

Religion and Democracy: The Emerging Diplomacy of Pope Benedict XVI

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While many Americans only see him as a spiritual leader of Roman Catholics, the Pope exerts an often subtle but undeniable influence in international affairs. The Pope is the final authority of the Holy See, which derives its name from “seat” in Latin and signifies the repository of authority and direction over the organization and affairs of the Church. As an institution and sovereign, the Holy See is the “oldest diplomatic entity in the world.”¹

During the two World Wars, Popes Benedict XV and Pius XII boldly promoted peace without preconditions. The jovial Pope John XXIII and more reserved Pope Paul VI implemented the Vatican II reforms. The unforgettable legacy of John Paul II, the Polish Pope, is his unswerving opposition to communism. The current Pope Benedict XVI, formerly known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, continues the diplomatic tradition of the Holy See aimed at salvaging faith in some parts of the world and promoting reason in others.

While Benedict XVI is often characterized as being less media-centric and charismatic than his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, he demonstrated remarkable strategic focus and clarity in his papal visit to the United Kingdom, September 16-20, 2010. His spirit of goodwill enabled him to overcome vocal and hostile opposition to the visit and, as a result, this visit will likely be remembered as a defining moment for the diplomacy of the Holy See.

In his in-flight press conference, the Pope made it clear that he wasn’t willing to compromise or soften his outreach, saying that “a Church that seeks to be particularly attractive is already on the wrong path, because the Church does not work for her own ends, she does not work to increase numbers and thus power.”² Free of constraints of political correctness or hegemonic aspirations, the Holy See has often exhibited a unique clarity and honesty in its discourse. The visit to the United Kingdom was no exception.

During the same press conference, the Pope expressed his gratitude towards Queen Elizabeth for elevating the trip to the level of a state visit. The Pope said that the visit reflected the “common responsibility of politics and religion for the future of the continent and the future of humanity: the large, shared responsibility so that the values that create

¹ Francis Campbell, (14 October 2010), “The Crown’s Oldest Diplomatic Relationship is With the Papacy,” Speech presented at St. Mary’s Cathedral, Newcastle, United Kingdom.

² “Pope Benedict: Interview,” *Catholic Communications Network*, 16 September 2010. Available online: www.thepapalvisit.org.uk/Replay-the-Visit/Speeches/Speeches-16-September/Pope-Benedict-Interview.

justice and politics and which come from religion, share the journey in our time.”³ This is a universal message, not just intended for Britons but also for a global audience.

There was a great deal of controversy surrounding the Pope’s trip. Notable anti-religious personalities, such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, called for the British authorities to arrest the Pope immediately upon his arrival due to their opinion that the Church had criminally enabled child abuse. *The Guardian* opposed the visit and accused the Holy See of increasing the number of impoverished families and of the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa by its position on the use of condoms.⁴ As George Weigel has pointed out in a December 2010 essay, “Fail, Britannia,” even the Catholic left was seduced to some degree by the intense criticisms. For example, Sir Stephen Wall, an advisor to the Diocese of Westminster and to Prime Minister Tony Blair, wrote that “individuals have their own values...changing moral code is a normal part of social evolution.”⁵

All of this controversy allowed the Pope to draw the clearest comparisons yet in his five year papacy between the state of affairs in the modern world today and aspirations for a more fully human order. During the UK trip, the Pope succeeded in articulating two critical challenges: (1) the risk of an increasing marginalization of religion—encapsulated in the phrase, “dictatorship of relativism,” and (2) the need for combining and rationally accommodating both reason and religion in the modern world. The fact that two-thirds of all papal visits to date have been to Europe certainly reinforces the Pontiff’s hopes for the re-evangelization of Europe.

In his address to diplomatic, business and academic leaders at Westminster Hall, the Pope laid out the case for the coexistence of religion and politics. “Britain has emerged as a pluralist democracy which places great value on freedom of speech...with a strong sense of the individual’s rights and duties.”⁶ He also said that such a stance squares with Catholic social teaching and “its overriding concern to safeguard the unique dignity of every person...and in its emphasis on the duty of civil authority to foster the common good.”⁷ Contrary to the critics of his visit, the Pope showed that a platform for good government and justice is created by mutually reinforced reason and faith.

These concepts are linked to Vatican II (1962-1965), which was a turning point for the evolution of Church relations in the world, building upon past traditions and policies while finding new approaches with which to confront the global realities of the 1960s. This

³ “Pope Benedict: Interview,” *Catholic Communications Network*, 16 September 2010. Available online: www.thepapalvisit.org.uk/Replay-the-Visit/Speeches/Speeches-16-September/Pope-Benedict-Interview.

