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Atheist scholar is ally (with reservations) in Benedict's fight against relativism

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 16, 2008 All Things Catholic

Ever since his famous warning about a ?dictatorship of relativism? shortly before his election three years ago, Pope Benedict XVI has been trying to kick-start a global conversation about truth. In particular, Benedict yearns for a new look at truth within the Western secular academy, that exotic region where Jacques Derrida?s relativist maxim ?there is nothing outside the text? has, ironically, achieved the status of a near-absolute.

This weekend, in the enchanting Alpine setting of Lugano, Switzerland, a cross-section of prominent Western intellectuals is taking up the papal challenge. Organized by the Balzan Foundation, which each year awards the Swiss-Italian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, this unique gathering of scientists, philosophers, and eggheads of all stripes, most of them without any specific religious conviction, is titled, simply, ?The Truth.?

I?m in Lugano covering the event. In effect, the two-day summit represents the most intriguing test to date of how Benedict?s effort to restore confidence in truth is playing among secular makers of opinion.

The guest list features a constellation of intellectual heavy-hitters: Simon Blackburn, an atheist philosopher from Cambridge, who literally wrote the book on truth -- 2005?s best-selling *Truth: A Guide*; Geza Vermes, a New Testament exegete born to Jewish parents in Hungary, sometimes called the greatest Jesus scholar of his day; Dominique Schnapper, a French sociologist and the daughter of famed French philosopher Raymond Aron; Bengt Gustafsson, a Swedish astronomer and a popular writer on matters of science and faith; and Emanuele Severino, Italy?s most famous living philosopher, described somewhat colorfully as a ?neo-Parmenidian.? The Vatican is represented by Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, former theologian of the papal household, and Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, an Argentine who serves as chancellor of the Pontifical Academies of Science and of Social Sciences.

Despite the presence of two prelates, this is definitely not an ?orthodox? crowd. Severino, for example, was fired back in 1970 by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, following an investigation by the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of his belief in ?the eternity of all being? -- which, among other consequences, renders the idea of a Creator God obsolete. Vermes is a former Catholic priest who left the church in 1957. His scholarship, while widely respected, wouldn?t pass Vatican muster either. In his latest book, Vermes speculates that Jesus didn?t physically rise from the dead, but rather his followers had visions that account for the resurrection narratives in the New Testament.

As for Blackburn, he regards religion as a delusion. He actually wrote a paper three years ago defending his

refusal to put on a yarmulke when invited by a Jewish friend to Friday dinner, on the grounds that it would express a respect for religion he doesn?t feel. (He complained about ?respect creep,? saying that he?s willing to tolerate religious believers, but that doesn?t mean he?s obligated to treat their beliefs as anything other than nonsense.)

Yet philosophy, a bit like politics, tends to make strange bedfellows. At least on the subject of truth, Benedict and many of the luminaries in Lugano seem to have some common ground.

Blackburn offers an interesting case in point. In his book *Truth*, Blackburn acidly denounced ?something diabolical in the region of relativism, multiculturalism or postmodernism, something which corrodes and corrupts the universities and the public culture, that sweeps away moral standards, lays waste young people?s minds, and rots our precious civilization from within.?

It?s language that, in another context, easily might have flowed from the papal pen.

In his keynote address this morning, Blackburn returned to the theme.

?Relativism attracts suspicion and hostility for a good reason,? he said. ?Suppose I voice an honest and heartfelt opinion about anything, from mathematics to aesthetics. The conversation stopping remark ?that?s just your opinion? is not only beside the point, but more importantly dehumanising. It signals that your words do not deserve to be taken seriously, but only taken as symptoms, like signs of a disease.?

?It is not only the conservative half of each of us who cannot stand this patronage,? Balckburn said. ?It is each of us *in toto*, agents attempting to reason our way through the practical problems with which life tries to trip us up.

On the other hand, Blackburn was not ready to sign up for Benedict XVI?s muscular sense of absolute truth, and certainly not truth rooted in a personal deity. Instead, he advocated a position known in the philosophical guild as ?deflationism.?

In essence, deflationism declares the ?truth wars? over on the grounds that there?s nothing to fight about in the first place. Both relativism and ?realism,? the belief in absolute standards of truth, presume that truth is a substantial property that either exists or not. In reality, deflationists say, it?s no such thing.

Take any propositional statement, such as ?water is formed by hydrogen and oxygen.? It contributes nothing to the content of that statement, deflationists say, to rephrase it as ?*it is true that* water is formed by hydrogen and oxygen.? Truth is ?invisible,? or ?transparent? -- it is not a lofty Platonic form, but rather a simple generalization about individual statements that are supported by convincing evidence.

Deflationism thereby refutes relativism, because it holds that statements can be either right or wrong -- not ?for you? or ?for now,? but right or wrong, period. It breaks with more robust forms of realism, however, in rejecting

the need for an abstract metaphysical theory to support that position. ?Truth? is nothing more than a linguistic label given to accurate claims -- not a property or a ?meta-reality.?

