VIEWPOINTS

Religion, Reason, 'Regensburg': Perspectives for Catholic–Muslim Dialogue

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The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day.

(Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, para. 841)

This 'viewpoint' is (exceptionally) more extensive in terms of size, which is perhaps excusable in the light of the fact that the year 2008 witnessed several very auspicious events in the field of Muslim–Christian dialogue.¹ The beginning of the currently rather positive news in this regard was a rather controversial incident back in 2006.

On 12 September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a lecture, entitled “Glaube, Vernunft und Universität: Erinnerungen und Reflexionen” (Faith, Reason, and University: Memories and Reflections) at the University of Regensburg in Bavaria, Germany, where he had been a professor of theology during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Benedict's controversial remarks on Islam during his speech have stirred anger among parts of the Muslim community worldwide as it was perceived as misrepresenting the very essence of the religion of Islam. Contrary to what is usually known among the wider public, however, the lecture – equipped with often critical references ranging from ancient Jewish and Hellenic thought, theology, as well as contemporary secularist thinking – focused mainly on Christianity and on what Pope Benedict referred to as the tendency “to exclude the question of God”

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1. A full-paper version of this 'Viewpoint' was presented by the author at the 3rd South and Southeast Asian Conference of the Association for the Study of Culture and Religion (SSEASR), “Waters in South and Southeast Asia: Interaction of Culture and Religion”, a regional Conference of the International Association of Historians of Religion (IAHR) under the auspices of UNESCO, organised by SSEASR in collaboration with Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) and Universitas Hindu Indonesia (UNHI), Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, 3–6 June 2009.

from reason rather than on Islam. Islam features merely in a part of the lecture as his emphasis was on the West.

In the following, it has not been the intention of this writer to investigate the veracity of the lecture's statements and quotes or to condemn or condone anything that has come forward since then from any side – Christian as well as Muslim – but to look into the question as to how *future* perspectives for a dialogue between *thinking* Christians and Muslims may be affected by 'Regensburg'.

The 'Regensburg Issue'

As a matter of fact, Benedict quoted in his speech also a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor – Manuel II Palaiologos (r. 1391–1425), one of the last Christian rulers before the fall of Constantinople to the Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453 – as saying that Islam had only brought evil to the world and that it was spread by the sword, a method that was unreasonable and contrary to God's nature. In the course of – to the mind of this writer – rash and premature reactions to the lecture it went almost unnoticed that the Pope appears to have distanced himself already in the course of his own lecture from Manuel's statements, by referring to them as a "startling brusqueness, a brusqueness which leaves us astounded". The Pope later said he "regretted any misunderstandings that his lecture might have caused among Muslims" – after violent protests from the part of extremists that had led to attacks on churches throughout the Muslim world and the particularly tragic event of the killing of a Catholic nun in Somalia.

The dialogue from which Benedict had quoted in his speech is believed to have taken place in 1391 between Manuel II and a 'Persian'² scholar and was recorded some years later in a book by the emperor in which the latter stated: "Show me just what Muhammad 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." Many Muslims were offended by what was perceived as a denigration of the founder of their religion, and some even reacted violently. Continuing his quote of Manuel, we read in the text of Benedict's lecture that

God is not pleased by blood – and *not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature*. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability

2. Just as a remark on the sidelines, however, this writer is not so sure whether the 'learned man' with whom Manuel is said to have had his dialogue on faith and reason was actually a 'Persian' at all, but rather a Turk. Turks – the bitter enemies of the (Greek-speaking) Byzantines – featured at that time as the only Muslim neighbours of Byzantium in Anatolia. After all, Byzantine medieval literature – most prominently the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene (d. 1153), the famous Byzantine princess, scholar, and daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos (r. 1081–1118) – very often refers to the Turks, as an anachronism of the Greco-Persian wars of Antiquity, as *Persai*, i.e. 'Persians', presumably in order to show their supposed 'civilisational otherness'.

