human and divine action, e.g., the scholastic notion that the gratuity of God’s gift of grace elevates rather than destroys the integrity of human nature. The Pope cites the formula from the second canon of the Fourth Lateran Council as just one lost benchmark: “For between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude.” I will cite another benchmark, here drawing from the mystical theology of a German Cardinal from the fifteenth century (one who also faced the issue of Islam):12 “Indeed, how will You give Yourself to me unless You also give me to myself? And while I am quietly reflecting in this manner, You, O Lord, answer me in my heart with the words: ‘Be your own and I will be yours.’”13

These words, I think, capture the genuine meaning of the Christian analogy of freedom. Our freedom stands in direct proportion to that of God. This does not mean that we can fathom the depth of the gift of grace. We cannot place limits on God’s freedom. God’s gift of love comes to us out of his mercy, not because of our goodness. But to recognize divine generosity hardly requires seeing the relationship between divine and human power as a zero sum game.14


What does nominalism have to do with violence? The idea of liberating the God of revelation from all humanly constructed systems of thought is not itself violent. In fact, allowing the free disclosure of the God of Jesus Christ is essential to uncovering the Christian path to Socratic humanism. The real problem has to do with human empowerment. If dialogue truly takes place within the broad expanse of a *logos* that takes on flesh, then there is no way that we can act with this logos to advocate that God must be on our side on the nominalistic grounds because God contravenes the normal rules of civil discourse. Acting with the logos gives rise to an unmodern principle of dialogue. It is unmodern precisely because the form of dialogue requires participants on both sides to acknowledge the broad contours of reason itself. Pope Benedict is very clear on this very point. We must have the courage to plumb the depth of reason; we cannot turn our backs on its wide expanse (in German: "Mut zur Weite der Vernunft, nicht Absage an ihre Größe"). It requires the courage to do more than to be tolerant of the other just by virtue of the different viewpoint. Love comes into the equation, a love incarnated in the person of Christ. When we love with the logos, we are not abandoning our principles. On the contrary, we show our cards, so to speak, so that they can be tested by the public scrutiny of rational discourse. We acknowledge what is good, true, and even holy in the viewpoint of the other without pretending that we hold no principles of our own. In the process, the rules of discourse become more than just civil procedures maintained for the sake of respecting an opinion different from our own. We actually care about the person who holds these views and want to know how these views give shape to a way of life.

*The Practical Foundations for Intercultural Dialogue*

These remarks about reason are situated by the Pope himself in the context of the practical demands of the university. His remarks about Islam are made at the university where he was once a professor. In addition, he himself highlights that the task posed by his remarks requires something other than just a classroom lecture.

In order to bring these practical considerations to the fore, I would now like to turn to an event that shaped my own view of the intercultural task of the university. I experienced the cataclysm of 9/11 at a time when I lived with my wife and eldest daughter on a university campus. The narration of this event as I experienced it brings home in a practical way the same points made by the Pope.

Nowadays 9/11 is a date that no one forgets. Its unforgettablenss is almost a stumbling block to recalling what happened. I need to adopt a reflective stance
in order to see that the cultural artifact of 9/11 once was a real event." None of us is, I think, unchanged by what took place that day, and I am not making that statement with the whiff of partisan urgency that our politicians have employed ever since that date. At the time, I was the faculty advisor to a residential college at The Catholic University of America. I lived in this college with my wife and our daughter, who was then not even six months old. For me, it is hard to disassociate the events that took place on that day from the fragile experience of being part of a young family.

Because of the proximity of faculty and students in the ordinary setting of life, residential colleges provide unique opportunities for learning. There are lessons to be learned from my own experience of 9/11 that illustrate the meaning and purpose of university life in general and the life of a residential college in particular. At the moment, I did not see these connections all that clearly, for I was more absorbed by the crisis of the moment. Retrospectively, however, I see clearly how the experience of 9/11 crystallizes all the good that one can find in a residential college and in life at a university.

Certain details from that day remained etched on my mind. 9/11 took place on a Tuesday, which is generally the first day of the week on which I teach. My story about 9/11 begins on the preceding day, which was a holiday. My family and I were visiting my brother-in-law, who was then a law student at New York University. We spent the day in the city and had a wonderful time. My brother-in-law lived in a dorm that was located only about ten blocks from the Twin Towers. I can honestly say that I wasn't thinking about the Twin Towers at all on that day except for when we were leaving. As we came out of the Holland Tunnel headed to Washington, our little baby was facing backwards in her car-seat. In a casual remark I will never forget, I said, "Look, Francesca, at the skyline of New York City. That's something that you can return to for the rest of your life."

