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FROM VIOLENCE TO WITNESS VIA REASON AND FAITH: THE INTERRELIGIOUS MESSAGE OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

SUMMARY: This article examines the message of Pope Benedict XVI to representatives of other religions, especially Muslims, using the pope's interreligious addresses as the main source material. The main topics surveyed are the peaceful nature of religion, the relationship between faith and reason, and common service or interreligious witness. These are interconnected, for Benedict is convinced that religiously motivated violence is contrary to the essence of religion, irrational, and damaging to the common cause of the religions against radical secularism. The difficulty arises in declaring a priori, based on Enlightenment convictions, that 'genuine religion' is non-violent at heart, without discussing the authoritative sources of each religion. It is striking that Benedict XVI never quotes the Qur'an in his speeches to Muslims. The appeals to reason, conscience, and human nature attempt to settle the matter on a level preceding faith, but the pope's Augustinian-Bonaventurian vision requires that reason be illumined by faith and revelation. This framework, used interreligiously, as the pope does, cuts both ways. Who or what decides, in the face of a violent instance of 'revelation', whether faith is to be purified by reason, or reason elevated by faith? Benedict XVI provides a strong impetus to those who agree with him and food for thought to all who are open to dialogue, but more needs to be done in order to 'argue credibly and realistically against religiously motivated violence'.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Maurice Borrmans, who devoted his life to Christian-Muslim dialogue and peace

What was the interreligious message of Pope Benedict XVI?¹ And especially, what was his message to Muslims? If anything, what most people remember about Pope Benedict XVI's contribution to interreligious dialogue is the uproar caused by the 2006 lecture 'Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections', delivered at the University of Regensburg, Germany². While not aimed at representatives of different religions per se, and in fact 'only marginally'³ touching on the topic of interreligious dialogue, the controversial lecture actually 'led to the development of a truly vigorous dialogue' between Christianity and Islam, in which it became evident – according to Pope Benedict XVI – 'that Islam needs to clarify two questions', namely those concerning 'its relation to violence and its relation to reason'⁴. Progress on these matters was important for Benedict XVI because he saw in Islam an ally in the defence of the 'major religious values' of 'faith in God and obedience to God', to the degree that in the modern world, Christianity and Islam are, according to Benedict, 'on the same side of a common battle' against 'radical secularism'⁵. In his interview book with Peter Seewald, *Light of the World*, the pope says: 'The important thing is to discover what we have in common and, wherever possible, to perform a common service in this world'⁶.

These three topics, namely violence, reason, and common service, feature prominently in the many speeches Pope Benedict XVI delivered throughout his pontificate to representatives of Islam and other world religions⁷, such

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¹ This article has been funded by The Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Kirkon tutkimuskeskus).

² Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the representatives of science: Lecture of the Holy Father', 12 September 2006, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html#_ftnref6. For commentaries, see J.V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 2007; Benedikt XVI, *Glaube und Vernunft: Die Regensburger Vorlesung, Kommentiert von Gesine Schwan, Adel Theodor Khoury, Karl Kardinal Lehmann*, Herder, Freiburg 2006.

³ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the members of the Roman Curia at the traditional exchange of Christmas greetings', 22 December 2006, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061222_curia-romana.html.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. M.J. Miller and A.J. Walker, Catholic Truth Society, London 2010, 98. See also M. Borrmans, 'The Dialogue that Sprouted from the Seed of Ratisbon', available at <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/the-dialogue-that-sprouted-from-the-seed-of-ratisbon>.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 99-100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷ Benedict's prioritisation of the dialogue with Islam is evident from the very beginning of the pontificate, though it is often the case that Muslims are addressed together with representatives of other religions. See Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the

as those given in Cologne (2005), Rome (2005, 2006, 2008), Ankara (2006), Washington, D.C. (2008), Sydney (2008), Yaoundé (2009), Amman (2009), Jerusalem (2009), London (2010), Berlin (2011), Assisi (2011), Cotonou (2011), and Beirut (2012)⁸. In comparison with the Regensburg lecture, little attention has thus far been paid to these substantial addresses⁹, although they constitute the most natural and suitable source material for determining Benedict XVI's 'interreligious message', that is, his message to the representatives of the world religions.

Consequently, the aim of this article is to examine Pope Benedict XVI's case for reasonable, non-violent religion, as well as his call to common service and witness, as expressed in the aforementioned speeches. This will be done against the backdrop of his other speeches and writings, as well as his broader theological and philosophical convictions, which draw on sources such as Augustine, Bonaventure, the Enlightenment, and Vatican II. A recurring tension will be noted between the universal and the particular, the interreligious and the tradition-specific, reason and faith, 'religion' and Christianity.

VIOLENCE AND PEACE: WHAT IS THE 'TRUE NATURE' OF 'RELIGION'?

The centrality of the topics of peace and violence stands out to anyone reading Pope Benedict XVI's interreligious addresses. For example, in an analysis of 91 statements to Muslim representatives from the first half of the pontificate, Guy Fricano concluded that 'the most astoundingly resonant theme was in favor of peace', together with the closely related topic of 'the condemnation of violence'¹⁰. It is worth noticing how comprehensive and theologically ambitious Benedict's rejection of violence is. He is not content to condemn unnecessary violence or instances of violence; rather, all forms of violence are rejected. Furthermore, Benedict declares violence not simply evil but also contrary to the nature of 'religion' – not merely Christianity, but *religion*. Asked about the phenomenon of violent fundamentalism on his flight to Lebanon in 2012, Benedict XVI said that 'the essence of religion' is 'to create God's peace throughout the world', and so the message of religion 'must be against violence', which is 'a falsification of religion'¹¹. Similarly, in Cameroon in 2009, Benedict XVI affirmed that 'genuine religion' rejects 'all forms of violence and totalitarianism: not only on principles of faith, but also of right reason'¹². Most emphatically, in Assisi in 2011, in the presence of leaders of the great world religions, Benedict XVI declared violence to be the 'antithesis of religion':

The post-Enlightenment critique of religion has repeatedly maintained that religion is a cause of violence and in this way it has fuelled hostility towards religions. . . . The religious delegates who were assembled in Assisi in 1986 wanted to say, and we now repeat it emphatically and firmly: this is not the true nature of religion. It is the antithesis of religion and contributes to its destruction¹³.

These statements give rise to many questions, and Benedict XVI realises as much. He himself raises the objections: How do you know what the true nature of religion is? Is there such a thing as a common nature of religion that finds expression in all religions and is applicable to them all?¹⁴ These self-critical points are all the

delegates of other churches and ecclesial communities and of other religious traditions', 25 April 2005, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050425_rappresentanti-religiosi.html.

⁸ A full selection of 188 passages from the pontificate of Benedict XVI, relevant to interreligious dialogue, can be found in F. Gioia (ed.), *Il Dialogo Interreligioso nell'Insegnamento Ufficiale della Chiesa Cattolica (1963-2013)*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2013. To date, the book is only available in Italian. I will be referring to the English-language versions of Benedict XVI's speeches, available on the official website of the Vatican.

⁹ An exception is found in the work of R. Viviano, *The Theological-Ecclesiological Thought of Benedict XVI (2005-2013) on the Christian Engagement with the Religions in the Context of the Modern Papacy*, Heythrop College, PhD Theology, London 2013, available at <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/sites/default/files/docs/publications/theses/Rocco%20PhD%20Thesis.compressed.pdf>; R. Viviano, 'Benedict XVI and Interreligious Dialogue: The Case of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations', *Landas* 24/2 (2010) 21-59; R. Viviano, 'Benedict XVI, Islam, and Christian-Muslim Relations', *The Downside Review* 135/1 (2017) 55-75; R. Viviano, 'Interreligious Dialogue In The Thought of Benedict XVI: Ecclesiological Foundations and Distinctive Characteristics', *Annales Missiologici Posnanienses* 20 (2015) 107-135. Viviano's presentation of Benedict's interreligious message is for the most part commendable, but it lacks any critical attention to the theological tensions taken up in this article. The two articles on Islam are nearly identical.

¹⁰ G. Fricano, *Pope Benedict XVI on Islam (2005-2009)*. Kindle edition. See also C. Amigo Vallejo, *Convivencia y diálogo: Benedicto XVI y los musulmanes*, Edibesa, Madrid 2012, 40.

¹¹ 'Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the journalists during the flight to Lebanon', 14 September 2012, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120914_incontro-giornalisti.html.

¹² Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with representatives of the Muslim community of Cameroon', 19 March 2009, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090319_comunita-musulmana.html.

¹³ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the meeting for peace in Assisi', 27 October 2011, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20111027_assisi.html.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

more interesting when read against the backdrop of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI's more famous remarks, according to which 'there is no such thing as "the religions" altogether as such'¹⁵, and that 'it is not possible for a believer to think that religions are all variations on a single theme'¹⁶.

