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Socrates or Muhammad?

Joseph Ratzinger on the Destiny of Reason

by

Mr. Lee Harris

Mr. Harris is the author of Civilization and Its Enemies. His new book, The Suicide of Reason, is to be published this year. This article is devoted to the memory of Oriana Fallaci.

On September 12, Pope Benedict XVI delivered an astonishing speech at the University of Regensburg. Entitled "Faith, Reason, and the University," it has been widely discussed, but far less widely understood. The *New York Times*, for example, headlined its article on the Regensburg address, "The Pope Assails Secularism, with a Note on Jihad." The word "secularism" does not appear in the speech, nor does the pope assail or attack modernity or the Enlightenment. He states quite clearly that he is attempting "a critique of modern reason from within," and he notes that this project "has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age. The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly."

Benedict, in short, is not issuing a contemporary Syllabus of Errors. Instead, he is asking those in the West who "share the responsibility for the right use of reason" to return to the kind of self-critical examination of their own beliefs that was the hallmark of ancient Greek thought at its best. The spirit that animates Benedict's address is not the spirit of Pius IX; it is the spirit of Socrates. Benedict is inviting all of us to ask ourselves, Do we really know what we are talking about when we talk about faith, reason, God, and community?

For many, it will seem paradoxical that the Roman pontiff has invoked the critical spirit of Socrates. The pope, after all, is the embodiment of the traditional authority of the Church, and the Church is supposed to have all the answers. Yet Socrates was famous as the man who had all the questions. Far from making any claims to infallibility, Socrates argued that the unexamined life was not worth living, and he was prepared to die rather than cease the process of critical self-examination. Socrates even refused to call himself wise, arguing instead that he only deserved to be called a "lover of wisdom."

Socrates skillfully employed paradox as a way to get people to think, yet even he might have been puzzled by the paradox of a Roman Catholic pope who is asking for a return to Socratic doubt and self-critique. Benedict must be perfectly aware of this paradox himself, so that we must assume that he, too, is using paradox deliberately, as Socrates did, and for the same reason: to startle his listeners into rethinking what they thought they already knew.

But why should Pope Benedict XVI feel the need at this moment in history to emphasize and highlight the role that Greek philosophical inquiry played in "the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe"? Christian Europe, after all, was a fusion of diverse elements: the Hebrew tradition, the experience of the early Christian community, the Roman genius for law, order, and hierarchy, the Germanic barbarians' love of freedom, among many others. In this cultural amalgam, Greek philosophy certainly played a role, yet its contribution was controversial from the beginning. In the second century A.D., the eminent Christian theologian Tertullian, who had been trained as a Roman lawyer, asked contemptuously: "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" For Tertullian, Athens represented hot air and wild speculation. Many others in the early Church agreed, among them those who burned the writings of the most brilliant of all Greek theologians, Origen. Yet Benedict's address can be understood as a return to the position of the man who taught Origen, the vastly erudite St. Clement of Alexandria.

St. Clement argued that Greek philosophy had been given by God to mankind as a second source of truth, comparable to the Hebrew revelation. For St. Clement, Socrates and Plato were not pagan thinkers; they prefigured Christianity. Contrary to what Tertullian believed, Christianity needed more than just Jerusalem: It needed Athens too. Pope Benedict in his address makes a strikingly similar claim: "The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance." This encounter, for Benedict, was providential, just as it had been for St. Clement. Furthermore, Benedict argues that the "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." For Benedict, however, this event is not mere ancient history. It is a legacy that we in the West are all duty-bound to keep alive, yet it is a legacy that is under attack, both from those who do not share it, namely Islam, and from those who are its beneficiaries and do not understand it, namely, Western intellectuals.

Let us begin by taking seriously Benedict's claim that in his address he is attempting to sketch, in a rough outline, "a critique of modern reason from within." He is not using his authority as the Roman pontiff to attack

modern reason from the point of view of the Church. His approach is not dogmatic; it is dialectical. He stands before his learned audience not as the pope, but simply as Joseph Ratzinger, an intelligent and thoughtful man, who makes no claims to any privileged cognitive authority. He has come, like Socrates, not to preach or sermonize, but to challenge with questions.