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 [...]. (emphasis added)

As a matter of fact, a glance at the rest of the ‘dialogue’ – not quoted by Benedict – shows that it deals indeed with such issues as ‘forced conversion’, ‘holy war’, and the relationship between faith and reason.

Benedict, a scholar deeply steeped in Hellenic thought, might have used his quote of the Byzantine emperor to launch a much more holistic and meaningful discussion of the key influence of ancient Greek philosophical reasoning on the early Christian faith. A closer look at Benedict’s academic, philosophical and theological views would reveal that his main agenda had always been a critique of *Western* secularism that all too often seems to contradict the ‘image of Man’ offered by religion – *any* religion – but Christianity in particular.

One of the circumstances that might have had a negative impact on the perception of ‘Regensburg’ among Muslims was that the original German text of Benedict’s speech – as published on the Vatican website – differs slightly in several respects from its English translation, although both versions had been declared as ‘official’ (though ‘provisional’). For instance, in commenting on the quote from Manuel II, the Pope states in the English translation that “he [Manuel II] addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness”. However, according to the German text Benedict’s original comment was “[...] wendet er sich in erstaunlich schroffer, uns überraschend schroffer Form [...]”, that is, “he addresses his interlocutor in an astoundingly harsh – to us surprisingly harsh – way”. Apparently, this difference was corrected a week later, on 17 September 2006. The ‘official’ (though still ‘provisional’) passage then read in English translation: “he addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness, *a brusqueness which leaves us astounded*” (emphasis added).

Another contentious issue evolved out of the rather problematic translation of the lecture, in particular into the English language: At the forefront of it is the use of the word *jihād*, which pops up in the (original) German version, but not in the English translation. The original German version – “kommt der Kaiser auf das Thema des *Djihād*, des heiligen Krieges zu sprechen” – developed into the English variant “the emperor touches on the theme of the holy war”. Another weak point in terms of (selective or inappropriate) translation involves another of Manuel II’s quotes by the Pope: “[...] things only evil and inhuman [...]”. This is not at all mirrored by the original German text (and, for that matter, also not in line with the audio of the lecture, as verified by this writer). What Benedict actually said was “[...] things only bad and inhumane [...]”. The German noun used was *Schlechtes* (bad/wicked), whereas the English word ‘evil’ would have corresponded in German to *Böses*, a word the Pope did not use at all. Similarly, the German word

inhuman (inhumane) was used in the original German version, and not *unmenschlich* (inhuman). These errors are by no means incidental or marginal, and they might have added to the negative perception of ‘Regensburg’ among Muslims – in spite of the Pope’s repeated clarifications that Manuel II’s views do not necessarily reflect his own opinion.

Moving Forward: From ‘Regensburg’ to ‘A Common Word’

In the aftermath of his controversial lecture, Benedict implicitly also invited Muslim scholars to enter into a dialogue about faith and reason with Christians. As we have already seen, however, Muslim scholars and intellectuals were not in need of such an invitation as they felt compelled to reply on their own to what they might have considered a misrepresentation of their religion, Islam. One month after ‘Regensburg’, 38 leading Muslims, representing all branches of Islamic academic and scholarly as well as institutional life, replied to Benedict XVI in an “Open Letter to the Pope”, dated 13 October 2006.

Exactly one year after that letter, Muslims expanded their message: In *A Common Word Between Us and You*, 138 Muslim personalities – scholars, clerics and intellectuals – issued a joint declaration to promote interfaith dialogue, emphasising common views between Islam and Christianity. The declaration was not only addressed to Pope Benedict XVI, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, but to the leaders of other Christian communities as well, featuring most prominently among them Bartholomew I, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul) and Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury.

The tenor of the *Common Word* declaration was the emphasis on an already existing basis for peace and understanding between Christians and Muslims, a basis which is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: ‘love of the One God’, and ‘love of neighbour’. These principles are considered integral parts of Muslim and Christian Scripture. The Unity of God, the ‘necessity of love for Him’, and the ‘necessity of love of neighbour’ is seen by the signatories as the ‘common ground’ of Islam and Christianity, the world’s two largest faiths. Pope Benedict responded in November 2007 by stressing that the path to true dialogue lies in “effective respect for the dignity of every human person, on objective knowledge of the religion of the other, on the sharing of religious experience and, finally, on common commitment to promoting mutual respect and acceptance among the younger generation”.

Another positive effect of both the *Common Word* Muslim initiative and the earlier ‘open letter’, was a reply, entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You*”, drafted by Christian scholars at the Divinity School at Yale University’s Center for Faith and Culture.

It was endorsed by almost 300 other Christian theologians and leaders of high standing and various denominations, released on 12 October 2007, and published on 18 November 2007 as a full page advertisement in *The New York Times*.

Also as a result of the *Common Word*, relations between the Vatican and Muslims took another step forward after a meeting between Muslim leaders and members of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue on 4–5 March 2008 had paved the way for a *Catholic–Muslim Forum* to which we shall refer toward the end of this contribution. In addition to the formation of the *Catholic–Muslim Forum*, the *Common Word* initiative has led to several other plans for major Christian–Muslim meetings in Great Britain and the United States.

Another Muslim–Vatican Encounter to Build On

There are even more signs of hope. Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, for instance, said that the *full* text of Pope Benedict XVI’s highly controversial 2006 Regensburg speech should be read before making any comments on its contents. “I hope that the reports in this regard are misinterpreted as such remarks are usually made by uninformed and fanatic people, but my impression of the pope was rather that of an educated and patient man,” Khatami said after his return to Tehran from his much-anticipated 2006 two-week visit to the United States. This was perhaps the first balanced statement to come out of the Muslim world on the ‘Regensburg issue’.

On 4 May 2007, Khatami even met Pope Benedict in Rome and said the wounds between Christians and Muslims were still “very deep”, including those caused by the ‘Regensburg speech’. Khatami became one of the most prominent Muslim clerics to visit the Vatican since the Pope’s controversial Regensburg speech which angered Muslims by appearing to link Islam and violence. “These wounds are very deep. There are many wounds and they cannot heal that easily,” Khatami told a conference in Rome just before the papal meeting, when asked if the wounds that followed the Pontiff’s speech in his native Germany had been healed. “For sure, a meeting with the Holy Father cannot be enough to heal all these wounds but at least we are making a joint effort in order to start healing them,” he said. Khatami and the Pope met for about 30 minutes and spoke through interpreters about the “dialogue among cultures” to overcome current tensions and promote peace. Khatami, speaking through a translator, said that Christianity and Islam needed to rediscover their common roots as monotheistic religions in order to improve relations. He added that “if Christian and Islamic societies could only rely on love and justice and get back to these founding principles and if together we fought against violence and extremism [...] then we can lay the foundations to heal any wound”.³ He also said

3. As reported by Reuters on 4 May 2007, available online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL0462089820070504> (accessed on 15 May 2007).

that no one could use God's name to "instigate war or hate or speak ignorantly of crusades" and that "both religions must enter a sincere and practical dialogue and commitment to achieve peace and eliminate terrorism and war".⁴

In several of his previous less publicised utterances on Islam, Pope Benedict used to lament what he considered a "lack of authority among the Muslims", by which he seems to be referring to the difficulty of finding a dialogue partner who is acknowledged to represent Islam at large. However, already during the pontificate of Benedict's predecessor, Pope John Paul II, Shi'ites and Catholics, for instance, had initiated a project of intellectual exchange that went largely unnoticed by the wider public. More significantly, in particular to the political observer, to deepen contacts with Shi'ism would indeed make sense in the light of the present crisis surrounding the unsettled future of Iraq and the controversial stand of Iran in terms of its nuclear activities.