How does the pope answer the objections, then? Is he now willing to defend a common, peaceful nature of all religions? First, instead of answering the objections outright, the pope simply says that they must be asked, 'if we wish to argue realistically and credibly against religiously motivated violence'. This is, in Benedict's opinion, 'a fundamental task for interreligious dialogue'¹⁷. In other words, Benedict seems to be declaring a thesis, giving voice to a shared conviction – though obviously still disputed by others – for which an adequate apology is something that must be thought through by all those who agree that religion is indeed by nature non-violent. Next, Benedict XVI offers his own contribution to this project by providing an apology for the non-violent nature of Christianity:

As a Christian I want to say at this point: yes, it is true, in the course of history, force has also been used in the name of the Christian faith. We acknowledge it with great shame. But it is utterly clear that this was an abuse of the Christian faith, one that evidently contradicts its true nature. The God in whom we Christians believe is the Creator and Father of all, and from him all people are brothers and sisters and form one single family. For us the Cross of Christ is the sign of the God who put "suffering-with" (compassion) and "loving-with" in place of force. His name is "God of love and peace" (2 Cor 13:11). It is the task of all who bear responsibility for the Christian faith to purify the religion of Christians again and again from its very heart, so that it truly serves as an instrument of God's peace in the world, despite the fallibility of humans¹⁸.

In this passage, Benedict XVI distinguishes between the 'heart' or 'true nature' of Christianity, which is against violence, and the 'religion of Christians', which has sometimes been violent, and which always stands in need of purification. In such a manner, the pope is setting an example to his listeners, as if saying: this is how I defend our thesis in the context of my religion, now think about how to do the same in yours!

It can of course be asked whether Benedict's argument is fully persuasive as it stands. Is it really 'utterly clear' that the 'true nature' of Christianity is opposed to all forms of violence? Medieval crusaders and inquisitors, some of whom were otherwise holy and well educated monks and friars, would certainly not have agreed that the Cross of Christ or God's love rule out the use of force in all cases; they were able to justify it from the most authoritative Christian sources, Scripture and Tradition. The same goes today for Christian defenders of just war and capital punishment. And what about other religions? Do we know a priori that they are all peaceful at heart? Should we not first consult their Scriptures and look at the teaching and example of their founders? We are forced to ask what is guiding Benedict's interpretation of the heart and true nature of Christianity, and even more broadly, 'religion'.

A very revealing speech in this regard was delivered by Benedict XVI in the aftermath of the Regensburg lecture to the members of the Roman Curia in December of 2006. Speaking on 'a dialogue to be intensified with Islam', he says that 'one must welcome the true conquests of the Enlightenment, human rights and especially the freedom of faith and its practice, and recognize these also as being essential elements for the authenticity of religion'¹⁹. This statement greatly helps us understand Benedict's interpretation of the 'true nature' of both Christianity and 'religion': it is a result of the 'convictions and demands that were strengthened in the Enlightenment', to which only 'the Second Vatican Council, as the fruit of long and difficult research, found real solutions for the Catholic Church'²⁰.

Consequently, for Benedict, Christian-Muslim dialogue should now consist in 'meeting each other in this commitment to find the right solutions'²¹. He is certainly right to call this an 'immense task'²², for it is destined to be much contested. Why should a European and often antireligious movement from the 18th century and a Catholic council concluded in 1965 be able to define – in general, but especially for Muslims! – any of the essential elements of what belongs to 'the authenticity of religion'? Of course, Benedict XVI does not expect Muslims to accept any sort of 'authority' of the Enlightenment or Vatican II. Rather, it is a question of 'solidarity with all those who, precisely on the basis of their religious conviction as Muslims, work to oppose violence and for the synergy between faith and reason, between religion and freedom'²³. It is about supporting 'all the currents within Islam that are open

¹⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. H. Taylor, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004, 107.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the parish priests and the clergy of Rome', 14 February 2013, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130214_clero-roma.html.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the Meeting for Peace in Assisi'.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the members of the Roman Curia'.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

to, and capable of, dialogue, so as to give a change of mentality a chance to happen even where Islamism still couples a claim to truth with violence'²⁴.

Hence, Benedict is happy to side with Muslims who condemn terrorism, regarding it as an 'abuse' of Islam and contrary to its teachings²⁵. He would be happy to see Muslims arguing, using their own sources and criteria, that any religiously motivated violence, even in the difficult case of dealing with apostates²⁶, contradicts the heart of Islam. Of course, there are already examples of this²⁷, but dialogue and cooperation must increase for a more widespread and lasting impact. As the pope told the first Catholic-Muslim forum in Rome in 2008: 'We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways'²⁸.

To sum up the discussion so far, Pope Benedict XVI's most prominent interreligious message is that of peace, together with a full-fledged condemnation of violence. This is formulated in an ambitious manner, with the claim that authentic religion is essentially peaceful and that all forms of violence are contrary to its true nature. This conviction is shaped by the achievements of the Enlightenment and the Second Vatican Council, and Benedict realises that it can easily be questioned by people of other persuasions. Nevertheless, the same conclusion can be reached by other means, and Benedict wishes to strengthen his interreligious dialogue partners in this conviction, however it is defended. The strategy that emerges in Benedict's key speeches to representatives of other religions, especially Muslims, is to focus on a level that precedes theological hermeneutics. Scriptural interpretation is left to the followers of the various religions themselves as the next step, and appeals are made primarily to the concepts of reason, conscience, human nature, human rights, and the dignity of the individual. But can these concepts provide solid common ground prior to, or apart from, faith?

