

PAPAL POLEMICS¹

1- The influence of the Greek heritage (Hellenism) on human civilization is both indelible and undeniable. One major component of this heritage is the systematic employment of the mind in the pursuit of knowledge, both theoretical and practical –sometimes described as the “rational” or “rationalist” (as opposed to “mythical”) approach of trying to understand the world and to dealing with it. By the time the Islamic World “came into its own” in the 8th and 9th centuries, and theologians of different hues began to extol the unique virtues of the revelatory knowledge introduced to the world by the Holy Qur’an, a debate began to take shape concerning the comparative status or value of the two species or bodies of knowledge which now seemed to “compete” with one another –the rational and the revealed. Meanings of terms such as “rational” and “knowledge” had to be analyzed seriously and in depth. After all, could one hold a revealed truth or item of knowledge not to be rational? Does Faith altogether exclude Reason? On the other hand, can items of knowledge be founded on Articles of Faith? Can theology itself be considered a “scientific” discipline, containing knowledge? Or is it simply a collection of fables?

Ibn Khaldun (d.1406) distinguished between what he called “rational” and what he called “transmitted” sciences (*ulum*)². He subsumed, under the designation “transmitted”, all those “sciences” which may be related to the revealed religion, such as the sciences of grammar, jurisprudence, and theology. By “rational” he referred to those sciences, such as the natural or human sciences (including social science, which he felt he had invented) which are dependent *ultimately* on reason. He did not venture to make this (e.g. the distinction between physics and metaphysics, or between medicine and theology) one between a scientific field of inquiry and a non-scientific field of inquiry. In this respect, and in like fashion as to the manner in which His Holiness the Pope comments on the University of Regensburg, he would not have found the pursuit of theology –even at two faculties- at a university which is devoted to the study of science an anathema. Nor would he have

¹ The comments in this article address some of the issues raised in the lecture delivered by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg on 12th September 2006.

² Singular “*ilm*”, noun, used typically to denote a *body* of knowledge, distinguished from “*aqli*”, adjective, here describing a *means* of attaining or of explaining/justifying an item of knowledge.

even thought to suggest that the pursuit of the transmitted sciences is a non-rational exercise, irrational or done without reason. The distinctive mark between the rational and the non-rational sciences rather, and as Ibn Khaldun presented this, only lay in this, that whereas the non-rational sciences on his view were bound by the tenets of the revealed religion, the rational sciences were unbound by any such tenets. The only tenets they were bound by, if these can be called “bounds”, are the tenets of reason. The distinction between the two genera of disciplines did not thus lie in their methodology as it lay in the origins and status of their first principles. Theologians could be excellent polemicists, philologists, historians, or even sophists, according to this view, but they can never “rise” to being philosophical, simply because in doing so they would have to rise above, and therefore shed, exactly those tenets of belief, or faith, which makes them who they are.

So far, and unless one takes issue with whether there are indeed *a priori* rational principles or truths standing at the foundations of the edifice of science, Ibn Khaldun’s distinction might seem harmless and straightforward enough³: assuming one can abstract from the question of how one came by one’s “first principles”, one can easily show that a “rational” or “systematic employment of the mind” can be applied indifferently (within a deductive framework) to the principles of theology as to those of physics. But trouble arises as soon as tenets (contentions about the world) from one “science” begin to be compared with those of the other- as indeed, even in the medieval milieu to which he belonged- they often were. For example, how literally should one understand the verses in the Qur’an describing Paradise, or what happiness in the afterlife consists in? Philosophers (e.g., Alfarabi, d. 950), as well as Sufis (e.g. Ibn Hazm, d. 1064, or Avempace, d. 1138) writing in the Islamic milieu, and mindful as much of Plato’s Cave allegory of images as of anything more exotically “oriental”, often resorted to the distinction between different levels of audiences (mental or cognitive capacities), and the correspondingly different forms of languages or “disciplines” in which the different tenets are held or propounded, to explain otherwise apparent inconsistencies between reality and its representation, or between different contentions about the world. Averroes (d. 1198) for

³ The classical distinction between *episteme* (knowledge) and *doxa* (opinion) can be tightened further by postulating a distinction between different types of *a priori* truths, e.g. such as the Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic. But the clarity of the distinction between two genera of bodies of beliefs has been questioned, one argument being that, as far as any agent is concerned, a necessary condition for knowing a statement to be true is to believe it to be true.

example, became famous, *inter-alia*, for his so-called “double-truth” theory: the truth recognized and expressed by the philosophers through the language of logic and reason, and that by the general public through the language of allegory and religion. Articles of Reason and those of Faith may thus seem contradictory, Averroes would have argued, but this only when they are viewed as belonging to the same category. View them in their properly distinct categories, and the contradiction between them immediately disappears. Sufis like Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), on the other hand, as well as Avempace, while accepting the categorical distinctions made by the philosophers, saw their own (mystical) truths (rather than those of reason) as what truly belong to the higher planes of reality (or as representing higher levels of cognition of that reality). For them, in contradistinction to the philosophers, reality transcends language in any case, and can never therefore be captured by it. Indeed, meanings captured by language are necessarily- that is, by definition- dwarfed or emasculated. Typically, poetic or allegorical language, or better still, pure and rationally-unadulterated mystical experience, is what brings us closer to an understanding of God. