
Who Owns Reason?

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In a speech on faith and reason in September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI touched off a global controversy by quoting an obscure Byzantine emperor who had condemned Islam as inherently violent and irrational. The Catholic Church has long claimed both faith and reason as its exclusive property. But the history behind the controversy Benedict aroused shows that claims of faith and reason have always been central to the competing cultural identities of Christianity and Islam—and that all sides in this struggle have at different times both embraced and rejected reason.

IN MARCH 1391, less than a year before he uttered the words quoted several years ago by Pope Benedict XVI, the emperor Manuel II Paleologos ascended to the throne of Byzantium. He inherited an empire that was clearly on its last legs, its once vast territory reduced to a sliver of land around the capital city, Constantinople, along with a few outposts in the Aegean and the Black Sea. Manuel himself was a vassal of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid, a fierce and uncompromising commander whose conquests would soon win him the title *ghazi*, warrior for Islam. The Ottoman Turks were in the process of conquering Asia Minor and the Balkans, both of which had once been ruled by Manuel's Christian predecessors. Bayezid's forces virtually encircled Constantinople, and he had just held Manuel hostage for nearly a year. Manuel claimed the throne only after escaping to Constantinople from the sultan's camp in Asia Minor, where the news had come to him that his father, the emperor John V Paleologos, had died.

On hearing of Manuel's escape, Bayezid was furious. He ordered the new emperor to return at once, and Manuel felt

that he had no choice but to obey. On June 8, he crossed the Bosphorus to Asia Minor, and then accompanied Bayezid's army as it marched into the interior. In letters to friends back in Constantinople, he described passing through the deserted towns and villages of this former Byzantine territory, their names forgotten, their inhabitants long fled to escape the Turks. Winter found Manuel holed up with the Ottoman army in Ankara, where the Orthodox Christian emperor engaged in a series of theological discussions with a learned Persian Muslim.

Our only source for these discussions is the version of them that Manuel himself is thought to have composed a few years after the fact. It was from this text, edited by Theodore Khoury, that the pope chose to quote in his speech at Regensburg on September 12, 2006: "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."

A worldwide controversy immediately erupted over the pope's quotation of this obscure medieval figure. The source may have been unfamiliar, but the claims are not. On one side, critics charge that Islam is inherently, even uniquely, anti-rational, intolerant, and violent—that it was born in violence, spread in violence, and is now cultivated in violence. On the other side, apologists tell us that the religion is inherently rational, tolerant, and peaceful, and that this authentic Islam has been "hijacked" by terrorists and others with violent agendas. Both sides fling quotations from the Koran at each other that purportedly prove their case. Before the pope stepped in, the most recent episode in this long-running serial was the Danish Cartoon Imbroglio.

The ostensible subject of Benedict's speech was "faith and reason," a topic that has a long history. Islam and Christianity alike have always had their flintier proponents, who have repeatedly struck sparks when rubbing up against reason. At times in European history, the clash between faith and reason has been literally incendiary. The Renaissance

scientist and philosopher Giordano Bruno, among others, burned at the stake because of it. But throughout history, anti-rationalist clerics have clashed with scientists, philosophers, and other champions of free inquiry not only in the West, but also in the Byzantine (or Eastern Orthodox Christian) and Islamic worlds. And like Manuel and Benedict, people in each of these civilizations have repeatedly claimed both faith and reason as their own.

We expect such claims from people of faith, which so often assert the exclusion from truth of those who don't believe. But exclusive claims about reason confuse us. On one hand, we feel reason is, or ought to be, universal. On the other hand, the six centuries of progress in the West that divide the age of Manuel II from our own suggest to many commentators that Western civilization possesses an inherent affinity with reason that has spurred its cultural ascendancy.

Certainly it suggests that to many Western commentators. But a closer look at the history behind the pope's appropriation of Manuel II undercuts this idea.

Manuel himself would probably have been gratified (if somewhat baffled) by the furor his words provoked. As far as we can tell, when he spoke them they caused not a ripple. By the time he wrote them down, he was back in Constantinople, which Bayezid was in the process of besieging in the name of Islam. The Turks were too busy spreading Islam by the sword to take offense. One imagines that Bayezid—whose preferred epithet was *Yilderim*, “Thunderbolt”—would have been flattered, anyway.