REASON, CONSCIENCE, AND HUMAN NATURE: COMMON GROUND BEFORE FAITH?

In one of the more insightful essays on Benedict XVI's approach to Islam, emerging from the early phase of the pontificate, the Jesuit Samir Khalil Samir writes that Pope Benedict chooses to base dialogue with Islam 'on rationality and on a vision of man and human nature which comes before any ideology or religion'²⁹. Samir paraphrases the pope as saying: 'let's go back to human nature, based on rationality, on conscience, which gives an idea of human rights'³⁰. The idea seems to be to avoid entering into debates about theology, because as an eternally perfect revelation that 'descended' from heaven, rather than an 'inspired' text with human authors, the Qur'an leaves very little room for interpretation for Muslims³¹. It is unclear where the line goes between the pope's presentation and Samir's paraphrase of this contested idea³², but it is certainly striking that in his addresses to Muslim audiences, Benedict XVI never quotes or discusses the contents of the Qur'an.

Instead, the approach outlined by Samir, based on the 'universality of reason'³³, is evident in several of Benedict's speeches to Muslims throughout the pontificate. In his programmatic 2005 speech to Muslim representatives in Cologne, Benedict XVI issues a call for a common defence of the dignity of the person and human rights, with the decisive epistemological point expressed as follows: 'This message is conveyed to us unmistakably

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99; Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with representatives of some Muslim communities'; Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to H.E. Mr. Habbeeb Mohammed Radi Ali Al-Sadr, the new ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the Holy See', 2 July 2010, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100702_ambassador-iraq.html.

²⁶ The 'right to change religions' is 'hard for the Islamic partners to accept'. Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 99.

²⁷ See, for example, M. Akyol, *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2013. Akyol rejects the death penalty for apostasy on the basis of the Qur'an and insists on the Qur'an's constant call to reason.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, 'Address to the participants of the Catholic-Muslim forum', 6 November 2008, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081106_cath-islamic-leaders.html.

²⁹ S. Khalil Samir, 'When Civilizations Meet: How Joseph Ratzinger Sees Islam', available at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/53826%26eng%3Dy.html>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² The idea is thoroughly criticised by D. Madigan, 'Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Difficult Times', in J. Heft (ed.), *Catholicism and Interreligious Dialogue*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, 57-85. Interpretation is inevitable, Madigan argues, and the Islamic tradition itself offers a variety of tools and possibilities in this regard.

³³ For the term in different contexts, see Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the ambassadors of countries with a Muslim majority and to the representatives of Muslim communities in Italy', 25 September 2006, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060925_ambasciatori-paes-arabi.html; Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with organizations for interreligious dialogue', 11 May 2009, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090511_dialogo-interreligioso.html.

by the quiet but clear voice of conscience³⁴. In another speech to Muslims in Berlin in 2011, Benedict twice refers to ‘certain inalienable values that are proper to human nature, in particular the inviolable dignity of every single person’, rights that are ‘proper to human nature and precede every positive formulation’³⁵. In Beirut in 2012, Benedict XVI affirmed ‘the existence of values which are common to all great cultures because they are rooted in the nature of the human person’³⁶. In this context and elsewhere, Benedict refers to the idea of the ‘natural law inscribed in the human heart’, which he also calls the grammar of the ‘the language of creation’³⁷.

Benedict XVI is convinced that the values he upholds in dialogue with the world religions are recognisable by ‘everyone of good sense’³⁸ independently of any religion. Therefore, on his apostolic journeys and in his speeches to representatives of different religions, his strategy is to speak to consciences and to speak to reason³⁹.

At this point we must return to the critical questions. Are reason and conscience really that universal, and is their message really that unequivocal? If so, why do reasonable and conscientious people still disagree so much? Why did it take so long for the Catholic Church to discover these universal truths about human rights and religious freedom? Isn’t Benedict simply claiming universality to a fairly recent, culturally conditioned, and tradition-specific mix of ideas? Or, from a hypothetical Muslim listener: What if God has determined people’s rights differently in his perfect revelation? Should one listen to God or men?

As it turns out, Benedict’s approach is not quite as simple as that. Rereading his speeches with some of these questions in mind, we are led deeper into the heart of his Augustinian-Bonaventurian theology, the relationship between faith and reason.

Faith and reason: the promise and problems of Benedict’s Augustinian-Bonaventurian approach

‘You know that I place great emphasis on the relationship between faith and reason,’ Pope Benedict XVI told a group of reporters in 2010. Once more he explained to them that faith ‘has its identity only in openness to reason’, while ‘reason becomes itself if it transcends itself towards faith’⁴⁰.

