

POPE BENEDICT XVI ON 'CREATION AND EVOLUTION'

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Honoured Mr President,
Your Eminences and Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for having been entrusted with the privilege of giving you a little insight into the thinking of Pope Benedict XVI, of Professor Joseph Ratzinger, on the topic of 'Evolution and Creation'. The great theologian in the Chair of Saint Peter has often and early on commented on this subject. In my foreword to the records of the colloquium of his *Schülerkreis* (circle of former graduates), which took place at Castel Gandolfo in autumn 2006, I already compiled in chronological order some of the most important statements of the present Pope (*Creation and Evolution. A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI in Castel Gandolfo, San Francisco 2008*, pp. 7-23).¹ Today, it is a matter of putting these statements in some systematic order and of structuring them thematically. In doing so, their importance is to be made more clearly visible, since it reaches far beyond the individual question of the theory of evolution.

1. THE REGENSBURG LECTURE AND ITS LASTING CHALLENGE

One day after September 11, 2006, Pope Benedict gave a lecture at his former academic place of activity, the University of Regensburg, delivering a speech which had far-reaching ramifications. First, there was that

¹ Original German edition: 'Schöpfung und Evolution. Eine Tagung mit Papst Benedikt XVI. in Castel Gandolfo, Augsburg 2007'.

great uproar in large parts of the Islamic world, with riots culminating in the killings of Christians. This was followed, however, by a positive wave of readiness to engage in dialogue shown by certain circles of Islam, which has lasted up to date, and which was particularly articulated in the letter to the Pope and the heads of the Christian churches signed by 138 Islamic scholars addressing the joint responsibility of Christians and Muslims for peace and justice in the world.

In the meantime, however, it has got around that the Regensburg lecture was not primarily directed at the topic of Islam, but rather at the question of how religion and reason are mutually interrelated. The quote rendered famous by the Byzantine emperor Manuel II indicates that it is 'contrary to reason', that it is not 'syn logô', to spread one's faith through violence. Forced religious conversion is contrary to reason and *therefore contrary to God's nature*.

With this statement by the emperor the question concerning the relationship between reason and religion shall be addressed. It is *this* issue that the Pope wanted to raise in his Regensburg lecture. And this is also the topic of my exposition. Pope Benedict views the debate on the theory of evolution and evolutionism in this very light. As we shall see, for him the decisive question is whether in the beginning there was the logos or un-reason. With reference to the prologue of the Gospel of John the Pope says:

'In the beginning was the logos. This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts *syn logo*, with *logos*. *Logos* means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason' (The Regensburg Address, paragraph 5).²

Does creative reason communicate itself, *as reason*? And is it, by our reason, recognizable as reason? And recognizable not only within the narrow scope of a certain culture, such as the Western occidental one, but in such a way that a dialogue beyond cultural and religious boundaries will become possible? A genuine dialogue of cultures can only be entered into if reason is of such breadth that it surpasses the boundaries which all of us inevitably live and think in. It was one quintessential matter of concern of the Regensburg lecture to explore the conditions for the possibility of

² English version quoted from the Regensburg Address: 'Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections', available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html. Original German edition: 'Glaube und Vernunft. Die Regensburger Rede, Freiburg 2006'.

a genuine intercultural and interreligious dialogue. It is my impression that some Islamic scholars have understood this challenge in a more explicit way than Western commentators.

But what does this have to do with our topic of ‘Creation and Evolution’? The examination of the concept of reason also leads Pope Benedict to the concept of reason as it is used, respectively presupposed, in the natural sciences. In his Regensburg Address, the Pope postulates a kind of ‘critique of modern reason from within’, not with the intention of ‘putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment’, but of ‘broadening our concept of reason and its application’ (loc. cit., par. 15).

This self-criticism of modern reason also contains a criticism of the positivistic concept of reason that widely dominates the Western world and that is often deemed to be the specifically scientific concept of reason, too. By comparison with this, Pope Benedict is trying to locate in the preconditions of scientific rationality the very traces of the broader understanding of reason that he has been looking for.

I am aware that these considerations are not the kind found in everyday scientific life, and that there exists a certain aversion towards these fundamental, quasi-metaphysical questions raised here. Quoting Socrates, however, Pope Benedict says that it would be greatly detrimental not to raise these questions. Let us therefore venture to raise them. It will certainly be worthwhile!