Ratzinger is troubled that most educated people today appear to think that they know what they are talking about, even when they are talking about very difficult things, like reason and faith. Reason, they think, is modern reason. But, as Ratzinger notes, modern reason is a far more limited and narrow concept than the Greek notion of reason. The Greeks felt that they could reason about anything and everything – about the immortality of the soul, metempsychosis, the nature of God, the role of reason in the universe, and so on. Modern reason, from the time of Kant, has repudiated this kind of wild speculative reason. For modern reason, there is no point in even asking such questions, because there is no way of answering them scientifically. Modern reason, after Kant, became identified with what modern science does. Modern science uses mathematics and the empirical method to discover truths about which we can all be certain: Such truths are called scientific truths. It is the business of modern reason to severely limit its activity to the discovery of such truths, and to refrain from pure speculation.

Ratzinger, it must be stressed, has no trouble with the truths revealed by modern science. He welcomes them. He has no argument with Darwin or Einstein or Heisenberg. What disturbs him is the assumption that scientific reason is the only form of reason, and that whatever is not scientifically provable lies outside the universe of reason. According to Ratzinger, the results of this “modern self-limitation of reason” are twofold. First, “the human sciences, such as history, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, attempt to conform themselves to this canon of scientificity.” Second, “by its very nature (the scientific) method excludes the question of God, making it appear an unscientific or prescientific question.”

In making this last point about God, it may appear that Joseph Ratzinger, the critical thinker, has switched back into being Pope Benedict XVI, the upholder of Christian orthodoxy. Defenders of modern reason and modern science can simply shrug off his objection to their exclusion of God by saying, “Of course, the question of God cannot be answered by science. This was the whole point of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Science can neither prove, nor disprove God’s existence. Furthermore, by bringing in the question of God, you have violated your own ground rules. You claimed to be offering a critique of modern reason *from within*, but by dragging God into the discussion, you are criticizing modern reason from the standpoint of a committed Christian. You are merely saying that modern reason excludes God; we who subscribe to the concept of modern

reason are perfectly aware of this fact. Maybe it troubles you, as a Christian, but it doesn't bother us in the least."

Can Joseph Ratzinger, the critical thinker, answer this objection? Yes, he can, and he does. His answer is provided by his discussion of jihad. Contrary to what the *New York Times* reported, Ratzinger is not providing merely "a note on jihad" that has no real bearing on the central message of his address. According to his own words, the topic of jihad constitutes "the starting-point" for his reflection on faith and reason. Ratzinger uses the Islamic concept of jihad to elucidate his critique of modern reason from within.

Modern reason argues that questions of ethics, of religion, and of God are outside its compass. Because there is no scientific method by which such questions can be answered, modern reason cannot concern itself with them, nor should it try to. From the point of view of modern reason, all religious faiths are equally irrational, all systems of ethics equally unverifiable, all concepts of God equally beyond rational criticism. But if this is the case, then what can modern reason say when it is confronted by a God who commands that his followers should use violence and even the threat of death in order to convert unbelievers?

If modern reason cannot concern itself with the question of God, then it cannot argue that a God who commands jihad is better or worse than a God who commands us not to use violence to impose our religious views on others. To the modern atheist, both Gods are equally figments of the imagination, in which case it would be ludicrous to discuss their relative merits. The proponent of modern reason, therefore, could not possibly think of participating in a dialogue on whether Christianity or Islam is the more reasonable religion, since, for him, the very notion of a "reasonable religion" is a contradiction in terms.

Ratzinger wishes to challenge this notion, not from the point of view of a committed Christian, but from the point of view of modern reason itself. He does this by calling his educated listeners' attention to a "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." In particular, Ratzinger focuses on a passage in the dialogue where the emperor "addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness" 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.'"

Ratzinger's daring use of this provocative quotation was not designed to inflame Muslims. He was using the emperor's question in order to offer a profound challenge to modern reason *from within*. Can

Modern reason really stand on the sidelines of a clash between a religion that commands jihad and a religion that forbids violent conversion? Can a committed atheist avoid taking the side of Manuel II Paleologus when he says: "God is not pleased by blood – and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature... 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."

Modern science cannot tell us that the emperor is right in his controversy with the learned Persian over what is or is not contrary to God's nature. Modern reason proclaims such questions unanswerable by science – and it is right to do so. But can modern reason hope to survive as reason at all if it insists on reducing the domain of reasonable inquiry to the sphere of scientific inquiry? If modern reason cannot take the side of the emperor in this debate, if it cannot see that his religion is more reasonable than the religion of those who preach and practice jihad, if it cannot condemn as unreasonable a religion that forces atheists and unbelievers to make a choice between their intellectual integrity and death, then modern reason may be modern, but it has ceased to be reason.