The next morning I had to teach a class at 9:00 a.m. I was probably still quite tired from the long drive back from New York. In any case, the class consisted of about fifteen seminarians and one Franciscan nun. By the time that the class actually got started, both of the Twin Towers had been hit. Of this I was completely unaware. The class was supposed to end at 10:25 a.m. It took place in the Life Cycle Institute, which is quite close to McDonald Residential College, i.e., the dormitory where I lived. Slightly after 10:00 a.m., Sr. Sarah Doser, a member of the same Franciscan community as the nun in my class, appeared at the door of the classroom with an urgent look on her face. I was somewhat tempted to tell her

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15. The original form of the remarks that follow were directed toward college students who were just teenagers on September 11, 2001. In narrating my experience to them, I had a palpable sense of how a real event quickly enters into the historical past. For many of these students, the artifact was better known than the real event. This experience of the past as both near and distant conforms to my own experience, for example, of the Vietnam War or the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon.
that she would have to wait for the class to end. But Sr. Sarah looked like she had something very important to say. So I stopped my class to speak to her privately. Her words were brief and to the point: “The Twin Towers have been attacked. Attacks against Washington, D.C., are expected. I came here to take Sr. Damien Marie back to our house immediately.” I have no clear memory of what happened next. As far as I can recall, I just ended the class early and told everyone to head home. I was hurrying back to McDonald Residential College.

The scene in the college was chaotic. Both towers in New York collapsed between 9:50 a.m. and 10:37 a.m. By this point, all classes on campus had been cancelled. I was with my family glued to the television in disbelief. My wife and I shuffled back and forth between our room and the hallways, which were filled with students in a state of panic. Most of them wanted to go home immediately. The crash into the Pentagon had taken place at 9:40 a.m. and the one in Pennsylvania at 10:37. In actual fact, those first few hours were ones of great uncertainty. Reports of other planes and other targets in Washington were all over the news. No one knew what would happen next. Some students were in tears. We had trouble reaching our relatives by phone. One aunt of my wife called from South America to see if we were still alive. I have never experienced life in a war zone, but the experience of those first hours was undeniably that of being concerned about an imminent attack.

Eventually the university’s Office of Student Life distributed signs announcing the formal closing of the university. Moreover, the signs indicated that a Mass would be celebrated at noon at the nearby Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The U.S. bishops had been meeting that morning at their conference across the street. So the Mass was to be celebrated with both the university community and the U.S. bishops. It was not really a Mass of remembrance, for during the Mass many of us were still trying to piece together what had just happened. I have a vivid memory of gathering students together to walk to the Basilica, which was only a few hundred yards away from our residence. In general, no one wanted to be alone that day. One student asked me if we were safe from an attack in making the walk. Looking back, many of our reactions seem exaggerated, irrational. At the time, we were just happy to be part of a small community that could support one another. In a real sense, worship was (as Pope Benedict claimed in Regensburg) the only rational way to meet all of our needs.

I assume that the broad contours of the rest of the story are more familiar. There were victims who were very close to members of the university community. Many of us had to rely on e-mail to contact loved ones since the telephone lines were jammed. By the end of the day most people had reached their family and friends off campus. There were candlelight vigils and memorial services soon after as well as one year later. Some of these commemorations still take place today.
As everyone knows, global politics changed as a result of the events of that morning. The religious ceremonies and political discussions are a very important part of the legacy of 9/11. In the months that followed, we invited faculty with diverse viewpoints to discuss questions of war and peace. We remembered the victims in our house Masses and prayer services. These events belong, in an important way, to the history of 9/11 that is still in our midst.

But there is another way that lessons can be drawn from the experience of 9/11. The catastrophe changed the way we professors looked at our role as educators. The residential colleges had the tradition of gathering once a week in the so-called roundtable discussions. In the next few months almost all of the roundtable discussions took on a new character. I remember saying to the students at one of these events that what took place will change their lives forever. I also counseled the students to order a copy of the Koran. This is a book, I said, that they would need to understand if they wanted to educate themselves in the future. To my amazement, one student actually bought a copy. Many curricular proposals have been contemplated at universities since 9/11. These suggestions include courses on the history of Islam that examine its canonical texts, theology, mysticism, cultural heritage, and the more complicated modern phenomenon of joining Muslim belief with political ideologies. The history of Muslim-Christian interaction also needs to be taught in an unvarnished fashion, especially as that has developed in Arab lands. But the lesson to be drawn from the setting of the residential college was more direct. Conversations between faculty and students outside of the classroom provided an ideal format and structure for learning about the idea of intercultural dialogue. Such interaction cannot be programmed into a curriculum. It is the real fruit of historical circumstances and personal interaction.

This brings me back to the speech given by Pope Benedict XVI on intercultural dialogue. The press reported just one, not terribly representative remark from that speech, and the reaction in the Muslim world was quite negative. I recognize that the choice of a quote on the part of the Holy Father may not have been very prudent. At the same time, I think there is a far deeper lesson in that speech that gets to the heart of the true meaning of university life.

16. It is quite clear that the Holy Father did not anticipate the lamentable consequences of this one citation. In a note added to the official text, he states: “In the Muslim world, this quotation has unfortunately been taken as an expression of my personal position, thus arousing understandable indignation. I hope that the reader of my text can see immediately that this sentence does not express my personal view of the Qur’an, for which I have the respect due to the holy book of a great religion. In quoting the text of the Emperor Manuel II, I intended solely to draw out the essential relationship between faith and reason. On this point I am in agreement with Manuel II, but without endorsing his polemic.”
The Pope returned to Regensburg, a Catholic university where he had been both a professor and an administrator. He actually opened his address by recalling the Dies Academicus that was celebrated there in the late 1950s, a crucial detail that received absolutely no attention from the global media. Pope Benedict was recalling a tradition that is now defunct even in the German context. Dies Academicus was a day at the beginning of the academic year when the senior faculty from every school would mix informally with the students. There was no student life staff, no bureaucracy, just a friendly gathering of faculty and students. Without mentioning a residential college or any other program for student life, the Pope endorsed the very principle that makes that particular experience so vital to the education of a college student today. Life in the contemporary residential college is epitomized by the Pope’s notion of setting aside a time in our busy schedules for nothing else but being together and discussing the timely issues of our day. On this day, students and faculty can get together to share experiences, hang out together, and discuss weighty questions that rightly occupy their minds.

Where does intercultural dialogue fit into this picture? I learned from 9/11 that the dialogue between the Christian West and the Muslim faith is not something that can wait. It is also not to be relegated to a few courses or special lectures. It is, as the Holy Father stated in Regensburg, the great task of the university today. To restate a point made earlier, if dialogue takes place within the broad expanse of the logos that takes on flesh, then there is no way that we can act with this logos to advocate that God must be on our side because he contravenes the normal rules of civil discourse. The point of the Pope’s rejection of certain forms of nominalism was to set aside the notion of a capricious, arbitrary God. God is never a mechanical product of human calculation. At the same time, the God who assumes human flesh indwells the human experience of seeking to understand the uniqueness of the divine self-disclosure. Faith in Jesus Christ seeks understanding, and this search is the authentic basis for intercultural dialogue. In Benedict’s own words, Christians are called to have the courage to explore the breadth of human capacity for dialogue based upon rational principles; they cannot, on the basis of the divine revelation, turn their backs on the breadth of reason.

Regensburg is a university far away from the McDonald Residential College at The Catholic University of America, and 9/11 is, for better or worse, an event far way from the lives of many people today. But the Pope’s advice to take up the great task of intercultural dialogue in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ as the incarnate logos is a timely starting point for the contemporary university. From this point one can reflect upon the more noble purposes of a university and the many life-giving purposes of a college. In his Regensburg address, Pope Benedict summarizes this noble aim with the term universitas. Even though Professor Ratzinger knowingly uses a term much discussed by scholastic theologians, he is not trying to rebuild the gothic towers of a lost age. My teacher Hans Frei used to say that German theologians always cite Latin when they want to
make a crucial point. Pope Benedict’s point is that **universitas** is an ideal that can be realized in the present. It refers to

the experience, in other words, of the fact that despite our specializations which at times make it difficult to communicate with each other, we made up a whole, working in everything on the basis of a single rationality with its various aspects and sharing responsibility for the right use of reason—this reality became a lived experience.

At its core the residential college is about discovering a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Today on many campuses students and faculty alike are hungry for this experience of **universitas**.

**Postscript**

Finally, I would like to add a personal comment about Benedict’s capacity for dialogue. Pope Benedict is a man of dialogue. I experienced this from 1999-2001 prior to Benedict’s elevation as pontiff. During those years I had the distinct privilege of participating in a yearly colloquium in Rome with him and other theologians associated with the journal *Communio*. I have a particularly vivid memory of a question that I asked him in one of these seminar settings. I asked him what he thought about the unity of the discipline of theology: “Is theology a single discipline or is it a disjointed aggregate of numerous subdisciplines (e.g., Biblical studies, moral theology, systematics, etc.)?” His response began with a pastoral insight. He said that he recalled returning from Rome to the seminary that he used to run when he was Archbishop of Munich and being confronted with the same question by the local seminarians. The seminarians, he said, complained that they were being filled with lots of scientific knowledge from each of the subdisciplines but nothing of real theological wisdom. Cardinal Ratzinger told me that a theologian has to seek the unity of the discipline even while pursuing the individual specializations. One can easily lose sight of the whole when one becomes immersed in the details of the particular scientific pursuits.**17** Seeking a whole that is greater than the individual parts, however, does not in any way absolve the student of theology from learning factual details about history or the natural sciences.

I admired and continue to admire Pope Benedict’s respect for the unity of the discipline of theology. We are, I believe, quite fortunate to have as the Bishop of Rome a thinker so dedicated to the notion of theology as an intrinsically complex

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17. For a theoretical justification of this position, one can consult Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1968), 197-204.
but nonetheless unitary way of thinking. I do not know whether I would rather have him as Pope or as a colleague, but I am certainly envious of the faculty at the University of Regensburg for being able to refer to him as both their German Pope and their fellow colleague. In general, the Regensburg address has up to now been seen as a point of controversy. Even if the controversy could have been avoided by a more cautious selection of quotations, the speaker nonetheless communicated great wisdom. His wisdom lies in both his generous theological principles and his genuine capacity for dialogue.