⁴ Peter Walker, “Pope’s visit: Pontiff should not be ‘honoured’ with state visit,” *The Guardian*, 15 September 2010.

⁵ George Weigel, “Fail, Britannia: A Spiritual Hollowness Overtakes the United Kingdom,” *First Things*, December 2010.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, (17 September 2010), “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” Speech presented at Westminster Hall, Westminster, United Kingdom.

⁷ Ibid.

post-Vatican II engagement saw the Church emphasizing human freedom, the protection of human dignity and the essential, inherent rights of man as demonstrated in its most significant pronouncements, specifically *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Benedict's predecessor, Pope John Paul II, had witnessed a Holy See diplomacy reacting to a different set of world challenges. Shaped by a different personal background, he applied these same principles in his diplomacy. His entire lifetime of experiences drove him, along with President Ronald Reagan, to focus on the evils of communism. In his address to the United Nations on October 3, 1979, Pope John Paul II "gave a speech in defense of basic human rights that left the delegates from communist countries worried" wherein he said that politics must begin with "a proper understanding of the dignity of the human person" and that respect for human rights was "the prerequisite to true peace."⁸ Elaborating his message further, John Paul II told an audience of scientists in 2000 that "faith is not afraid of reason" because they "are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."⁹

These two examples illustrate the continuity of thought of Holy See diplomacy and the important symmetries between two "modern" popes, often less recognized than their differences. More open to inter-religious and pluralistic, democratic process, these two popes have done much to foster the dialogue about the place of religion in democracy, culture, and the political morality of society.

Religion and Democracy

President Richard Nixon, a staunch anti-communist, was capable of rapprochement with China at a time when opposition to such an outreach was strong. While not exactly analogous and on an entirely different plane, an unstintingly conservative Pope has been able to actively engage non-believers and the most secular of peoples in robust dialogue. Cardinal Ratzinger honed his intellectual arguments in several publications and has become a leader for theologians. Just over a year before he was elected pope, then Cardinal Ratzinger worked with the noted neo-socialist Jürgen Habermas to write a series of essays in the book, The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion. This is the same person who spoke out against the "dictatorship of relativism" in the 2005 conclave that elected him. This Pope is simultaneously capable of speaking forcefully about his positions while actively engaging the most ardent dissidents.

Many link the Pope's focus on the need for religion as a building block of democracy with his boyhood experiences during the Third Reich. British Historian Michael Burleigh reveals Nazi leaders' determination to "demolish the moral authority of the Catholic Church" in order to later abrogate citizens' rights.¹⁰ The Pope believes that

⁸ George Weigel, The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II - The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy. (New York: Doubleday, 2010) 114.

⁹ Ibid. 243.

¹⁰ Michael Burleigh, The Third Reich. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000) 189.

once religion becomes attenuated and removed from society, then the void is filled by an authoritarian dictatorship and there is no longer a check or balance to political power.

This concept has also been expressed by President George W. Bush, as he has often said that free people foster peace because they can change out their leaders. There is a similar history with the evolution of dissent in communist Russia, from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who gave life to the focus on human rights in Russia, to Pope John Paul II.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright writes that part of the failure of the opposition to communism in Vietnam was the fact that the Saigon government repressed Buddhism—the “largest noncommunist institution in the country”—leaving an obvious void.¹¹ She also criticized in her book those who sought to ignore or downplay the role of religion in many of the foreign policy conflicts she dealt with during her time in government, like Northern Ireland, Muslim India and pre-revolutionary Iran, saying, “Religion is a large part of what motivates people and shapes their views of justice and right behavior.”¹²

At least in the United States, statistical research backs up the Pope’s philosophical and theological perspective. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in their new work, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, put forward empirical social science research to argue for the value of religion in establishing good behavior and improved citizenship. Their data show when religion matters to people, they are more charitable with their time and their money, and they belong to more civic organizations. The research also correlates positively with political involvement of all ideologies and voting. Interestingly, the data show that the more religious one is, the more likely that person is to feel that tax evasion is “always wrong.” These are behaviors which are essential to a smoothly functioning democracy which is engaged in preserving its freedoms.¹³ Their research proves empirically what George Washington thought in 1796, that “of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”¹⁴

Religion and Reason

The Pope’s concern for the perils of secularism has led to the second front of his personal diplomacy, the quest for a mutual relationship between reason and religion. His first opportunity to raise this issue came with the Islamic outrage over the publication of a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed by the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in 2005. The Pope’s comment that “intolerance and violence can never be justified as response[s] to offenses” parallels the US State Department’s official position, which defended freedom of

¹¹ Madeleine Albright, The Mighty and the Almighty. (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 43.