Thus Blackburn?s advice is to forget the debate between realism and relativism, and just get on with analysis of specific questions. He offers the example of capital punishment: ?If we hammer this out, and decide that it should be [abolished], then we do not increase the theoretical temperature by adding ?what?s more, that?s true.? ?

Blackburn is aware that the deflationist position is likely to seem a bit, well, deflating for realists such as Benedict XVI -- a thin gruel, compared to the meaty stew of absolutes which the pope likes to dish up.

Yet Benedict may take comfort that even someone like Blackburn, obviously worlds away from Catholic thought on most matters, is nevertheless on his side in opposing a ?dictatorship of relativism.? Many thinkers here seem to share a similar sense; after all, they have spent lifetimes arguing passionately for particular views of the world, and don?t appreciate the suggestion that their conclusions are the result of nothing more than chemical processes in the brain, or psychological and cultural forces. While many aren?t persuaded by the content of the Catholic catechism, they nevertheless grudgingly admire Benedict?s defense of truth. Indeed, it may be the first papal cause in a while some of them even noticed, let alone endorsed.

Improbably enough, therefore, the conversations unfolding this weekend in Lugano could betoken a new chapter in the oft-strained relationship between church and culture. Stimulating reflection on truth, in a way that softens the normal divide between theists and secularists, could turn out to be Benedict XVI?s most important legacy in the realm of Western intellectual life.

What?s more, that?s true!

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I had the opportunity to sit down with Blackburn on the margins of the Lugano symposium this morning. The following are excerpts from our conversation.

Are you familiar with the writings of the pope on truth?

I?m afraid that I don?t follow the pope?s pronouncements very much. Of course, I do mention him in my paper this morning. I am aware of his views on relativism, the danger of relativism.

You?re referring to his warning about a ?dictatorship of relativism.?

Yes. Myself, I?m not sure that I share that diagnosis of the modern condition. That is, people may say they?re relativists, but nature is too strong for them. They actually have opinions, quite passionate ones. My own sense

of things, at least as far as morality goes, is that there?s as much passion and commitment as there ever was, even in Western Europe. Of course, it not necessarily passion and commitment in the direction the pope approves, but that?s another matter. As far as people being able to take a stand goes, I don?t see that sort of failing in the modern world. I think people find it quite easy to take a stand.

Yet in your book on truth, you wrote rather acidly about relativism corroding public morality and laying waste to young minds.

I think I got the rhetoric of that passage slightly wrong, because somebody else challenged me on it. I intended it as a quotation of a line of thought, rather than words from my own mouth.

Still, I got the impression that you feel some sympathy with that view.

Oh, yes. I think it?s a real danger. I think in that regard the pope struck a chord, which is why we?re talking about his words now. In a slightly Aristotelian sense -- and that too is a name we can share -- you?ve got to be very careful how you educate people. There is a way of educating people in the West, which I don?t approve of, and which allows a certain corrosiveness, a certain extreme skepticism about values, to become part of the discourse. It?s the ?whatever? of the British teenager, who just shrugs his shoulders and turns his back on everything the older generation stands for. When the message is reinforced by television, by the media, by popular idols and celebrities and so on, you see them living careless and foolish lifestyles which are held up as goals, then I am conservative enough to worry about whether there?s something toxic in the body politic.

To that extent, I?m on Aristotle?s side, if not directly that of the church. People have to practice a sensible discussion of values, sensible realizations that values matter, a sensible realization that public discourse about values is as necessary in their generation as it is in every generation.

Pope Benedict?s desire is to stimulate a broad cultural conversation about truth. Is he succeeding?

I do think there?s a movement which he must approve of, though he might not always approve the particular directions it takes. It seems to me that ten years ago, what goes loosely under the name of post-modernism was much more an ?item? in the general cultural conversation. That is, people like Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida in France, some aspects of Heidegger, had led people in academic and semi-academic conversation to doubt authority and to doubt even their own judgment, to become, as it were, sort of paralyzed because of familiar thoughts about plurality of opinions, the difficulty of proof, cultural relativism. I think it?s fair to say that in the discourse of intellectuals, that was a major wave.

I think its heyday was in the ?80s and ?90s. It?s sometimes said that as far as America goes, it was killed off by the events of September 11. I suspect there?s some truth in that. You know, there comes a time to be serious. The playful, ironic, ?anything goes? sort of attitude may have suited the ?90s, but not anymore.

We see that movement in Europe today even on the left, where there?s a strong rethinking of the limits of multi-culturalism. The growing sense is that the values of the Enlightenment have to be defended.

Exactly right. The problem with ?anything goes? is that some fairly nasty characters who come in under that rubric, with some nasty opinions and nasty, threatening ideologies that will take root and fill the vacuum.