At least among theologians, it is likewise well known that Joseph Ratzinger’s theology is heavily influenced by Augustine and Bonaventure, the two subjects of his doctoral and post-doctoral dissertations⁴¹. In comparison with the Thomists’ stress on the capacities of natural human reason, the Augustinian-Bonaventurian approach has a stronger emphasis on the Fall, on the one hand, and on the role of beauty and the heart, on the other. Significantly, for Benedict XVI, there is no such thing as ‘(the light of) natural reason’; rather, in fallen humans reason stands in need of purification and illumination to see properly and to really be itself. It is precisely ‘in his epistemology’, writes Tracey Rowland, that ‘Ratzinger is at his most Augustinian and Bonaventurian’⁴².

On a closer look, this framework is clearly present also in Benedict’s interreligious message. However, it puts a puzzling twist on the strategy of engaging non-Christians on a universally human level. To be sure, it solves some problems, but it also creates some new ones. Let us look at some examples.

Speaking to Muslims in Yaoundé in 2009, Benedict XVI reminds his audience about the ‘vast potential of human reason, which is itself God’s gift and which is elevated by revelation and faith’⁴³. It is easy to see Muslims

³⁴ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with representatives of some Muslim communities’, 20 August 2005, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting-muslims.html. On Joseph Ratzinger’s theology of conscience, see J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2007; V. Twomey, *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age: A Theological Portrait*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2007, 80-134.

³⁵ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with Muslim communities’, 23 September 2011, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110923_muslim-berlin.html.

³⁶ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with members of the government, institutions of the republic, the diplomatic corps, religious leaders and representatives of the world of culture’, 15 September 2012, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120915_autorita.html.

³⁷ *Ibid.*; Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with representatives of the Muslim community of Cameroon’.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with government members, representatives of state institutions, diplomatic corps and major religions’, 19 November 2011, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20111119_corpo-diplom.html.

³⁹ ‘Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI during the flight to the Holy Land’, 8 May 2009, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090508_terra-santa-interview.html.

⁴⁰ ‘Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the Journalists during the Flight to Spain’, 6 November 2010, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20101106_intervista-spagna.html.

⁴¹ See e.g. T. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, 3-9; A. Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*, Burns & Oates, London 2007, 17-44; T.P. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to His Theological Vision*, Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah 2007, 47-55; J. Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas: Wise Cautions & Legitimate Hopes*, Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah 2007, 28-9, 44-8.

⁴² Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 9; see also Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI*, 54-5.

⁴³ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with representatives of the Muslim community of Cameroon’.

and Christians agreeing that reason is God's gift, but what are we to make of 'revelation and faith' in an interreligious context? Benedict continues:

We are called to help others see the subtle traces and mysterious presence of God in the world which he has marvellously created and continually sustains with his ineffable and all-embracing love. Although his infinite glory can never be directly grasped by our finite minds in this life, we nonetheless catch glimpses of it in the beauty that surrounds us. When men and women allow the magnificent order of the world and the splendour of human dignity to illumine their minds, they discover that what is "reasonable" extends far beyond what mathematics can calculate, logic can deduce and scientific experimentation can demonstrate; it includes the goodness and innate attractiveness of upright and ethical living made known to us in the very language of creation⁴⁴.

Augustinian-Bonaventurian overtones are clearly noticeable in this text. Christians and Muslims are called to help others see the traces of God's glory 'in the beauty that surrounds us'. This dynamic leads to the illumination of minds, now enabled to read the 'language of creation' aright. In other words, it is not a matter of natural reason working its way to truths about God on its own, prior to any revelation or faith; rather, minds illumined by revelation and faith are equipped to make right use of their reason and help others do the same. With this in mind, we can appreciate the full context of Pope Benedict's words on the flight to the Holy Land in 2009:

We are seeking to assist in the formation of consciences. The conscience is the human capacity to perceive the truth, but this capacity is often impeded by particular interests. And to break free from these interests, to open up more to the truth, to true values, is a major undertaking: it is a task of the Church to help us to know true criteria, true values, and to free us from particular interests. And so . . . we also speak – no doubt about it – to reason: precisely because we are not a political force, we can perhaps more easily, and in the light of the faith, see the true criteria, we can assist in understanding what contributes to peace and we can appeal to reason, we can support positions that are truly reasonable⁴⁵.

Again, Augustinian-Bonaventurian emphases are evident. Conscience is the human capacity to perceive the truth, yes, but it is often blurred, 'impeded by particular interests'. The Church appeals to reason, yes, but it is able to see the true criteria 'in the light of the faith'. Hence, as the pope said on the flight to Lebanon in 2012, the Church's task is to 'illumine and purify consciences and to make it clear that every person is an image of God'⁴⁶. In other words, Benedict's call to reason is really illumined by faith, and the two are in fact inseparable. To the Muslims in Yaoundé, Benedict XVI sums it up as follows: 'religion is purified and structured by reason, and reason's full potential is unleashed by revelation and faith'⁴⁷.

