



Olivier Abel

A Western split within Christianity?

The controversy surrounding Benedict XVI's speech in Regensburg in 2006 centred around what Muslims claimed was his misrepresentation of Islam. However, as Olivier Abel points out, the Pope's criticism was directed less at Islam than at Protestantism, with its twofold spectres of sectarian utopia and consumer individualism. Nevertheless, in asserting that his Church alone was following the right path, the Pope was simply fulfilling his role: the real scandal was the way the speech, with its anti-rationalism, was warmly received by so many intellectuals.

In his speech at the University of Regensburg in September 2006, Benedict XVI introduced a note of forthrightness that is quite at odds with the ecumenical language of warm embraces. He was addressing the Other, expounding and expressing his own views, without perhaps taking account in a sufficiently responsible fashion the consequences that his words might have. The fact is that he is not, first and foremost, a statesman but a theologian full of conviction: Protestants could have no reason to complain about that. So I will not deal here with the political aspect of his words so much as their strictly theological significance, because it is on that level that I am puzzled, slightly disappointed, even concerned. Concerned not so much by the speech itself, since the head of the Roman Catholic Church is simply fulfilling his role when he asserts that his Church and his Church alone is following the right path, but by the way that it was so warmly received by so many intellectuals.

There we were, counting ourselves lucky to have an intelligent and intellectual Pope; and there he was claiming that only the *Via Romana* truly represents the heritage of Greece and of Christian Hellenism. What does that mean? We remarked upon the rejection of the road followed by the Orthodox world and by the various oriental forms of Christianity, which were the first to suffer in real terms from Muslim upheavals. We noted the implied rejection of the Arabic and Muslim links in the chain of rationality that joined Greece to Europe, as well as the undervaluing of what might be termed "Arab" or "Persian" versions of Platonism. This is the first reservation that I would have: that it is difficult to understand how the Pope would dare to speak in terms of such grossly oversimplified entities as "Greek thought" or "Biblical thought". To do this, to isolate the line of descent and yet claim that it is a true genealogy, is fatal. The Fathers of the Church are fathers of others too, not just of ourselves, and similarly, we have other fathers as well as those whose names we bear. The lines of descent always mingle. And Plato, father of the neo-Platonic tradition, with his "oral teaching" concerning a flux of interlocking spheres, ordered to produce Good, is also the father of a great sceptical tradition, in the non-Pyrrhonian sense of an unsynthesized dialectic. From a very early stage, well before the Middle Ages and right up to the present time, there have therefore been several systems of Aristotelian thought,

several forms of Platonism and, throughout history, several kinds of Hellenism. The Hellenism of the Franco–Italian Renaissance is not the same as that of German Romanticism. The gesture of radical reform in the establishment of the Puritan colonies was perhaps more Greek than the so-called uninterrupted line of continuity of the Roman Catholic establishment, and even the postmodernists that the Pope attacks may perhaps be opening up something resembling Greek religiosity in its most classical form.

An anti-Protestant speech

We must look elsewhere to see how this speech by the Pope ought properly to be understood. It was all about the West, an internal settling of accounts, and Benedict XVI actually had more to say about the West than he did about Islam, which in this case was a disguise for the real target: the Reformation. By reasserting the continuity between the Greek *logos* and Roman Catholicism, he was reproaching the reformation for having destroyed the analogical relationship between God and Reason and for having asserted a form of transcendence that was too radical and that made the divine will too capricious. The speech therefore targeted the nominalist tradition, Duns Scotus, the Franciscans, Luther and Calvin, but also Pascal or Kierkegaard, which propounds a way of relating to a God who is will and love and not to a God who is intelligence and presides over an inclusive theology that would also involve morality and science. The speech opposed theologies and metaphysics based on understanding to those based on the will. Its central plank was a denunciation of three waves of "de-Hellenization": the wave associated with the Reformation, that of the liberal theology that came out of the Age of Reason (with its aim to demythologize), and finally the present-day wave of religious pluralism and relativism.

