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The Pope's Monopoly on Reason

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The controversial [speech](#) given by Pope Benedict XVI at his old university stomping grounds in Regensburg on September 12 is indeed a call for dialogue among religions, as some of his defenders have claimed. However, a close reading of the speech suggests that the dialogue he envisages is to be carried out very much on his own terms.

What are those terms? Throughout his speech, the Pope equates the positions of the Catholic Church with those of "reason," thereby implying that those who disagree with its positions are being irrational, be they Muslims, Protestant Christians or secularist believers in science.

To illustrate, he delves into a theological debate concerning the limits of God's power. The Pope regards it as rational to believe that God cannot violate the laws of logic. By implication, anyone who disagrees with this conclusion, such as the eleventh-century Andalusian Muslim philosopher [Ibn Hazm](#) (to whom he refers incorrectly as "Ibn Hazn"), is deemed beyond the pale.

But the Pope should also be aware that many thinkers within Islam did indeed differ with Ibn Hazm on this point. One of his illustrious successors in Muslim Spain, [Ibn Rushd](#) (also known as Averroes), rejected Ibn Hazm's position and insisted that God could not defy logic and "conjoin contraries," for example by making something that was both round and square.

Is it more reasonable to believe, with Ibn Hazm, that God can contravene the laws of logic if he so chooses, or with Ibn Rushd that even God's will is incapable of doing so? The first takes God's omnipotence to its logical conclusion, while the latter considers that there are certain limits even to God's will and power.

Indeed, within the Islamic tradition there is yet a third position. The theologian and philosopher [al-Ghazali](#) held, with Ibn Hazm, that God could bend the laws of nature but agreed with Ibn Rushd that he could not violate the laws of logic. In Ghazali's view, God can create a fire that does not burn, but he cannot make something both round and square at the same time.

Which, if any, of these positions is the rational one? All have strong philosophical arguments to back them, and each is derived from reasonable premises. What seems most reasonable is to allow such debates to flourish and to permit philosophers to argue all sides of the case. Unfortunately, that is made difficult when one philosophical position is equated with the voice of reason.

The Pope maintains that the Catholic Church's position is the only reasonable one, and he suggests that those who disagree with it are being irrational. But as he recognizes, even within the Christian tradition there are philosophers who dissent from [Thomas Aquinas](#)'s conclusions, which have become official Church doctrine on this as on so many other

issues. He mentions with some dismay that [Duns Scotus](#) also adhered to the philosophical position that he finds objectionable. From the Pope's perspective, Scotus is a dissident who has strayed from the path of reason, just as Muslims, Protestants and secular Westerners have done.

The same dialectic is at play when the Pope discusses violence. He quotes with favor the Byzantine [Emperor Manuel II](#), who regarded violence as unreasonable and against God's nature. But this seemingly attractive position raises many questions. What about violence in self-defense? Or violence against an occupying army? Or violence to prevent greater violence?

While evading these important ethical questions, the Pope manages to get in a gratuitous slur about Islam. He acknowledges the Koranic verse "There is no compulsion in religion." But he suggests that this verse is a reflection of early Muslim powerlessness rather than a genuine adherence to the principle that faith must be freely embraced rather than brought about by coercion.

This amateurish attempt at Koranic exegesis strikes us as utterly irresponsible. This widely quoted verse is held as an unassailable principle by Muslims to this day. To imply, in opposition, that the Islamic faith is spread largely by the sword is to repeat a medieval Christian canard that flies in the face of historical research. The great majority of inhabitants of the lands that Muslims came to rule continued for many centuries to adhere to their original faiths.

Read in context, the Pope's most recent remarks on Islam reveal two unfortunate tendencies. Not only does he arrogate to his Church the power to determine what is rational; he also reveals a plainly essentialist attitude toward Islam, one that is oblivious to the history of this diverse religious and cultural tradition. Unlike Catholicism, Islam's two main branches never defined dogma on abstruse doctrinal matters and tolerated a broad spectrum of opinion. Thus, Islam has the potential to let a thousand arguments bloom. That potential has been insufficiently exploited in modern times, but it may yet lead to sincere inter-religious dialogue, one in which neither side dismisses the other as being irrational.