Benedict's Augustinian-Bonaventurian model helps answer some of the obvious criticisms that could be raised against what could appear as a naively (pre)modern appeal to 'the universality of reason' or the 'clear voice of conscience'. Benedict XVI is acutely aware of the difficulty of discerning what is right, recognising that all sorts of influences and interests often blur individual consciences⁴⁸. This also applies to the history of the Church. Thus, Benedict has a clear understanding of the need for wisdom, illumination, and purification of reason and conscience, in the light of revelation and faith. Therefore, in fact, 'Ratzinger's Augustinian epistemology . . . gives him a very contemporary intellectual profile and a bridge to the post-moderns'⁴⁹.

However, from the perspective of Benedict's interreligious message regarding human rights and non-violence, this approach creates as many problems as it solves. Above all, there is the evident tension between trying to find common ground on a level that precedes religion, while at the same time asserting that this level needs illumination from revelation and faith to see properly and to really be itself. The problem of circularity is further complicated when we consider the actual differences between the various religions, for example Christianity and Islam. In the words of Maurice Borrmans: 'If Muslims and Christians equally speak of "revelation" (*wahy, tanzil*), its content very soon turns out to be quite different'⁵⁰.

Benedict seems to speak simply about the fact of revelation, or the belief in revelation, without giving due consideration to the content of revelation. Many are sure to question whether 'revelation' can be treated this abstractly. What if my 'revelation' commands violence in some cases? How is a Muslim to decide, in the face of a challenging piece of revelation, whether it should 'elevate' and 'illumine' his reason, or whether he should use his

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ 'Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI during the flight to the Holy Land'.

⁴⁶ 'Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the journalists during the flight to Lebanon'.

⁴⁷ Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with representatives of the Muslim community of Cameroon'.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, 'Visit to the Bundestag', 22 September 2011, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html. See also Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 207, where he says that the 'speech of the "heart"' is often heard 'with difficulty and in fragmentary fashion'.

⁴⁹ Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 5.

⁵⁰ M. Borrmans, 'Islam as It Understands Itself', in K.J. Becker and I. Morali, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2010, 487-508, at 501.

reason to ‘purify’ this aspect of his religion? In the first case, the Muslim would have a perfect Augustinian-Bonaventurian argument in place to support his religiously motivated violence. In light of revelation, it might after all make sense to use violence, if it serves God’s greater purpose of establishing his just rule in the whole world.

Of course, this would be out of the question for Benedict XVI. Violence is irrational, and justifying the use of violence by appealing to revelation is wrong. But the question is if this is merely a faith-based assertion, or can an argument be given for it that would change the mind of the (potential) violent Islamist? Consider the following statement by Benedict XVI from 2011:

Everyone of good sense understands that a serene and respectful dialogue about cultural and religious differences must be promoted. True interreligious dialogue rejects humanly self-centred truth, because the one and only truth is in God. God is Truth. Hence, no religion, and no culture may justify appeal or recourse to intolerance and violence. Aggression is an outmoded relational form which appeals to superficial and ignoble instincts. To use the revealed word, the Sacred Scriptures or the name of God to justify our interests, our easy and convenient policies or our violence, is a very grave fault⁵¹.

This is the closest Benedict XVI comes, in an interreligious context, to recognising the problematic role of Sacred Scriptures in motivating violence, but his argument has clear limitations. Granted, a self-centred use of Scriptures to justify ‘our’ violence is a grave fault, but what if it is a matter of a sincere religious submission to what is perceived as God’s will? How does it follow from the assertion that ‘God is Truth’ that ‘no religion’ may justify ‘appeal or recourse to intolerance and violence’? There is no interreligious agreement about what God can or cannot reveal or command. What if God who is Truth has commanded violence in some cases, for the purpose of a greater good?

Benedict can of course hope that ‘the truth which is in God’ persuades people ‘by the force of its own truth’⁵², on the assumption that his message truly does correspond to the grammar of creation, the law written on all human hearts. He can hope that his insistence on the inviolable dignity of the human person or his emphasis on reason as God’s gift will make some potential Islamists think twice before accepting intolerant interpretations of Islam or applying any of the violent verses of the Qur’an. At the same time, it is not difficult to see how his case could be reasonably rejected, exploiting some of the very presuppositions with which he makes it.

COMMON SERVICE AND WITNESS – BUT TO WHAT?

We are left with one final argument that Benedict XVI employs in his interreligious appeal for peace and non-violence. It is more pragmatic in nature, being closely related to the broader vision of an interreligious mission in today’s world, particularly in the secular West. In effect, the pope says to the religions: ‘Stop the violence, for it is harming our common cause!’ ‘Let us get our act together, and what a witness we will be to the world!’

