



Mt 10:16 Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Faith, Reason and the University

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~~Though~~ I am through and through a liberal Christian and the central model for my faith and action has, and will remain, Jesus of Nazareth. ~~again and again~~ <sup>One of the teachings that seems to me to be filled w. the same spirit</sup> ~~again~~ <sup>I recognize in Jesus Dis</sup> the thought of that great Iranian Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). These words found in his 'Letter to a Disciple' - a brief summary of his life's teaching - seem so pertinent that I cannot begin today without quoting them. In this section he is advising his disciple about eight things. Four of these are to be accomplished and four to be given up. Here is the first of those to be given up (Al-Ghazali, Letter to a Disciple, edited by Tobias Mayer, 2005, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society p. 42):

(The first of them) is that you do not argue with anyone regarding any issue, insofar as you are able, since there is much that is harmful in it, and 'its evil is greater than its utility?' For it is the origin of every ugly character trait, such as insincerity, envy, haughtiness, resentment, enmity, boastfulness and so on. Certainly, if an issue arises between you and an individual or a group, and your intention in regard to it is that the truth become known and not lost sight of, discussion is allowed you. However there are two indications of this intention. The first is that you make no distinction between the truth's being disclosed on your own tongue or that of someone else. The second is that discussion in private be preferable to you than in public.

<sup>I would prefer this important matter was being dealt w. in private but it's now public - hence this address.</sup> ~~And so I may begin.~~ As most of us are aware, the lecture given two weeks ago by Pope Benedict XVI in Germany to the 'Representatives of Science' at the University of Regensburg and entitled 'Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections', caused a worldwide angry reaction from many Muslims. In this address I don't propose to critique the Pope's paper in full but simply address two aspects of it which are of great importance to us as a liberal Christian community, namely, the use of reason in religion

general and the place of reason within the faith of one of our major interlocutors, namely Islam.

The Pope's general point was one I think all of us can get wholly behind: 'not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.' <sup>To this</sup> ~~As a~~ point my reply to the Pope is, 'Amen, Brother.' But what disturbs me, and has disturbed <sup>many</sup> others, is that ~~the way he~~ <sup>in</sup> his argument managed to characterise Islam as being a religion of unreason whilst displaying Christianity as a religion of reason. Whether this was deliberate or, as I suspect simply a painful and very, very dangerous naivety, I entirely leave aside for today. Even Professor Hans Kung, a former colleague of his when at Tübingen university <sup>&</sup> who has crossed swords with the present Pope many times agrees that the Pope did not intend to provoke Muslims. But, as Kung excuses him on this point, he does go on to say that the speech "shows the limits of the theologian Joseph Ratzinger. He never studied the religions thoroughly and very obviously has a unilateral view of Islam and the other religions."

Anyway, to make his general point the Pope, quoted a fourteenth century dialogue between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an unnamed Persian. The offending passage, to remind us, reads as follows:

"Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached". The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. "God", he says, "is not pleased by blood - and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death..."

With this in mind I want to start with two obvious and general points, but which are no less important for that. The first, is that throughout history both Christianity and Islam have at times displayed their commitment to the use of reason and, at other more shameful times, a complete abandonment of reason. Christianity and Islam, whilst being very different from each other, are also as good and as bad as each other.

My second point is that we always make mistakes when we characterise Islam and Christianity, any religion in fact, in ways that make them appear monolithic entities. However, they are diverse and phenomenally complex and nuanced traditions. I have said it many times before and will, no doubt, repeat it many more times in my life, but it would be better if we spoke of Christianities and Islams.

So rule number one, when ever any of us feels the need to talk about Islam and/or Christianity, is check that any generalisations we are tempted to make can be shown to be based in reality. Which point brings us to a consideration of Islam and Reason.

Without doubt arguments such as that made by the fourteenth century Persian interlocutor who met with the emperor have been made by some Muslims, but this dialogue is a tiny fragment of a very much larger picture and one, remember, ~~not~~ recorded by ~~an~~ <sup>less than</sup> impartial figure. ~~Take~~ <sup>For a different perspective</sup> the views of ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> great Spanish Muslim, Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), one of the most influential Islamic religious philosophers who successfully brought together Islamic traditions and ancient Greek thought. He is perhaps still best known in the west by the name Averroes. At the request of an Almohad caliph (Abu Ya'qub Yusuf)\* Ibn Rushd produced a series of summaries and commentaries on most of Aristotle's works (1169-95) and on Plato's Republic. For centuries these were influential, not only in the Islamic world, but throughout Europe. In one of his treatises ('Decisive Treatise' Ibn Rushd, The Decisive Treatise 1-2 AVERROES 1961: 44-46 and quoted in Quoted in Peters Judaism, Christianity and Islam - The Classical Texts and their Interpretation, Princeton UP, 1990, pp. 1110-1112) we read:

That the Law summons us to reflection on beings, and the pursuit of knowledge about them by the intellect is clear from the several verses of the Book of God, blessed be He and exalted, such as the saying of the Exalted, "Reflect, you have vision" (Quran 39:2); this is textual authority for the obligation to use intellectual reasoning, or a combination of intellectual and legal reasoning. Another example is His saying, "Have you not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created?" (Quran 8:185); this is a text urging the study of the totality of beings.