Let me ask a politically incorrect question. Prior to 9/11, the cultural fault line in the West was between Western theists and Western secularists. Is it easier post-9/11 for Western theists and secularists to see themselves as having more in common with one another, meaning commitment to a basic set of Western values, then with those who don?t share those values -- in a special way today, some currents in Islam?

Yes, I do think it is. We share a history. There have been various degrees of rapprochement between the churches and the world of the Enlightenment. I think a lot of people from both secular and religious backgrounds are nervous about seeing an awful lot of that tradition coming under attack, from people who either don?t respect that tradition or actively wish to destroy it. The extent to which those people represent an ?ism? is, I think, tricky. The disaffected terrorist or anarchist, the chap with the bomb, may have his head full of ideas, but the extent to which they form a coherent system is very doubtful, I think.

They don?t need a coherent system to do a lot of harm.

That?s right. The criminals have to be criminalized, they?re dangerous and we have to do what we can to keep ourselves secure from them. I fully share that government concern. On the other hand, it seems to me that we thinkers can fight our own ?war against terror? in a different way.

In just the last couple of months, I?ve had two e-mails that have pleased me more than almost anything else in my academic career. One was from Syria, from an Arab who wanted to translate my little book *Think*, which is a resolutely secular introduction to philosophy, into Arabic, because he thought it would do a lot of good on the Arab street. Another was from a lonely student in Iraq, who wanted to read some of my books on truth and such matters. I take great pride in that.

It seems to me that this is my little contribution to fighting the battle on behalf of the West.

That?s precisely my point. We?re living in a new world, in which there is a much more clear recognition of the need to fight a battle on behalf of the West, which at least on that canon of issues puts you and the pope in the same boat.

Yes, that?s right. I don?t mind at all finding myself talking alongside representatives of the Church of England or the Roman Catholic church if that?s the message we?re trying to convey. I?ve often put it slightly mischievously by saying, ?Even Christians are human!? I think there are a lot of values that humanity needs to defend. I?d just have to listen to exactly what they say.

Would you as a secular intellectual with no particular affinity for religious systems nevertheless be prepared to say that it?s helpful to have someone with the cultural standing of the pope making this argument?

It could be, yes. I think it?s important. The defense of values is something that has to be done again and again and again. You can never rest. Insofar as he?s defending what I would recognize as Enlightenment values, then of course I?m very pleased to hear it. Naturally, as a non-religious and certainly non-Catholic thinker, I?d be worried about whether some of the values he?s defending are ones I can?t subscribe to.

The pope has written that ultimately, it is only truth that sets limits to power. If there aren?t objective truths about human dignity, for example, what we can and cannot do to other people, then you can justify absolutely anything.

I think that?s a very good argument. Whether it requires a high-powered notion of truth, I don?t know. It certainly requires a value, that?s for sure. It requires that you think of other people in a certain way, acknowledge boundaries to what you can do to them. It requires a commitment of you. Whether that commitment in turn requires a more heavyweight notion of truth is another question, it seems to me.

Now, of course, governments are extremely unlikely to acknowledge that there are limits to what you can do to people. The United States threw that over in the last five years. I don?t think any government, or any religion for that matter, has an unblemished record of respecting the boundaries to what you may do to other people.

But truth does play this role of setting boundaries?

I don?t see it as ?truth? that does so. It seems to me that it takes a value to make a value. The value of respect for people, boundaries to what we may do to other people, has to be established by thinking about the conditions of living together, the way in which the vulnerable are to be treated, and so on. You can get an awful long way thinking about those things without thinking about truth.

Nonetheless, acknowledging at least the possibility of establishing such values does play the role of protecting us from ourselves?

It does indeed.

In your book, you write about the potential mischief in even seemingly innocuous religious beliefs. Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, you wrote, can dispose Catholics to also see Satan in other people and hence feel license to destroy them. In a similar vein, Benedict has written that ?the pathology of religion is the most dangerous sickness of the human spirit.? Do you at least admire that commitment to rationality on his part?

Yes, very much so. I think one thing the Catholic church has always had going for it, and I say this as, I guess, a ?Protestant secularist,? is a very strong sense of the number of ways in which the unaided human heart can go wrong. That I think is salutary and very healthy. All credit to the pope, especially if he?s also capable of confronting ways in which Christianity has gone wrong. ? For myself, I take a pessimistic view not just of [Christianity?s] past but also its present. Because of the decline in temporal power of religious authority, things

feel much better in the West, but I don?t think that can be put down to progress.

From your own point of view, is a form of theism with a principled commitment to reason preferable to one without it?

Yes, it is. I think that it was G.K. Chesterton, who was of course Catholic, who said that the trouble with atheists is not that they believe nothing, but that they?ll believe anything. One has to be very careful about that. But by ?reason,? I?m going to mean not the reason of St. Thomas or the apologetic tradition, but the commitment to discourse that you get in the town hall and the town square ? the ability to find common ground and so on. These are values I hope I share with the pope, but he goes an extra yard or two which I won?t follow.

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