

Ten years after the Regensburg lecture: the challenges of dialogue

*by Nick Spencer**

It is a painful irony that Pope Benedict XVI's lecture at the University of Regensburg, on 12 September 2006, which provoked such an angry and divisive response around the world was ultimately about the need for intelligent dialogue.

The ensuing storm is well-remembered. The Pope quoted Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus' less than complementary words about the prophet Mohammed, and even though these came from a dialogue, written six hundred years earlier, during an Ottoman siege of Constantinople, and were partially disowned by the Pope, who said they had "a brusqueness that we find unacceptable", the reaction was instant and fierce. Confusion, criticism, and condemnation followed.

What is less widely recognised today – indeed it was lost almost instantly in the reaction – was that the Pope's lecture was fundamentally about dialogue, specifically dialogue between what we say and understand about God (theology) and the rationality and reasonableness of human language and thought (philosophy).

Benedict's central theme was that the "rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry" that we see in the New Testament, and most particularly in John's gospel, is not only mutually enriching, but of decisive cultural and intellectual importance. "This convergence, with the subsequent addition of Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe."

A decade later and it is painfully clear that the world's need for dialogue, and Europe's need for stable foundations, is as great – indeed greater – than at any time in recent memory. Indeed these two elements may, in fact, be closely linked.

Globalisation, of the kind we have seen accelerate over the last 25 years, results in the increasing movement not only of goods and services but of people and ideas. Convictions and cultures run up against one another in ways that enrich and enrage. The result can refine and deepen our thinking, but it can also tempt us to intellectual mistakes.

Benedict was sharp about these, in Regensburg and elsewhere. Often, the encounter between different intellectual frameworks can lead to a lowest-common-denominator approach, the view that "only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid." Such thinking is "widely held", at least according to the Regensburg lecture, but its consequences are deleterious: literally dehumanising in the way it invalidates key areas of human enquiry. Such an approach is not only "deaf to the divine" and indifferent to questions of human identity and purpose, but saws through the branch on which human reason sits, 'positivist' thought being unable to justify its own activity.

The common alternative to positivism is the kind of relativism against which Benedict wrote so often and so forcefully, although not a subject at Regensburg, in which all attempts at objective truth are foregone and we choose, instead, to live in solipsistic bubbles. This is clearly no better.

The proper alternative to these challenges is the 'hellenised Christianity' that Benedict defended in his lecture, an approach that listens attentively to the best in both traditions, incorporating them systematically in such a way as to affirm the transcendence of God, while retaining the conviction that one can still speak meaningfully (if tentatively) about him. (It was here that Benedict sought a distinction with Islam, where the "absolutely transcendent" nature of God's will "is not bound up with

any of our categories, even that of rationality” – although it is fair to say that this argument provoked somewhat less animated a response than Manuel II Paleologus’ words).

The challenge laid down by Regensburg lecture is no less acute today than it was a decade ago. Indeed, in a peculiar way, we see it played out on our TV screens every night. The arena is Europe: a continent central to Benedict’s papacy but one that has been beset by near-continuous crisis since 2009.

In the first instance, there is the question of Europe’s identity. This proved a contentious subject when raised in the debate over the place of Christianity in the Preamble to the European Constitution, during John Paul II’s papacy and, *mutatis mutandis*, it remains a contentious one today. Catalysed by the chasm left by a decisively economic turn in [our understanding of Europe](#) in the last decades of the 20th century and then forced to crisis by a monetary union not matched by fiscal union in the 2010s, Europe has struggled to identify what it stands for; how and why do Europeans belong to one another, and what kind and level of commitment does that require. In place of a careful, if difficult, dialogue about the different intellectual and cultural streams that fed into what makes Europe Europe, political elites have opted for an almost positivist version in which economic growth alone is all we need. It isn’t, and without a vision of, and dialogue about, the continent’s ‘soul’, the project looks a weak one.

This is a problem exacerbated by the horrendous suffering of Syria and the resultant surge of refugees and migrants seeking a new life in the West. This, make no mistake, would be an agonisingly difficult problem for Europe, or any other continent, at any time. But a continent unsure of what it stands for is even more challenged in its attempts to deal with and assimilate so many people from so different a cultural, religious and social context. Islamophobes will react the way they react irrespective of the nuances of this crisis, but the fear is that the wider population, uncertain and insecure about what it is to be European, is stirred to hostility by people who are understood as nothing other than alien and a threat.

Such political anxieties were not within Pope Benedict’s sights when he rose to the lectern in Regensburg on Tuesday, 12 September 2006. However, the violence of the reaction to his sophisticated and thoughtful lecture hinted at their presence in the hinterland of the day. Regensburg dwelt at length and in detail on the need for and challenges of dialogue. Its focus was at a deep intellectual level. But philosophy and theology are the deep ocean currents on which more volatile social, political and cultural ideas often rest, and we are unlikely even to glimpse peace in the latter if we shy away from the difficult dialogue between the former.

*Nick Spencer is Research Director at the Christian think tank, Theos (www.theosthinktank.co.uk). He studied Modern History and English at Jesus College (Oxford University) and is currently working on a PhD on politics and theology at Jesus College (Cambridge University). He is author of a number of books, including *Darwin and God* (SPCK, 2009), *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), and most recently *Atheists: The Origins of the Species* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity shaped our values* (SPCK, 2016). He is Visiting Research Fellow at the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths, University of London.

