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Reflections on Benedict's Trip

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 19, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Benedict?s trip to the United Kingdom had one, over-arching theme: There must be a place for the Church in the public square and the efforts of ?secularism? to deny the Church such a voice in the public affairs of nations should be resisted. As is always the case, Pope Benedict speaks with great clarity, and he commended John Henry Newman, whose beatification was the highpoint of the visit, for the clarity of his many writings. Yet on this central point of the Church?s role in civil society, he something less than perfectly clear.

In the Pope's address to Parliament, in the magnificent Westminster Hall, with all its history seemingly streaming down upon the podium, Benedict said this: ?Britain has emerged as a pluralist democracy which places great value on freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation and respect for the rule of law, with a strong sense of the individual?s rights and duties, and of the equality of all citizens before the law. While couched in different language, Catholic social teaching has much in common with this approach, in its overriding concern to safeguard the unique dignity of every human person, created in the image and likeness of God, and in its emphasis on the duty of civil authority to foster the common good.? I would submit that the phrase ?couched in a different language? suggests that lack of clarity. Couches are comfy, over-stuffed, given to naps. They are not syllogisms.

Later in that same speech the Pope pointed to the fact that the Church?s traditional teaching on civil society is rooted in natural law. ?The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers ? still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion ? but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.? The problem with natural law as the basis of a dialogue between the Church and civil society is both practical and theoretical. Practically, natural law philosophy is not much taught outside of Catholic collegs and universities. As well, natural law has always been resisted by Protestants because it is unbiblical, derived not from the Scriptures but from the pagan theories of Aristotle.

The theoretical problem with natural law is different and, I believe, more problematic for the Church. Because natural law inevitably ends up being hyper-teleological, it gets bogged down quickly in a discussion of the ?ends? of the human person, in anthropology, in which people have such widely different biases, the anthropological discussion is easily as complicated and problematic as the ethical debate it is meant to ground. More importantly, precisely because n atural law theory ?prescinds? from divine revelation, it unwittingly facilitates the reduction of religion to ethics that has been part and parcel of the removal of faith from the public square, confining it to the realm of the private.

These reservations about natural law are not mine only. They have been voiced previously by?then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. In his now famous 2004 discussion with Jurgen Habermas, published as ?The Dialectics of Secularization,? Ratzinger admitted the limited usefulness of natural law theory as the ground for a renewed

dialogue with the modern world, in part because the idea of ?the natural? has been almost irrevocably altered in the past century and one-half under the influence of evolutionary theory.

Ratzinger?s discussion with Habermas was in a distinctly academic setting, and his speech to Parliament had a different audience in mind. What, then, did he propose in the UK? He proposed a dialogue: ?This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith ? the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief ? need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.? Calls for ?dialogue? are a bug-aboo of the right, a bug-aboo I sometimes share. After acknowledging the difficulties posed by distorted religious ideas ? he mentioned fundamentalism and sectarianism ? Benedict did not call for seminars to instruct MP?s in natural law, he called for dialogue. Nothing more, nothing less.

I think, however, there was an implied additional point of reference to Benedict?s call. Monumentum petivitis circumspecti. These words mark the otherwise unmarked grave of the architect Christopher Wren, situated amidst the glories of St. Paul?s Cathedral which Wren designed. Benedict spoke his words in similarly referential surroundings, in Westminster Hall, where Thomas More stood trial, where kings and queens celebrate their coronations with banquets and where their bodies lie in state. The dialogue between faith and reason that he hopes will influence the public square is not merely rooted in similarly humane ideas, albeit ?couched? in different language. The dialogue is rooted in history. Those secularists who seek to remove the influence of ?Jerusalem? in the history of the West, leaving only Athens, are as misguided as those fundamentalists who wish to write Athens out of the equation. Put differently, humanism in not the sole province of secularists. There is a proud tradition of Christian humanism, and where better than in the room where More stood trial to point towards it?

Benedict was not imprecise in Britain because his thoughts are confused. He was imprecise because he knows that in the current socio-cultural context, the Church is not in a position to throwdown its tenets like thunderbolts from above. In the UK, he invited the assembled politicians, and the society they represent, to look deeper, into the ethical presuppositions of their culture. I wish he had focused, too, on the aesthetic, artistic presuppositions of British culture but perhaps that seemed self-evident. Beauty, too, shapes our understanding of what it is to be a human being and, therefore, what it is to be a follower of the God who took on human flesh. But, Benedict was right to insist on no more than dialogue and, like his hero Newman, to approach the interaction between faith and reason with confidence and vigor. Before we run, we must walk. And before the culture of the West will listen, we Catholics must learn to propose, not to insist, to be generous in our estimation of the opinions of others and of their motives, to propose the Gospel, not to enforce it. In this regard, our soft-spoken Pontiff, so frequently compared unfavorably with his bigger-than-life predeccesor, is ideally suited to the task he recommended: a dialogue.

N.B. Just after I wrote this, I consulted Austen Ivereigh?s article [1]at America, where he wrote this: ?Although he had come with a fierce message about the vital importance of the place of faith in public life and education, it had been framed, throughout, in terms and language and symbols which pointed to the value of dialogue and respect. It is this, perhaps above all, which floored his critics. The Pope's was a message which all could instantly recognise as the true humanism.? So, perhaps, the call for humanism was evident on the ground and to Brits in a way it was not to us in the States watching on television. Still, I wish he had named it, not least because ?humanism? has been the target of Christian fundamentalism in America for at least forty years.

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