Or take a <sup>modern</sup> modern figure such as Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905). He was a religious scholar, jurist, and liberal reformer who led the late 19th-century movement in Egypt and other Muslim countries to revitalize Islamic teachings and institutions in the modern world. As mufti (that is to say an Islamic legal counsellor) for Egypt (from 1899), he brought about reforms in Islamic law, administration, and higher education. Although he met with resistance from conservatives he succeeded in relaxing the <sup>what he saw as</sup> rigidity of Muslim ritual, dogma, and family ties. His writings include the "Treatise on the Oneness of God" and a commentary on the Qur'an. In this extract from his The Theology of Unity we clearly see the role of reason in his faith:

At all events, religion must not be made into a barrier, separating men's spirits from God-given abilities in the knowledge of the truths of the contingent world as far as in them lies. Rather, religion must promote this very search, demanding respect for evidence and enjoining the utmost possible devotion and endeavour through all the worlds of knowledge - and all within the true proportions of the goal, holding fast the while to sound itself. Any who assert the contrary do not know what religion is and do despite to it which the Lord of the worlds will not forgive. . . .

I could cite many more examples but I think the basic case is clear. The use of reason in Islam exists and we <sup>simply have to</sup> ~~should~~ acknowledge that. It is used in slightly different ways and contexts - <sup>remember</sup> there is no simple one-to-one mapping of anything across cultures - but these are thinkers who would agree wholeheartedly with the Pope's basic premise, and one that we

in this Unitarian and Free Christian church wholeheartedly agree, that 'not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.'

However, those of you who listen to Radio 4's 'Today' programme will have heard on Friday and interview with a young British Muslim radical who would struggle with Islam as expressed by Ibn Rushd and Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh. This youngster and recent violent events reveal that, despite the great intellectual and spiritual tradition whose surface I have merely scratched, there is a growing fundamentalist strain within certain sections of Islam. One of the most profound and darkly ironic tragedies of the Pope's recent misrepresentation is that the extremity of certain Islamic responses illustrates, in terrifying clarity, how desperately the world needs to the heart of the Pope's message that 'not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.' The Guardian journalist Stephen Bates, another commentator sensitive to the dark irony of the situation noted (in his blog of September 15 ([http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/stephen\\_bates/2006/09/post\\_390.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/stephen_bates/2006/09/post_390.html))): 'if, as a result of the outrage, some Catholics get killed or their churches burned down by offended scholars and textual exegesis it might be thought that Manuel's (the emperor in the quoted dialogue) original point had rather been made.'

So I'm not here to <sup>had my claim</sup> ~~pretend~~ that all Muslims are wonderful - that clearly isn't the case in the same way it isn't true about Christians or anyone else for that matter - <sup>not of all</sup> ~~not of all~~ Unitarians, but what I am going to say is that one of our most particular and pressing present day religious duties, as my recent address printed in the last edition of our newsletter reveals, is to re-engage with our own liberal rational Unitarian tradition and bring it into dialogue with Islam. Under any circumstances we share too much at a fundamental theological level for this opportunity to be missed - <sup>perhaps</sup> ~~but~~ under the present difficult conditions this is even more vital than we would ~~perhaps~~ either like or suppose. The situation that is developing is very, very serious folks and, whilst I don't pretend that we as Unitarian

Free Christians have inherited a tradition that can do all the work required in the present situation, we can undertake a key part in it.

I try to offer week to week, in addition to ~~the opportunity~~ <sup>our primary purpose for exist. of which is</sup> ~~to~~ <sup>to act</sup> worship God, something of the rich history and theology of our tradition. But if you want to know more and know it in depth, I'm here. One of the roles of any minister in the Reformed Christian tradition is as a teacher - the education is free. Call me and, as you do you can be assured that it won't be some form of Unitarian Christian indoctrination. Why? Well because this is a church tradition committed to what the Pope was trying in such a dreadfully naïve way, that 'not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.' My appeal is to <sup>the</sup> reason which lies at the heart of the human spirit - your spirit and, as the proverb so beautifully put it: 'The human spirit is the lamp of the LORD, searching every innermost part' (Prov. 20:27). In the end your inner spirit, your reason, the very lamp of the LORD, is what will <sup>help you</sup> <sup>to do</sup> decide because it is the only thing that has true authority in matters of faith. <sup>Then go out & proclaim 'not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.'</sup>

Amen.

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\* Arabic AL-MUWAHHIDUN (Those Who Affirm the Unity of God), a Berber confederation that created an Islamic empire in North Africa and Spain (1130-1269), founded on the religious teachings of Ibn Tumart (d. 1130).

CALIPH spelled CALIF, Arabic KHALIFAH ("successor"),