

Ideas & Opinions

Tune out the static and hear Pope's challenge to us all

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Because he had to find a paying job at the age of 12, my father did not get to finish high school, but he was nobody's dummy. So if he were still alive and asked me to explain exactly what Pope Benedict said in that speech in Regensburg, Germany, last week, which everybody is kicking around, I would have had to put it honestly and clearly, awaiting his inevitable counterpunches.

People are missing the point, Pop, I would have said. The Pope just pulled off a triple play and they are still arguing about a single pitch early in the inning.

What the Pope was lecturing on, in his modest, quiet, careful way, was the crucial role of reason. His triple play consisted in using reason to get three different runners out at three different bases.

He told Christians and other religious people that reason is indispensable for disciplining religious faith. As he put it in an earlier lecture, it is important for reason to take the toxicity out of religion.

He told secularists, who define reason solely as science and limit it to empirical knowledge, that their grasp of reason does them an injustice by its narrowness. This tunnel vision cuts them off from many forms of human understanding and insight. It also prevents them from having reasoned conversation with that vast majority of the world's people who are religious.

Finally, practically as an aside - as if he had intended to make a double play, then saw an opportunity to make a third out - he also tried to save the honor of Islam as a religion that once had a high and civilizing tradition of reason (and in many quarters still does). He tried to do this by pointing out that those in Islam's midst who are seen daily preaching and practicing violence are injuring that faith's good name.

In the little story he told about a conversation between the second-to-last Byzantine Emperor of Constantinople (Manuel II) and a Persian savant, the Pope's point was that both these men conversed through a mutual appeal to reason. Unlike modern secularists, they held that reason *itself* finds paths to God. And if that is true, then the God they come to must be reached through evidence and not by violence. "Not to act reasonably is contrary to the nature of God," concluded Manuel II.

This story, in its way, is an appeal to the men and women of reason in the Muslim world, in an effort to help them out against the violent ones who are usurping a great religion.

And so, all the talk about whether he insulted Islam is obscuring the main thrust of the Pope's lecture.

He wanted to remind Christians that the great civilizing strength of Christianity sprang from its marriage to Greek reason from the very beginning, as in the first words of the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word." (In Greek, the term "Word" is the same as "reason.")

He wanted to invite secularists to recognize that we are entering an age in which they can no longer pretend to be the only "enlightened" ones. They must open themselves to a larger vision of reason in order to use reason well in conversing with others all around them.

The very inability of many secular writers in the media even to grasp the main points of the Pope's lecture is proof of a certain narrowness of mind.

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