The typical solution to the problem of ethics and religion offered by modern reason is quite simple: Let the individual decide such matters himself, by whatever means he wishes. If a person prefers Islam over Christianity, or Jainism over Methodism, that is entirely up to him. All such choices, from the perspective of modern reason, are equally leaps of faith, or simply matters of taste; hence all are equally irrational. Ratzinger recognizes this supposed solution, but he sees the fatal weakness in it. Modern reason asserts that questions of ethics and religion

...have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by "science,"... and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective. The subject then decides, on the basis of his experiences, what he considers tenable in matters of religion, and the subjective "conscience" becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter. This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity, as we see from the disturbing pathologies of religion and reason which necessarily erupt when reason is so reduced that questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it.

If the individual is free to choose between violence and reason, it will become impossible to create a community in which all the members restrict themselves to using reason alone to obtain their objectives. If it is left up to the individual to use violence or reason, then those whose

subjective choice is for violence will inevitably destroy the community of those whose subjective choice is for reason. Worse still, those whose subjective choice is for violence do not need to constitute more than a small percentage of the community in order to destroy the very possibility of a community of reasonable men: Brute force and terror quickly extinguish rational dialogue and debate.

Modern reason says that all ethical choices are subjective and beyond the scope of reason. But if this is so, then a man who wishes to live in a community made up of reasonable men is simply making a personal subjective choice – a choice that is no more reasonable than the choice of the man who wishes to live in a community governed by brute force. But if the reasonable man is reasonable, he must recognize that modern reason itself can only survive in a community made up of other reasonable men. Since to be a reasonable man entails wishing to live in a community made up of other reasonable men, then the reasonable man cannot afford to allow the choice between reason and violence to be left up to mere personal taste or intellectual caprice. To do so would be a betrayal of reason.

Modern reason, to be sure, cannot prove scientifically that a community of reasonable men is ethically superior to a community governed by violent men. But a critique of modern reason from within must recognize that a community of reasonable men is a necessary precondition of the very existence of modern reason. He who wills to preserve and maintain the achievements of modern reason must also will to live in a community made up of reasonable men who abstain from the use of violence to enforce their own values and ideas. Such a community is the *a priori* ethical foundation of modern reason. Thus, modern reason, despite its claim that it can give no scientific advice about ethics and religion, must recognize that its own existence and survival demand both an ethical postulate and a religious postulate. The ethical postulate is: Do whatever is possible to create a community of reasonable men who abstain from violence, and who prefer to use reason. The religious postulate is: If you are given a choice between religions, always prefer the religion that is most conducive to creating a community of reasonable men, *even if you don't believe in it yourself*.

Modern reason cannot hope to prove these postulates to be scientifically true; but it must recognize that a refusal to adopt and act on these postulates will threaten the very survival of modern reason itself. That is the point of Ratzinger's warning that "the West has long been endangered by (its) aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby." Because it is ultimately a community of reasonable men that underlies the rationality of the West, modern reason is risking suicide by not squarely confronting the question:

How did such a community of reasonable men come into being in the first place? By what miracle did men turn from brute force and decide to reason with one another?

It is important to stress that Ratzinger is not repudiating the critical examination of reason that was initiated by Kant. Instead, he is urging us to examine the cultural and historical conditions that made the emergence of modern reason possible. Modern reason required a preexisting community of reasonable men *before* it could emerge in the West; modern reason, therefore, could not create the cultural and historical condition that made its own existence possible. But in this case, modern reason must ask itself: What created the communities of reasonable men that eventually made modern reason possible?

This was the question taken up by one of Kant's most illustrious and brilliant students, Johann Herder. Herder began by accepting Kant and the Enlightenment, but he went on to ask the Kantian question: What were the necessary conditions of the European Enlightenment? What kind of culture was necessary in order to produce a critical thinker like Immanuel Kant himself? When Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, methodically demolished all the traditional proofs for the existence of God, why wasn't he torn limb from limb in the Streets of Königsburg by outraged believers, instead of being hailed as one of the greatest philosophers of all time?

Herder's answer was that in Europe, and in Europe alone, human beings had achieved what Herder called "cultures of reason." In his grand and pioneering survey of world history and world cultures, Herder had been struck by the fact that in the vast majority of human societies, reason played little or no role. Men were governed either by a blind adherence to tradition or by brute force. Only among the ancient Greeks did the ideal of reason emerge to which Manuel II Paleologus appeals in his dialogue with the learned Persian.

A culture of reason is one in which the ideal of the dialogue has become the foundation of the entire community. In a culture of reason, everyone has agreed to regard violence as an illegitimate method of changing other people's minds. The only legitimate method of effecting such change is to speak well and to reason properly. Furthermore, a culture of reason is one that privileges the spirit of Greek philosophic inquiry: It encourages men to think for themselves.