Thus his target was first and foremost Protestantism, with its twofold spectre of sectarian utopias and consumer individualism. This is to be expected: we are not sufficiently aware of the fact that Protestantism is the dominant religion of the world, and as such serves as a scapegoat for the sins of modernity. So the Pope is advocating a return to the civilization of western Christendom, with the more or less covert approval of all those pious atheists who make up today's intellectual battalions. It is easy to poke fun at Muslim philosophers and critical thinkers for not being true believers; but, all joking aside, those intellectuals who assert the Christian cultural identity of Europe are even less so! There exists in France, even if it is marginal and unaware of its own existence, an anti-democratic form of Catholicism that is all the more fanatical in that it is resolutely atheist; and one of its most typical historical representatives is Charles Maurras. He took over the baton from those who, in times past, would have been referred to as the "Ultras". Today, atheists who belong to this form of fanatical "Catholicism" are recruited among neo-Conservatives nostalgic for a secular Republic (although they are discovering it rather late in the day) and among ultra-revolutionaries who resemble Maoists in their denunciation of democracy and its feeble humanism. These people despise traitors and damn pluralism to hell. Admittedly, this anti-modern Catholicism is very marginal but it can happen that it sets the tone. And, if you listen carefully, you find that it even happens quite often.

Let us listen to what they have to say. If the Reformation had won, as the anti-philosophers won in Muslim lands, that would have spelt the end for European understanding, since there is a direct line from Luther and Calvin to Nietzsche, to nihilism and to totalitarianism. This kind of thing is no longer

just something Maurras might have said; it has become the vulgate of our pious intellectuals. In the face of the combined trends of Evangelical and Islamic fundamentalism, they say, we have to rebuild the great edifice made up of the synthesis of Faith and Reason. The Reformation's splitting of Reason and Faith gave rise, first, to an excess of corrosive liberal rationalism which destroys everything, leaving behind only a pragmatic, positivist cult of efficacy and then an excess of fideistic irrationalism. The latter, they claim, was propounded by Karl Barth; following Kierkegaard, he cast away the anchor and reproached faith for having been excessively contaminated by Greek reason.

Of course, it was Ricœur who never ceased to complicate this simplistic schema, in line with his own precept: "Let us complicate, let us complicate everything! In history, Manichaeism is stupid and harmful!" Protestants therefore do not find it particularly easy to recognize themselves in such a caricature. It is as if the influence of Karl Barth and of Kant on Ricœur during his youth had condemned him to irrationalism and not to tensions that go to make up a living kind of rationality! It is all too easy to see the mote of irrationalism in the eye of the other... The Pope did not say that exactly, but he in no way contradicted such a reading of his words. There is nothing in the Protestant heritage that he can approve of or come to terms with. He even shaped his speech very precisely in a way that acknowledged no debt of any kind to Protestant thought.

Defence and illustration of modernity

My problem is not to defend the Reformation; but it worries me to see so few intellectuals trying to understand and to justify modernity which today is too easy a target for every kind of attack. Admittedly, Benedict XVI claims that he is not dismissing modernity but broadening it. That is what I would like to examine. He wants to look at modernity again, on a basis that would no longer be founded on Kant (cf. his debate with Habermas) but on Aristotle. But why oppose these two and thereby reduce the basis of our examination? Does not Ricœur indeed see ethics as lurching between Aristotle and Kant? Should we not be thinking in terms of a mutual rather than solely a vertical recognition of authority? Benedict XVI's reproach that the Reformation overstressed the absolute alterity of God, thereby unleashing arbitrary power and violence, flies in the face of historical reality: what the Reformation's claim did was to open up a relationship that was respectful of others and of the world. Was not the impossibility of enforced conversion that same language of tolerance upheld by Bayle and Locke and, indeed, first realized in the Netherlands? Did not the Puritan Revolution affirm a radical right of dissent? After all, was it not the Roman Catholic synthesis of Reason and Faith that allowed Bossuet to force French Protestants to enter the "only true Church", for their own good?

What is more, I can quite see how the Calvinist affirmation of transcendence and the elimination of finalism reduced the great and subtle constructions of scholastic cosmology to a state of chaos: but sometimes you have to agree to abandon forms in order to reach them in some other way. Does not the debate between Bayle and Leibniz, two minds that provide such good representations of two poles or two limits of Protestant thought, sum up the fluctuation between criticism, doubt, the loss of forms and their confident rediscovery? There would never have been a Descartes were it not for Calvin — that great unknown quantity, the bugbear of western culture. We would never have had Newton or Leibniz. And what Benedict XVI is refusing to see is that Kant propounded not the idea of a reduction in the role of Reason but its