2. REDUCING THE CONCEPT OF REASON

The main part of the Regensburg lecture is dedicated to the following question: What led to the reduction of the concept of reason, which Pope Benedict sees as a particular sign of modern times?

The first reduction is understood to have arrived with *nominalism*. It has moved the transcendence of God so far beyond reach ‘that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions’ (loc. cit., par. 7). God’s creative reason no longer speaks through his works. The latter are arbitrary positings that do not reflect God’s wisdom and reason; they are unfathomable arbitrary positings of divine omnipotence.

During the Reformation, faith and reason are, consequently, uncoupled. Faith relies solely on Scripture (*sola scriptura*), while reason is ‘sec-

ularized'. The latter is more and more restricted to what is deemed 'strictly scientific' and to that which corresponds to the canon of modern science. 'The specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics, then have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by "science" [...] and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective' (loc. cit., par. 13).

Pope Benedict sees in this reduction a real danger for both sides; religion is threatened by irrational 'pathologies' (loc. cit., par. 13); science will suffer damage, if the 'questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it' (loc. cit., par. 13).

The answer to these 'pathologies of religion and reason' (loc. cit., par. 13) does not lie in the reduction of reason, but in the already cited 'broadening [of] our concept of reason and its application' (loc. cit., par. 15). This requires the overcoming of the 'self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable' (loc. cit., par. 15).

The path to this engagement of the 'whole breadth' of reason is regarded by Pope Benedict as a possibility that is intrinsic to modern scientific reason (cf. loc. cit., par. 16). It is a matter of reversion to an understanding of the requirements for scientific study. The Pope says on this:

'Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based. Yet the question why this has to be so is a real question, and one which has to be remanded by the natural sciences to other modes and planes of thought – to philosophy and theology' (loc. cit., par. 16). Theology in particular draws upon a source of knowledge, 'and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding' (loc. cit., par. 16).

3. WAYS TO ENGAGE THE BREADTH OF REASON

Ten days prior to the Regensburg lecture, the members of the *Schülerkreis* met with their master and teacher at Castel Gandolfo for the annual scholarly exchange. Pope Benedict himself had wished the topic to be 'Creation and Evolution'. He regarded the debates triggered by my 'opinion editorial' in the New York Times as providential for a new and reinforced public review of the topic (cf. *Creation and Evolution*, p. 161). Four presentations were given in his presence, the speakers being Prof. Peter Schuster, Prof. P. Paul Erbrich, Prof. Robert Spaemann and myself.

Pope Benedict's personal comments are documented in the symposium volume, giving us a vivid insight into his thoughts on our topic. I shall here have to refer to some key issues in these comments.

First, there is the clear dissociation of the so-called 'creationism that is closed off from science as a matter of principle' (loc. cit., p. 161). It must be clear that to the Catholic point of view no scientific findings will present an obstacle to faith.

Yet, Pope Benedict also reminds us that the theory of evolution has its gaps which it must not make light of, and that it must not close its eyes to questions going beyond its methodical possibilities. For the theory of evolution implies questions 'that must be assigned to philosophy and that in and of themselves lead beyond the internal scope of the natural sciences' (loc. cit., p. 162).

I am taking the liberty to render to you, at this point, an extended quote of Pope Benedict's contribution to the discussion. As we have so often witnessed with him, his freely spoken statements are, time and again, of fascinating clarity, well-worded and linguistically perfect in form. I quote:

[...] science has opened up major dimensions of reason that previously had not been accessible and have thereby provided us with new knowledge. But in its joy over the greatness of its discoveries, it tends to confiscate dimensions of our reason that we still need. Its findings lead to questions that reach beyond its methodological principles and cannot be answered within science itself. Nevertheless these are questions that reason must ask itself and that must not simply be left to religious feeling. We must look at them as reasonable questions and also find reasonable ways of dealing with them.

These are the great perennial questions of philosophy, which confront us in a new way: the question of where man and the world come from and where they are going. Apropos of this, I recently became aware of two things that the three following lectures also made clear: There is, in the first place, a rationality of matter itself. One can read it. It has mathematical properties; matter itself is rational, even though there is much that is irrational, chaotic, and destructive on the long path of evolution. But matter per se is legible. Secondly, it seems to me that the process, too, as a whole, has a rationality about it. Despite its false starts and meanderings through the narrow corridor, the process as such is something rational in its selection of the few positive mutations and in its exploitation of the minute probabilities. This twofold rationality,

which in turn proves to correspond to our human reason, unavoidably leads to a question that goes beyond science yet is a reasonable question: Where does this rationality originate? Is there an originating rationality that is reflected in these two zones and dimensions of rationality? Science cannot and must not answer this question directly, but we should acknowledge that the question is a reasonable one and dare to believe in the creative Reason and to entrust ourselves to It (loc. cit., p. 163f).