For Herder, modern scientific reason was the product of European cultures of reason, but these rare cultures of reason were themselves the outcome of a well-nigh miraculous convergence of traditions to which Ratzinger has called our attention as constituting the foundation of Europe: the world-historical encounter between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry, "with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage." Thus, for Herder, modern scientific and critical reason, if it looks

scientifically and critically at itself, will be forced to recognize that it could never have come into existence had it not been for the "providential," or perhaps merely serendipitous, convergence of these three great traditions. Modern reason is a cultural phenomenon like any other: It did not drop down one fine day out of the clouds. It involved no special creation. Rather, it evolved uniquely out of the fusion of cultural traditions known as Christendom.

A critique of modern reason from within must recognize its cultural and historical roots in this Christian heritage. In particular, it must recognize its debt to the distinctive concept of God that was the product of the convergence of the Hebrew, Greek, and Roman traditions. To recognize this debt, of course, does not require any of us to believe that this God actually exists.

For example, the 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was an atheist; yet in his own critique of modern reason, he makes a remarkably shrewd point, which Ratzinger might well have made himself. Modern scientific reason says that the universe is governed by rules through and through; indeed, it is the aim of modern reason to disclose and reveal these laws through scientific inquiry. Yet, as Schopenhauer asks, where did this notion of a law-governed universe come from? No scientist can possibly argue that science has proven the universe to be rule-governed throughout all of space and all of time. As Kant argued in his *Critique of Judgment*, scientists must begin by *assuming* that nature is rational through and through: It is a necessary hypothesis for doing science at all. But where did this hypothesis, so vital to science, come from?

The answer, according to Schopenhauer, was that modern scientific reason derived its model of the universe from the Christian concept of God as a rational Creator who has intelligently designed every last detail of the universe *ex nihilo*. It was this Christian idea of God that permitted Europeans to believe that the universe was a rational cosmos. Because Europeans had been brought up to imagine the universe as the creation of a rational intelligence, they naturally came to expect to find evidence of this intelligence wherever they looked and, strangely enough, they did.

Ratzinger, in his address, draws our attention to the famous opening passage of the Gospel of John, in which the Biblical God, the Creator of the Universe, is identified with the Greek concept of *logos*, which means both word and reason — "a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason." Though Ratzinger does not mention it, the Roman tradition also comes into play in this revolutionary new concept of God: For the Christian God, like a good Roman emperor, is a passionate lover of order, law, and hierarchy. He does not merely create a universe through reason, but he subjects it thoroughly to laws, establishes

order in every part of it, and organizes hierarchies that allow us to comprehend it all: Our cat is a member of the species cat, the species cat belongs to the order of mammals, all mammals are in turn animals, and all animals are forms of life. What Roman legion was ever better organized than that?

For Schopenhauer, as an atheist, the rational Creator worshiped by Christians was an imaginary construction, like all other gods. For Ratzinger, as a Christian, this imaginary construction is an approximation of the reality of God; but for Ratzinger, as a critical thinker, there is no need to make this affirmation of faith. In offering his “critique of modern reason from within,” it is enough for his purposes to point out how radically different this imaginary construction of God is from the competing imaginary constructions of God offered by other religions – and, indeed, from competing imaginary constructions of God offered by many thinkers who fell clearly within the Christian tradition.

For example, Ratzinger notes that within the Catholic scholastic tradition itself, thinkers emerged like Duns Scotus, whose imaginary construction of God sundered the “synthesis between the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit.” For Scotus, it was quite possible that God “could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done.” If God had willed to create a universe without rhyme or reason, a universe completely unintelligible to human intelligence, that would have been his privilege. If he had decided to issue commandments that enjoined human beings to sacrifice their children, or kill their neighbors, or plunder their property, mankind would have been compelled to obey such commandments. Nor would we have had any “reason” to object to them, or even question them. For Scotus and those who followed him, the ultimate and only reason behind the universe is God’s free and unrestrained will. But as Ratzinger asks, How can such a view of God avoid leading “to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness?” The answer is, it cannot.

Intimately connected with the concept of God as a rational Creator who wishes for us to be able to understand the reason behind the universe is the concept of a God who will behave reasonably toward us. He will not be delighted when we grovel before him, nor will he demand that we worship him in “fear and trembling.” Instead, he will be a God who prefers for us to feel reverence and gratitude towards him.