According to Pope Benedict, religions can join forces in many areas in social and public life. In London in 2010, speaking to representatives of different religions, Pope Benedict XVI underlined the ‘side by side’ dimension of interreligious cooperation, as a complement to the ‘face to face’ aspect of interreligious dialogue. Concrete forms of ‘side by side’ collaboration can include ‘promoting integral human development, working for peace, justice and the stewardship of creation’ as well as ‘exploring together how to defend human life at every stage and how to ensure the non-exclusion of the religious dimension of individuals and communities in the life of society’⁵³.

Similarly, to the participants of the Catholic-Muslim forum in Rome in 2008, Benedict XVI said that Christians and Muslims have a ‘great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage’⁵⁴. On the level of common societal action, examples of this might include ‘the protection of the family based on marriage, respect for life in every phase of its natural course or the promotion of greater social justice’⁵⁵. Above all, however, Christians and Muslims are called to work together ‘to help society to open itself to the transcendent, giving Almighty God his rightful place’⁵⁶.

Bringing God to bear on public life is a priority concern for Benedict XVI, reflecting his view of the ultimate battle line between religion and secularism. He thinks it is necessary to counter an Enlightenment-inspired ‘dictatorship of positivist reason that excludes God from the life of the community and from public organizations,

⁵¹ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with government members’.

⁵² Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with members of the government’.

⁵³ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with clerical and lay representatives of other religions’, 17 September 2010, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_altre-religioni.html.

⁵⁴ Benedict XVI, ‘Address to the participants of the Catholic-Muslim forum’.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with Muslim communities’.

⁵⁶ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate’, 28 November 2006, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061128_pres-religious-affairs.html.

thereby depriving man of his specific criteria of judgment⁵⁷. Making this case in more detail is the main burden of both of Benedict's famous speeches to the worlds of science and politics, given in Regensburg and Berlin in 2006 and 2011, respectively⁵⁸. Interestingly, it is also Benedict's message to the religions, especially Jews and Muslims: 'if we believe we have a criterion of judgment and discernment which is divine in origin and intended for all humanity, then we cannot tire of bringing that knowledge to bear on civic life'⁵⁹.

Prescinding for the moment from the problem of differences in the various religious revelations, and assuming for the sake of argument Benedict's view of this kind of an interreligious mission in the world, let us return to the question of religiously motivated violence. How does this phenomenon affect the common mission of the religions?

Benedict XVI's interreligious addresses often include the perspective of those who look at religions from the outside, whether it is a question of those who sincerely seek God or those who actively oppose religion. As an example of consideration for the first group, in 2009, Benedict suggested the foundation of the 'Courtyard of the Gentiles' as a forum for dialogue with those 'to whom religion is something foreign' but who nevertheless do not want to be merely godless⁶⁰.

Benedict XVI also invited representatives of agnostic truth-seekers to the interreligious meeting in Assisi in 2011: 'These people are seeking the truth, they are seeking the true God, whose image is frequently concealed in the religions because of the ways in which they are often practised'⁶¹. One of the primary factors in concealing the true face of God is religiously motivated violence. It is also a chief factor in generating animosity against religion in general. The 'enemies of religion', Benedict says, 'see in religion one of the principal sources of violence in the history of humanity and thus they demand that it disappear'⁶².

Similar ideas are shared in Amman in 2009. Here, Pope Benedict mentions those who 'assert that religion is necessarily a cause of division in our world; and so they argue that the less attention given to religion in the public sphere the better'⁶³. The same point is expressed also in Sydney and Jerusalem⁶⁴, whereas to the participants of the Catholic-Muslim forum in Rome the pope states that we are 'challenged to demonstrate, by our words and above all by our deeds, that the message of our religions is unfailingly a message of harmony and mutual understanding', lest we 'weaken the credibility and the effectiveness not only of our dialogue, but also of our religions themselves'⁶⁵. In other words, Benedict argues that religiously motivated violence, as well as violations of religious freedom, serve as a counter-witness to the cause of religion, a challenge to which believers cannot remain indifferent.

If religiously motivated violence leads to the intensification of antireligious sentiments and the furtherance of radical secularism, Benedict considers that the consequences can only be tragic. Having lived through the 1940s, Benedict XVI knows that eliminating religion does not eliminate violence, an illusion still propagated by some. On the contrary, there is another form of violence that is equally alarming, namely, violence resulting from the absence of God:

The denial of God has led to much cruelty and to a degree of violence that knows no bounds, which only becomes possible when man no longer recognizes any criterion or any judge above himself, now having only himself to take as a criterion. The horrors of the concentration camps reveal with utter clarity the consequences of God's absence⁶⁶.