I believe that Pope Benedict has here, in few sentences, captured the essence of what there is to say on the debate that we are engaged in.

Why is matter 'legible'? Why does the whole process of evolution have something rational? Where does this rationality originate? Reason must not avoid these questions if it does not want to abdicate itself, as I said in my New York Times article by quoting Pope John Paul II. It would be a mistake, however, to expect the natural sciences to be eager, by way of their method, to provide their own answers to these questions. This, perhaps, is the methodical mistake of the 'school of intelligent design'. They are asking the right question: Where does this evident *design* in nature originate? '*Finding design in nature*', that was the title of my disputed 'opened'. It is not scientifically operating research that finds *design* in nature. On the contrary, however, it will be found by *man* reflecting on his research, who wonders about the meaning of matter giving him 'reasonable' answers to his questions, and who ponders the question why his reason is capable of perceiving these answers.

4. THEORY OF EVOLUTION AS A 'FIRST PHILOSOPHY'

In the year 1999, Cardinal Ratzinger gave a much-noticed lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris. It undeniably belongs to the great speeches of his long career. Its subject, at a first glance, has nothing to do at all with our topic. At the Sorbonne, in the 'temple of enlightenment', so to speak, the Cardinal dared pose the question about the truth of Christianity: 'Christianity – The True Religion?' (in: *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*. San Francisco 2004, pp. 162-183).³

³ Original German edition: 'Glaube, Wahrheit, Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen, Freiburg 2003, pp. 131-147'.

Cardinal Ratzinger names the theory of evolution as one example of the scepticism towards the truth claim of Christianity, since it makes – as it seems – the theory of creation appear obsolete (cf. loc. cit., p. 163). General relativism seems to leave nothing but symbolic meaning for the Christian theology of a created world according to God’s design and intent. Christianity has not resigned itself to being *one* symbolic expression among others for the – never attainable – significance of the world, a myth among others, as it were, without any particular claim to truth. Christianity has understood itself as reasonable, and due to its reasonableness accessible to all people.

‘Looking back, we may say that the power of Christianity, which made it into a world religion, consisted in its synthesis of reason, faith, and life’; this is how the Cardinal summarizes the retrospective view of the worldwide expansion of Christianity, in order to then raise the critical question: ‘Why is this synthesis no longer convincing today? Why, on the contrary, are enlightenment and Christianity regarded today as contradicting each other or even as mutually exclusive?’ (loc. cit., p. 175).

I believe that the following deliberations by the Cardinal are of great importance especially in view of the approaching Darwin anniversary (2009), since they define the great scope of intellectual history that hosts the debates of today. Cardinal Ratzinger regards the Judaeo-Christian belief in creation as a great potential for enlightenment, as an emancipation from myth. God is not nature, but the Creator of nature. As it has been created, it speaks of the Creator and the Creator speaks through it. Through creation He speaks to man, His creature, shows him the way and shows him what to do. In modern times the metaphysical horizon of the world is fading. Joseph Ratzinger sees the theory of evolution as part of that movement of intellectual history which wishes to steadily cancel ‘the separation of physics from metaphysics achieved by Christian thinking’. ‘Everything is to become “physics” again. The theory of evolution has increasingly emerged as the way to make metaphysics disappear; to make “the hypothesis of God” (Laplace) superfluous, and to formulate a strictly “scientific” explanation of the world’ (loc. cit., p. 178).

As early as 1985, Cardinal Ratzinger had, on the occasion of the Roman symposium on ‘Evolutionism and Christianity’ (Weinheim 1986), pointed out that ‘evolution’ has today ‘been exalted above and beyond its scientific content and made into an intellectual model that claims to explain the whole of reality and thus has become a sort of “first philosophy”’ (quoted in: *Creation and Evolution*, p. 9). Everything, even knowledge, ethics, reli-

gion, is to be derived from the general scheme of evolution. It is ultimately about 'the derivation of all reality from matter' (loc. cit., p. 10).

In the context of this totalitarian claim of the explanatory model of 'evolution', 'the Christian idea of God is necessarily regarded as unscientific' (Sorbonne Address in: *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 178).