Khatami, in particular, has a record of contributions towards Muslim-Christian understanding. Khatami displays a deep reading not only in Islam but in Western philosophy as well, and his ideas are often in contrast to those of his more conservative peers in Iran. Already back in March 1999 he made a sensational visit to the ailing John Paul II in the Vatican – to my knowledge, the first such meeting ever between a Pope and a high-ranking member of the Shi'ite religious establishment. On a somewhat more 'spiritual note', the emotions of the moment were captured when one of the Shi'ite clerics accompanying Khatami spontaneously ran to the Pope and embraced him, kissing him on both cheeks. When they parted, Pope John Paul gave his blessing to his Muslim guests, saying that "it was an important, promising day".

The 1999 meeting between Khatami and John Paul was not just one of those myriads of 'good-will gestures' with no follow-up. It resulted in a sequence of important conferences, attended by leading authorities from both denominations, and in the joint publication of several books. In July 2003, a joint conference took place at University of London's Heythrop College and Ampleforth Abbey. It was inspired by previous meetings between Ampleforth's Benedictine monks and the scholars of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute at Qom, Iran. The meeting, attended by twelve Catholic and thirteen Shi'ite scholars, produced a proceedings volume. Exactly two years later, another four-day conference took place at the same location. Simultaneously, Catholic scholars went to visit their Muslim counterparts in Iran. So far, the Shi'ite-Catholic dialogue has resulted in the publication of two books. *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, and Politics*, by J.A. Bill and J.A. Williams,⁵ appears to be the first attempt by Western

4. Ibid.

5. J.A. Bill and J.A. Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, and Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Catholics to present a comparative approach towards basic features of Shi'ite Islam and Catholicism, in terms of devotional practices as well as basic beliefs. However, it also addresses the issue of Shi'ism and politics. The other book contains the proceedings of the earlier mentioned 2003 'Shi'ite–Catholic encounter'.⁶

It should also not be forgotten that Shi'ites also have a strong tradition of inter-Islamic dialogue, known in Arabic as *taqrīb al-madhābib* or 'rapprochement between the Muslim denominations', such as during the 1950s with Egypt's Al-Azhar University, the leading authority of Sunnite Islam. It appears that Shi'ite Islam has gone a long way since the excesses of the 1979 revolution in Iran. Today, its somewhat more open approach towards philosophy and its deep roots in mysticism are also becoming increasingly apparent as a sign for the rediscovery of Islam's intellectual and spiritual tradition. A meaningful dialogue between Christians and Muslims is thus not only of relevance to those interested in purely religious matters, but could also be helpful towards diffusing some of the current tensions in the Middle East. That Mr Khatami was followed in office by 'hardliner' Mr Ahmadinezhad might thus not discourage those looking into the future. In the light of what is usually presented as 'daily increasing tension' between Islam and Christianity in many parts of the world, the 'Shi'ite–Catholic encounter' project thus assumes a particular significance. It goes without saying that the pontificate of the late John Paul II (1978–2005) saw also very important movements towards the direction of a rapprochement with orthodox Sunnite Islam, which represents between 80 and 90 per cent of the world's Muslims.

The particular Shi'ite case has been mentioned here in order to show that even during those times of tension between the Muslim world and the West the bridges of communication should never be destroyed unilaterally, following the simple wisdom which is expressed in the (admittedly rather crude) premise of "people who still talk to each other won't shoot each other".

IAIS Malaysia and Christian–Muslim Dialogue

Malaysia, too, a Muslim-majority country with a strong non-Muslim minority, has contributed considerably to interfaith dialogue. The recently inaugurated International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS Malaysia), a think tank and research institution, aims at pushing efforts in this regard even further forward. Right from its establishment in 2007, IAIS Malaysia has been actively involved – in Malaysia as well as on the international scene – in inter-religious dialogue which, in fact, is one of its core areas of scholarly activity. Aside from the present writer, several other eminent scholars are pursuing this field at IAIS. Among them

6. A. O'Manony, W. Peterburs, and M.A. Shomali (eds), *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (London: Melisende, 2004).

are Professor Dr Mohammad Hashim Kamali (the Founding Chairman and CEO of IAIS Malaysia), Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Osman Bakar (IAIS's Deputy CEO) and IAIS Principal Research Fellows Dr H.A. Hellyer and Dr Karim D. Crow (aside from the present writer).