The absence of God leads to the absence of a 'criterion' above man, which opens the door to all but limitless violence. Turning to our times, Benedict notices a 'change in the spiritual climate that occurs imperceptibly and hence is all the more dangerous':

The worship of mammon, possessions and power is proving to be a counter-religion, in which it is no longer man who counts but only personal advantage. The desire for happiness degenerates, for example, into an unbridled, inhuman craving, such as appears in the different forms of drug dependency. There are the powerful who trade in drugs and then the many who are seduced and destroyed

⁵⁷ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the members of the Roman Curia'.

⁵⁸ Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the representatives of science'; Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the Bundestag'.

⁵⁹ Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with organizations for interreligious dialogue'.

⁶⁰ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the members of the Roman Curia and papal representatives for the traditional exchange of Christmas greetings', 21 December 2009, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091221_curia-auguri.html.

⁶¹ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the meeting for peace in Assisi'.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with Muslim religious leaders, members of the diplomatic corps and rectors of universities in Jordan', 9 May 2009, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090509_capi-musulmani.html.

⁶⁴ Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with representatives of other religions', 18 July 2008, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080718_interel.html; Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with organizations for interreligious dialogue'.

⁶⁵ Benedict XVI, 'Address to the participants of the Catholic-Muslim forum'.

⁶⁶ Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the meeting for peace in Assisi'.

by them, physically and spiritually. Force comes to be taken for granted and in parts of the world it threatens to destroy our young people. Because force is taken for granted, peace is destroyed and man destroys himself in this peace vacuum. The absence of God leads to the decline of man and of humanity⁶⁷.

The tragedy of violence, whether motivated by religion or its absence, leads Benedict XVI to reiterate that ‘the rightly lived relationship of man to God is a force for peace’⁶⁸. He issues an urgent call for ‘dialogue’ and an ‘appeal to believers to purify their faith, so that God, the true God, becomes accessible’⁶⁹. This brings us back full circle to the problem of interreligious criteria for discerning ‘the true God’.

Ideally, Pope Benedict XVI envisions a mode of interreligious coexistence and mission where followers of different religions live in peace and mutual respect, offering a joint testimony in favour of God in the public sphere. In this situation, critics pointing to interreligious disagreements in order to advocate for areligious civic life would encounter the unified voice of the religions: yes, we have our differences, but we respect each other, and we all agree that the spiritual dimension must be given due recognition in society⁷⁰. In Jerusalem in 2009, the pope said to Jews and Muslims:

Together we can proclaim that God exists and can be known, that the earth is his creation, that we are his creatures, and that he calls every man and woman to a way of life that respects his design for the world. Friends, if we believe we have a criterion of judgment and discernment which is divine in origin and intended for all humanity, then we cannot tire of bringing that knowledge to bear on civic life. . . . Some would have us believe that our differences are necessarily a cause of division and thus at most to be tolerated. A few even maintain that our voices should simply be silenced. But we know that our differences need never be misrepresented as an inevitable source of friction or tension either between ourselves or in society at large. Rather, they provide a wonderful opportunity for people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another in the ways of God⁷¹.

Here the pope lists some of the commonalities of the monotheistic religions, which amount to some of the content of the envisioned interreligious witness: God’s existence and knowability, creation, and the call to live according to God’s design in the world. But, as we have already noted, this beautiful vision inevitably faces difficult questions. Is Benedict taking the differences between the religions seriously enough? Are the theological terms he uses to be understood in a Christian or in an interreligious sense? For instance, are the ‘ways of God’ the same or different for Christians and Muslims – are they those of the Bible or those of the Qur’an, both, or whatever is common to both? What if the Qur’an and the Sharia constitute the Muslim’s ‘criterion of judgment and discernment which is divine in origin and intended for all humanity’ – would Benedict still wish to encourage bringing it ‘to bear on civic life’? This illustrates the problem inherent in a general approach that avoids open engagement with the concrete sources and authorities of the particular religions.

Conclusion

Pope Benedict XVI’s message, motivation, and aims in dialogue with Islam and other world religions are clear: eliminating violence, insisting on the link between faith and reason, and bearing witness to God and common values in the battle against radical secularism. What is less clear is the persuasiveness of the arguments and the coherence of the strategies employed. Pope Benedict has certainly provided a strong impetus for those who agree with him, as well as food for thought for the open-minded, but to confront conflicting religious ideas, more will need to be done. A profound engagement with the authoritative sources and concrete teachings of other religions is called for; common reasoning must become ‘Scriptural Reasoning’, to use the name of one of the newer and more promising methods of interreligious dialogue⁷². Arguing ‘realistically and credibly against religiously motivated violence’ remains ‘a fundamental task for interreligious dialogue’⁷³.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with organizations for interreligious dialogue’.

⁷¹ Benedict XVI, ‘Meeting with organizations for interreligious dialogue’.

⁷² See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/>

⁷³ Benedict XVI, ‘Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the meeting for peace in Assisi’.