pluralization, since there are such things as types of truths and judgments, registers in different discourses. Now this is an Aristotelian idea too, and Calvin's reading of Genesis, not as a cosmology, but as a poem to the glory of the Creator, in its pluralization of types of discourse, is testimony to the broadening of a form of reasoning that eschews any single discourse that provides an answer to everything. Is there really no rational justification behind the critical separation and re-linking of what is theological and what is political, between the theological and the cosmological, the theological and the ethical, the theological and the poetic study of Biblical texts? Is it not by distinguishing registers, by not being too ready to mix scientific reason, moral wisdom or gratitude for faith that we will avoid theological–moral–scientific syntheses that are always so dangerous? And is that not precisely what we find worrying about neo–creationism as well as neo–Islamist theories? If that is the "fullness of reason" that Benedict XVI is calling for, is it not actually a step backwards? We inveigh against fundamentalism, but there is a kind of undiluted fundamentalism, not concentrated on texts in the way that Muslim or Protestant fundamentalism is, and the extension of reason can also be the extension of an unverifiable kind of fundamentalism. It was also said that Benedict XVI provided a fine example of academic freedom: perhaps, but will he grant the same freedom to all Catholic theologians? It would be nice to think so, but there is nothing in Ratzinger's past to suggest that he would give higher priority to freedom than to dogma.

If I had to state what seems to me the main thread of his statements, I would say that it is fear of scepticism. But do we not need a little scepticism, especially when it is a matter of thinking about Europe and the questions that have always been integral to it? Do we not need the kind of doubts that raise questions about our knowledge, about how we relate to the world, but also the kind that affect our ability to recognize and to relate to other people? What kind of confidence would it be that asked no questions about itself? What kind of assertion that left room within itself for other assertions? At the heart of our debate we can find Descartes, with his evil genius and his confidence in divine truth, but also Bayle and his dialogic concept of the *cogitas ergo es*, his concern to know whether we can comprehend the Other. And on both sides, the idea that faith is just a little agnostic. There again, we must not confuse the various forms of scepticism and throw them away into the same darkness in an act of uncompromising Pyrrhonism.

A logos of dialogue

What the Pope was asking for, quite rightly, was that there should be no question of compulsion in matters concerning faith: he would see enforced conversion in Islam as the historical symptom of a renunciation of the close union between divine reason and divine decree. But that amounts to saying that the violence that *we* have committed over the centuries was accidental, whereas *yours* was essential! Everyone could say as much, could they not? It is an argument to make you die laughing, is it not? Don't we need to do a little more than this? Rather than wallow in a paralyzing kind of guilt, ought we not sweep our own doorsteps and start by understanding that each of us carries violence within himself, each shored up by his own form of rationality? Let us agree that a certain kind of Islam, that is today dominant, may be closer to the metaphysics of the will than to the metaphysics of understanding. But the will comes up against the Other's refusal and must come to terms with it, whereas understanding supposes, in the end, comprehension and unity. Benedict XVI objects to the Kantian model of the conflict of the faculties in the name of a Platonic or Augustinian model of reconciliation. But is it not possible to see

Plato and Augustine in a different way? Should we not, with Ricœur, honour the conflict of interpretations? Who can allow himself the internal cohesion of reason but reject that of others who are supposed to have rejected the *logos* — but which *logos*?

The crux of our debate is the meaning of the *logos*, which the Regensburg speech tried to claim is Reason–Being–Truth as One, as a singularity. One can understand that the Pope should want to construct a common world of reason, but does that not presuppose a dialogic reason and the sense that our religions are still attached to languages? Would it be impossible to conceive of a "soft" universality, one that was not coercive, that was resistible, open to a kind of plurality that reiterates the figures that express it, which are still never more than metaphors? For basically the *logos* is the Word, what is human is, at its origins twofold: it is conversation, it is not monologue. God is a relationship. It is not enough to seek some internal coherence of intent for any discourse; it should be located pragmatically where it belongs, between interlocutors who are able to make it say things other than it intended to say. This may be difficult and even, at times, frightening, but it is the very essence of understanding. The *logos* is twofold and can only be "one" in terms of hope. Benedict XVI, in his rejection of pluralism and internal conflict, is refusing to give up his monopoly of the truth. Fortunately, I do not believe that he is representative of all forms of Catholicism. In the face of a kind of Greek thought reduced to such a static conception of the *logos* as Reason, one would wish to claim, along with many thinkers in the Catholic tradition, along with certain thinkers in medieval Islam whom the Pope is castigating and a long-standing Jewish tradition, that God is, fortunately, not bound by his own word and that our prayers are able to release Him from his promises and threats. As Ricœur pointed out, does not Aeschylus show the tragic God of the Erinyes being transformed into the merciful God of the Eumenides? Does that *logos* not teach us more about human beings and about God?

An earlier version of this text, entitled "Amplitude de la raison ou régression", appeared in Réforme, no. 3192, 28 September 2006.

Published 2008–01–30
 Original in French
 Translation by Mike Routledge
 Contribution by Esprit
 First published in *Esprit* 11/2006
 © Olivier Abel/Esprit
 © Eurozine