Ratzinger notes that Socrates’ mission was to challenge and critique the myths of the Greek gods that prevailed in his day. These gods were imagined as behaving not only capriciously, but often wickedly and brutally. The famous line from *King Lear* sums up this view: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods – they kill us for their sport.” But, asked Socrates, were such gods worthy of being worshiped by reasonable men,

or by free men: True, we may feel abject terror before them; but should we have reverence for them simply because they have the power to injure us? In *The Euthyphro*, Socrates quotes a Greek poet, Stasinus, who, speaking of Zeus, says "where fear is, there also is reverence," but only to disagree with the poet's concept of God. "It does not seem to me true that where fear is, there also is reverence; for many who fear diseases and poverty and other such things seem to me to fear, but not to reverence at all these things which they fear." For Socrates, it was obvious that good was not whatever God capriciously chose to do; the good was what God was compelled by his very nature to do. Socrates would have agreed with the Byzantine emperor when he said, "God is not pleased by blood, and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature."

The Emperor Manuel II Paleologus pondered this question in his debate with the learned Persian. How can a god who commands conversion by the sword be the same god as the emperor's god – a god who wished to gain converts only through the use of words and reason? If Allah is happy to accept converts who are trembling in fear for their lives, with a sword hovering over their necks, then he may well be a god worth fearing, but not a god worth revering. He may represent an imaginary construction of god suitable to slaves, but he will not be an image of god worthy of being worshiped by a Socrates or by any reasonable man.

The *New York Times* expressed dismay that Pope Benedict XVI, by quoting the words of Manuel II Paleogus, had betrayed the ecumenical tradition of John Paul II, who insisted that all of us, including both Christians and Muslims, worship the same God. Many others have joined in the criticism of the Regensburg address; Ratzinger, in his role as the Roman pontiff, has apologized if his remarks offended Muslim sensibilities. Perhaps, as Pope Benedict, he was wise to do so. But Ratzinger, the man of reason, the critical thinker, owes no one an apology. He spoke his mind, and he challenged his listeners and the world to ponder questions that have haunted thoughtful men from the first age of Greek philosophic inquiry. He has thrown out an immense challenge to modern reason and to the modern world. Is it really a matter of subjective choice whether men follow a religion that respects human reason and that refuses to use violence to convert others? Can even the most committed atheist be completely indifferent to the imaginary gods that the other members of his community continue to worship? If modern reason cannot persuade men to defend their own communities of reason against the eruption of "disturbing pathologies of religion and reason," then *what* can persuade them to do so?

Human beings will have their gods – and modern reason cannot alter this. Indeed, modern reason has produced its own *ersatz* god – a blind and capricious universe into which accidental man has found himself inexplicably thrown. It is a universe in which all human freedom is an

illusion, because everything we do or think was determined from the moment of the Big Bang. It is a universe in which there is no mind at all, but only matter. Yet without mind, how can there be reason? Without free will, how can there be reasonable choices? Without reasonable choices, how can there be reasonable men? Without reasonable men, how can there be communities in which human dignity is defended from the indignity of violence and brute force?

On his last day on earth, Socrates spent the hours before he drank the fatal hemlock talking to his friends about the immortality of the human soul. Next to Socrates was a Greek boy, whose name was Phaedo – Ratzinger mentions him in his address. Socrates had come across Phaedo one day in the marketplace of Athens, where he was up for sale as a slave. Distraught at knowing what lay ahead for the handsome and intelligent boy, Socrates ran to all his wealthy friends and collected enough money to buy the boy, then immediately gave him his freedom. Socrates' liberation of Phaedo was a symbol of Socrates' earthly mission.

Socrates hated the very thought of slavery – slavery to other men, slavery to mere opinions, slavery to fear, slavery to our own low desires, slavery to our own high ambitions. He believed that reason could liberate human beings from these various forms of slavery. Socrates would have protested against the very thought of a God who was delighted by forced conversions, or who was pleased when his worshipers proudly boasted that they were his slaves. He would have fought against those who teach that the universe is an uncaring thing, or who tell us that freedom is an illusion and our mind a phantom. Ultimately, perhaps, Socrates would have seen little to distinguish between those who bow down trembling before an irrational god and those who resign themselves before an utterly indifferent universe.

In his moving and heroic speech, Joseph Ratzinger has chosen to play the part of Socrates, not giving us dogmatic answers, but stinging us with provocative questions. Shall we abandon the lofty and noble conception of reason for which Socrates gave his life? Shall we delude ourselves into thinking that the life of reason can survive without courage and character? Shall we be content with lives we refuse to examine, because such examination requires us to ask questions for which science can give no definite answer? The destiny of reason will be determined by how we in the modern West answer these questions.