¹² Ibid. 285.

¹³ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010) 454-459.

¹⁴ Ibid. 443.

speech even when it was unpopular to do so.¹⁵ Both the United States and Holy See offered courageous support for journalists the world over. This issue continued as recently as last Fall when a group of extremists attempted to bomb the Swedish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* because it had reprinted the cartoon as a demonstration of free speech.

Months later, Pope Benedict's first foray into the global spotlight after his election featured highly publicized remarks at his former teaching post, the University of Regensburg. The Pope referred to Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus saying Islam is Prophet Mohammed's "command to spread by the sword the faith he preached"¹⁶ in an effort to express his concern over the extremism, aggression and immutability reflected in certain Islamic doctrines and parts of the Koran.

As the sound bite reverberated around the world, evoking a variety of reactions, the broader meaning and intent of his expressions that day have resonated more profoundly as a global discussion and analysis of the Koran, Islam and its relations to the modern world have ensued.

The crucial point, reinforced constantly since Regensburg, is that reason and religion can—and indeed must—co-exist in the modern world. The only way forward is to continually foster this mutual relationship. What is a quest for rationality tempering fervor and fanaticism in some expressions of Islam and other religious traditions is coupled, at least by the Pope and the Holy See, with more fervor and excitement about religion in the modern, secular state.

Since Regensburg there have been numerous debates and publications commenting on the issue of the immutability of the word of the Prophet Mohammed expressed in the Koran, on whether Shiite or Sunni Islam is more subject to interpretation and contextualization and about what the Enlightenment meant or should mean for Islam. These issues are important and relevant to the discussion of religion in modernity and underscore the urgency of the need for workable doctrines, policies and intellectual frameworks within which to create opportunities for reconciliation and conflict avoidance.

Again in his address at Westminster Hall, the Pope postulated that advocates of both secular rationality and religious belief "need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization."¹⁷

The harsh reality of the fault line between reason and religion has received greater international attention following the United Kingdom visit. Religious intolerance recently fueled two deadly church bombings in the Middle East. The October 31, 2010 massacre in Baghdad killed more than 50 Syriac Catholics and 23 Coptic Christians were murdered in

¹⁵ "Pope Says Peace Implies Respect for Religious Symbols," *Zenit*, 20 February 2006.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, (12 September 2006), "Lecture of the Holy Father," Speech presented at the University of Regensburg, Regensburg, Germany.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, (17 September 2010), "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI," Speech presented at Westminster Hall, Westminster, United Kingdom.

Alexandria, Egypt on January 1, 2011, all while attending services. These events tragically reaffirm the Pope's UK call for religious freedom.

Conclusion

In his five years as pope, Benedict has led a diplomatic mission embracing the positive role of religion in politics, global justice and the peaceful evolution of civilization. Occasionally blunt and sometimes misunderstood, he has not shrunk from the 21st century challenges of secularization and radicalism and has lent his lifetime of theological and philosophical study to help solve these seemingly intractable problems.

In his address for the celebration of the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2011, delivered almost as the attack in Alexandria was taking place, the Pope highlighted the humanizing and civilizing role of religion in the development of civil society. Pope Benedict XVI said, "Freedom and respect are inseparable;" and, moreover, that "religious freedom is the condition for the pursuit of truth."¹⁸ He went on to quote from the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*: "in exercising their rights, individuals and social groups are bound by the moral law to have regard for the rights of others."¹⁹ Once again, in this message broadly addressed to all people, the Pope reaffirmed the critical linkages of religious freedom and human dignity to the pursuit of justice and peace, and to the truth and objective credibility which reason adduces to the profession of faith.

Though a relatively older Pope when he was elected, Pope Benedict XVI has shown vigor and spirit in expressing the diplomacy of the Holy See. The September trip to the United Kingdom urged preservation and enhancement of the role of religion in modern society and government, and continues to call for dialogue and the coexistence of religion and reason in today's world.

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, (1 January 2011), "Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace," Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for The Celebration of the World Day of Peace, Vatican.

¹⁹ Ibid.