That siege began in 1394, and was prompted by Manuel's refusal to answer yet another imperious summons from the sultan. In ignoring Bayezid, Manuel was gambling that Constantinople's famous walls would outlast the sultan's wrath. They did. What really saved Byzantium, however, was not its capital's walls, formidable though they were, but simple good luck—in the shape of the Mongol conqueror Tamerlane, who took umbrage at Bayezid's imperial aspirations and swooped in from Central Asia to decimate the Ottoman army at

Ankara in 1402. Bayezid himself was captured in the battle and died a year or so later. His sons began fighting among each other for control of the suddenly wobbly Ottoman state.

Bayezid's defeat allowed Byzantium to survive for another half-century, which was how long it took the Ottomans to recover and finally capture Constantinople (they did so in 1453, renaming the city Istanbul and making it their own capital). But Manuel deserves some credit for the reprieve, too. By all accounts a charming and handsome man, long-bearded in the best Byzantine fashion, he was also widely known for his learning and intelligence. Around forty years old on his ascension to the throne, he was described as a Platonic "philosopher king" by his older friend and mentor, the Byzantine scholar and statesman Demetrius Cydones. Manuel now took advantage of the Ottomans' disarray to play the diplomatic odds (also in the best Byzantine fashion) by backing one of Bayezid's sons, Mehmed, against Mehmed's brother Musa, the other claimant. Supported by Byzantine and Serbian troops, Mehmed won the contest and swore that forever after he would be like a son and obedient subject to his father, the emperor.

Manuel, in other words, had adroitly put the shoe on the other foot. True to his word, Mehmed—whose feelings of friendship for Manuel were apparently genuine—never attacked Constantinople, although as Manuel was aware the obligation was purely personal and temporary. Mehmed's successors would feel themselves under no such burden.

We don't know why the pope chose to quote Manuel II in this speech, but the choice itself is suggestive, and it may be less random than would appear at first glance. Like Manuel II, Benedict XVI presides over a realm whose past glories far outstrip its present power. Beset by scandal, relegated to the margins of a secular, post-Christian Europe, their authoritarian strictures openly ignored by their notional flock, the popes have been left behind by history as much as the Byzantine emperors with whom they once contested for worldly power. The popes, too, are now vassals of the infidel.

Benedict's agenda includes healing the long-standing schism between Catholic and Orthodox Christians, and a display of scholarly familiarity with an Orthodox Christian ruler such as Manuel II may have seemed politic in this regard. But there's another reason why the pope might quote this particular Byzantine emperor. Manuel belonged to a movement within Byzantine society that was highly sympathetic to the Catholic world, and that had repeatedly been in open conflict with the strongly anti-Catholic mainstream of Orthodox opinion. He may have been Orthodox, but he was Orthodox with a Catholic twist.

Claims of faith and reason were central to this situation, which arose out of the centuries-long divergence between what had been the Latin and Greek halves of the pre-Christian ancient world. Christianity began in the ancient Mediterranean, in an intellectual world dominated by the highly rational legacy of ancient Greek culture—as reflected in philosophy and science, mainly, and also in disciplines such as history, which applied the tools of reason to the human past. But the emerging Catholic world lost touch with this rationalistic legacy during the social and political turbulence of the early Middle Ages, as barbarians moved into Western Europe and classical civilization was eclipsed. Not until the rediscovery of Aristotle and the resulting rise of the scholastic movement in the eleventh and twelfth centuries did reason reclaim the attention of the West. The most influential scholastic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, struggled to reconcile reason with faith in the thirteenth century. His thought was embraced as dogma by the Catholic Church in the early fourteenth century, when Thomas was declared a Catholic saint by Pope John XXII. Thomism, which essentially claimed reason as the exclusive property of the Catholic church, is generally considered the last major stage in the development of Catholic theology.

In the meantime—a bloody period during which Benedict's German ancestors were likely converted to Christianity at the point of a Frankish sword—reason resided

elsewhere. One place that didn't forget about reason was Orthodox Byzantium, the culturally Greek half of the old Roman empire. There ancient Greek learning survived, which is why you can go into a bookstore today and buy a copy of Herodotus or Plato (not to mention Plato's student Aristotle). But though reason maintained a residence in Byzantium, that presence amounted to no more than a *pied-à-terre*. Ancient Greek learning survived there, but it was never cultivated by more than a tiny, elite minority—aristocrats such as Demetrius Cydones, for example, and his protégé Manuel II. By their day, the mainstream of Byzantine civilization had moved in the opposite direction.

This was the final step in a long process of mutually-reinforcing cultural differentiation. Shortly after Aquinas was made a Catholic saint, his Orthodox mirror-image Gregory Palamas formulated the anti-rational doctrine of Hesychasm, which holds that mystical contemplation, not human reason, is the key to unlocking humanity's relationship with the divine. (Palamas likened reason to snake poison, which the Byzantines thought had a salutary effect in small doses but was deadly in larger ones.) As Thomism capped Catholic theology, so did Hesychasm cap Orthodox theology. Nor did these events occur in isolation from each other. Hesychasm had clear roots in Orthodox tradition, but it can also be seen as a direct reaction against the direction taken so recently by the Catholics, and one with unmistakable (and oddly familiar) elements of nativist obscurantism. While the West was expanding, the Byzantine world was collapsing under the Turkish onslaught.

Palamas was declared an Orthodox saint shortly after his death in 1358, but not before he had come into sharp conflict with the Byzantine "humanists" who upheld the rationalism at the heart of ancient Greek thought. One of those who continued to oppose Hesychasm after Palamas' canonization was Demetrius Cydones, who translated Thomas Aquinas into Greek and who, under the theological influence of Thomism, converted from Orthodoxy to Catholi-

cism. A trusted advisor to Manuel's father John V Paleologos, Cydones eventually persuaded John V himself to profess the Catholic faith as well. While Manuel II remained Orthodox, he had much in common with this rationalistic "west wing" of Byzantine culture, including an intense interest in ancient Greek literature. Many others in the ranks of the Byzantine humanists did convert to Catholicism, and a number of Manuel's friends came to Italy, where they taught ancient Greek to the avid Italians who made up the avant-garde of Renaissance humanism. One of the emperor's closest friends was the celebrated Manuel Chrysoloras, who taught ancient Greek in Florence for three years at the dawn of the fifteenth century and is credited with founding classical Greek studies in the West. Like Manuel II, Chrysoloras was a protégé of Demetrius Cydones, but unlike the emperor, Chrysoloras followed Cydones in converting to Catholicism.

Another aspect of the Byzantine humanists' openness to the West was their persistent hope of Western aid against the Turks. By contrast, most Byzantines preferred the Muslim Turks to the hated Catholics, their hostility having been fixed by the Western occupation of Constantinople during the not-so-reasonable Fourth Crusade (1204–1261). Any military expedition would have to be sanctioned by the pope, and it was while undertaking such an embassy to Rome with his friend Cydones that John V converted. Manuel II himself toured the West for several years in hopes of aid, stopping in Italy, Paris, and London (where the emperor's regal bearing made him a hit with the English court but resulted in no aid).

If reason never took up full-time residence in Byzantium, where exactly was it hiding during those long centuries of absence from the West? Nowhere else than in the Islamic world, at which Benedict XVI in 2006 wagged the finger of "reasonableness." Having conquered territory from Byzantium and Persia in the seventh century, the Arabs took over the schools of ancient Greek philosophy and science that were long established in places such as Alexandria and

Jundi-Shapur. Under Muslim Arab patronage, the largely Christian translators trained in these schools began rendering Greek works into Arabic in the late eighth century, after the foundation of Baghdad (ca. 750).

In an eye-opening book on this Greco-Arabic translation movement, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (1998), Dimitri Gutas, a Yale professor of Arabic philosophy, describes in ninth-century Baghdad what amounts to an ironic reversal of the current situation. The caliph al-Mamun came to power at the beginning of that century after a bitter civil war in which his followers killed his brother. With his grip on power shaky, to say the least, al-Mamun undertook a sophisticated propaganda campaign to legitimize it. As part of that campaign, he exalted Islam as inherently rational and chided the caliphate's main enemies, the Christian Byzantines, for turning their backs on the ancient Greek legacy of reason. Gutas calls al-Mamun's spin campaign "anti-Byzantinism as philhellenism." Al-Mamun focused Islamic hostility at Byzantium even while drawing on Byzantine sources to help inaugurate what has become known as the Golden Age of Islamic science (and to secure his own power, not incidentally).