On the international scene, IAIS was represented by Professor Kamali, upon the invitation of the Royal Academy of Jordan, at the *1st Vatican–Muslim Forum*, which was held between 4 and 6 November 2008 at the Vatican. This auspicious event – which included also a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI – was attended by the world's foremost religious Muslim and Catholic scholars – 24 on each side. The *1st Vatican–Muslim Forum* was a follow-up event of the *Common Word* Muslim initiative, referred to above. The session of the first day of the *Forum* focused on the theological and spiritual foundations of Christian and Muslim teachings about the obligation to love God and one's neighbour. The second day addressed the issue of 'human dignity and mutual respect'. On 6 November 2008, the *Forum* concluded with a conference that was open to the public and an audience of the participants with the Pope. The *Catholic–Muslim Forum* will meet every two years, alternating between the Vatican and a Muslim country.

In 2008, IAIS also published a monograph, entitled *An Islamic Perspective on the Commitment to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, by Malaysian sociologist Dr Syed Farid Alatas, an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, which provides invaluable insights into the requirements for approaches toward a meaningful togetherness of Muslims and non-Muslims.

Within the context of Malaysia, IAIS is also offering a platform for Muslims and non-Muslims to voice their views in public seminars and roundtables – one of which was chaired in February 2009 by this writer – in an open but mutually respectful manner on current issues affecting this ethnically and religiously diverse country. In addition to this, the present writer has also published a volume, entitled *The Islamic World and the West: Managing Religious and Cultural Identities in the Age of Globalisation*,⁷ which contains 15 articles by distinguished Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, dealing with current as well as historical aspects of the encounter between the two civilisations.

Perspectives

As we have seen, *thinking* representatives from the world's two largest religious communities – Islam and Christianity – seem to see the need for understanding better each other's often sharply differing positions. For its part, Catholic Christianity has

7. Christoph Marcinkowski (ed.), published in the series *Freiburger Sozialanthropologische Studien* (vol. 24, general editor: Professor Christian Giordano; Zurich: LIT Verlag and Kuala Lumpur: The Asia-Europe Institute in the University of Malaya, 2009).

many points to its advantage in terms of making the dialogue with Islam a reality, and this not only from a purely religious perspective. In addition to this, the Vatican is also present as a sovereign State in many Muslim nations through diplomatic representations. Through them the Vatican is thus in a unique position to explain or correct misunderstandings as soon as they arise – such as successfully done in the aftermath of the ‘Regensburg issue’, discussed above. Moreover, seen from its own perspective, Catholicism can look back to about 2,000 years of an unbroken historical tradition, which – in the view of Rome – establishes its ‘teaching authority’ and ‘authenticity’.

The Islamic world, on the other hand, can build on centuries of longstanding contacts with the West which had not always been based on violence and bloodshed. Muslims, too, would therefore be in a good position to enter into a meaningful dialogue. However, such a dialogue should not be based on purely religious considerations (‘Christian Europe’ versus ‘Muslim Orient’) as those are largely obsolete today – contemporary Europe being secular.

Both sides should not shun from pointing out differences in worldview and civilisation, while at the same time focusing on *joint* efforts by god-fearing Muslims and Christians. This writer is convinced that ‘Regensburg’ and the subsequent (and previous) efforts by *knowing* and *thinking* believers have already borne fruits. It is now important not to let pass this precious momentum and to *continue* on this path, as the alternatives would be rather gloomy.