In the symposium of 1985, Cardinal Ratzinger unmistakably stated: 'In no case should the appearance of a new dispute between natural science and faith be created, because in fact that is not at all what this dialogue is about' (quoted in: *Creation and Evolution*, p. 10). It does not pose a problem to faith to allow 'the scientific hypothesis of evolution to develop in peace according to its own methods' (*ibid.*).

It is not the exact scientific work on the theory of evolution that is the problem, but its 'remodelling' into a philosophical explanatory model with a claim of totality. And the Cardinal adds: 'The real level of discourse is that of philosophical thought: when natural science becomes a philosophy, it is up to philosophy to grapple with it. Only in that way is the contentious issue framed correctly; only then does it remain clear what we are dealing with: a rational, philosophical debate that aims at the objectivity of rational knowledge, and not a protest of faith against reason' (quoted in: *Creation and Evolution*, p. 10f.).

His speech at the Sorbonne ends with a similar conclusion: 'There is at any rate no getting around the dispute about the extent of the claims of the doctrine of evolution as a fundamental philosophy and about the exclusive validity of the positive method as the sole indicator of systematic knowledge and of rationality. This dispute has therefore to be approached objectively and with a willingness to listen, by both sides – something that has hitherto been undertaken only to a limited extent' (loc. cit., p. 179).

Pope Benedict here voices what seems to be mostly overlooked in the public debate: The alternative does not read: Either creationism or evolutionism! Nor does it read: Either faith or science! It is rather about *the philosophical question* as to the scope and the limits of the strictly quantitative method of the natural sciences: Philosophy is required as an entity mediating between faith and the natural sciences. Philosophy is sought in order to formulate the limits of the scientific methods and their scope, in order to reveal boundary crossings, in order to open up any narrowed concepts of reason. A good philosophy of nature can help avoid the fundamentalisms imminent on both sides today, i.e. the religious as well as the scientific ones.

5. IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Yet, philosophies, too, have their limits, particularly if it is a matter of posing the ultimate questions. Pope Benedict has often addressed this issue. In his Sorbonne speech he says: ‘In the end this concerns a choice that can no longer be made on purely scientific grounds or basically on philosophical grounds. The question is whether reason, or rationality, stands at the beginning of all things and is grounded in the basis of all things or not. The question is whether reality originated on the basis of chance and necessity [...], and, thus, from what is irrational; that is, whether reason, being a chance by-product of irrationality and floating in an ocean of irrationality, is ultimately just as meaningless; or whether the principle that represents the fundamental convictions of Christian faith and of its philosophy remains true: “In principio erat Verbum” – at the beginning of all things stands the creative power of reason. Now as then, Christian faith represents the choice in favor of the priority of reason and of rationality. This ultimate question, as we have already said, can no longer be decided by arguments from natural science, and even philosophical thought reaches its limits here. In that sense, there is no ultimate demonstration that the basic choice involved in Christianity is correct. Yet, can reason really renounce its claim to the priority of what is rational over the irrational, the claim that the Logos is at the ultimate origin of things, without abolishing itself?’ (loc. cit., p. 180f.).

It seems that, with these words, the decisive question has been posed. Joseph Ratzinger restated it over and over on many occasions. His remarks on our topic are numerous, and we have merely been able to provide a small selection here. Inherent to Joseph Ratzinger, besides his immense conceptual clarity, is always a very true-to-life and existential approach to the questions he addresses. It is perhaps this close interrelation of high intellectuality, deep piety and close bond with real life that account for the sustained success of his lectures, speeches and sermons.

Thus, I shall not conclude without referring to the very thing that most profoundly determines Joseph Ratzinger’s, Pope Benedict’s statements on the topic of ‘Creation and Evolution’: This logos, which was in the beginning and which bears everything and makes everything reasonable, is inseparable from love: ‘The Logos was seen to be, not merely a mathematical reason at the basis of all things, but a creative love taken to the point of becoming sympathy, suffering with the creature’ (loc. cit., p. 182). This logos was made man and, in its resurrection from the dead,

underwent 'the greatest mutation' in the long history of the evolution of life, as Pope Benedict said in his first Easter Vigil (15 April 2006); this logos itself is love, and if this logos is at the beginning of everything as well as at the end of all things, then love is the most profound reason of everything. Or, using the words of Pope Benedict: '[...] the true reason is love, and love is the true reason. They are in their unity the true basis and the goal of all reality' (loc. cit., p. 183).