It was through later Islamic philosophers such as the Persian Avicenna and especially the Spanish-Arab Averroës that Aristotle first found his way into the embrace of Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church. By that time, the Islamic world was itself in the process of evicting reason from its full-time residence there. In the past, Western commentators have delighted in finding essentialist reasons for the eviction, proposing first racial and then cultural traits to demonstrate Islam's "essential" incompatibility with reason. As more recent observers have noted, such explanations cannot account for the centuries during which reason was embraced by Muslims. And the claim that Western civilization expanded and prospered because of its inherent rationality is, of course, broadly similar to al-Mamun's claims about Islamic civilization.

Rather than boasting about supposedly inherent qualities like rationality, we do better to seek explanations in the flu-

idity of particular historical circumstances, which as they change give greater political traction to some agendas (and the promise of greater traction to some claims) at the expense of others. This argument was made very persuasively by Fred Halliday, a professor of international relations at the London School of Economics who died in early 2010, in his book *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (1995, revised 2003). Like the West and Byzantium earlier, the Arab Islamic empire was invaded and attacked over a span of centuries, first by the Turks and then by the Mongols. Reason in the Islamic world also suffered from al-Mamun's efforts to impose a rationalistic version of Islam on his subjects by force, which like his propaganda arose from a lingering taint of illegitimacy. Al-Mamun's rationalistic inquisition discredited reason over the long term, and its outrageous memory is still frequently cited by Islamic fundamentalists today. Yet in spite of it all, reason kept a *pied-à-terre* in the Islamic world much as it had in Byzantium.

Gutas and Halliday both discuss specific writers and intellectuals in their books, Gutas focusing on the surprisingly long-lived tradition of Arabic philosophy, and Halliday on more recent political and cultural developments. Taken together, these two volumes illuminate a tradition of liberal intellectual culture in the Muslim world that goes back centuries and remains vibrant today, yet is largely ignored by the Western media.

Over the long term, the Western, Byzantine, and Islamic worlds—the three monotheistic heirs of classical antiquity—give the impression of being locked in a competition for legitimacy and identity, struggling to differentiate themselves in a manner reminiscent of siblings. Faith and faith claims were central to this process, but, as we've seen, reason and reason claims surface, too. More importantly, in each of these civilizations, reason seems most easily embraced during “golden ages,” periods of cultural confidence or expansion. Conversely, reason seems most easily rejected during circumstances of turbulence or contraction, “dark ages” in

which institutions break down and people feel their cultural or religious identity to be under threat.

Obviously, this simplified description smoothes out numerous ambiguities and anomalies. Nothing makes historians clench their teeth like the phrase “the big picture.” Yet the long-term pattern suggests not that “Western” reason has brought us expansion and prosperity, but instead that general confidence, in any society, can open the door to reason. The other side of the coin is that a loss of confidence can open the door to reason’s enemies, who always seem to be there, impatiently pushing for their turn. Reason is nobody’s exclusive, inherent birthright.

As America digs itself deeper and deeper into a dark strategic hole under the shadow of an increasingly narrow and intolerant piety, we might keep in mind that reason has never in the past really gained the status of permanent resident anywhere. It’s possible, I suppose, that after centuries of scientific progress reason has finally put down roots. However, history suggests that it can be evicted when circumstances conspire to give its enemies the upper hand. For now, despite the best efforts of telegenic rapture-ready political candidates, reason seems secure enough here. But then American confidence has yet to be severely shaken, although global terrorism, economic meltdown, extreme weather, and debt-bondage to the Chinese may offer a mild foretaste of things to come.

One thing is certain. Sooner or later, our confidence will falter, perhaps owing to events that we cannot as yet even dimly predict. When that happens, I have to wonder, what kind of place will reason keep here?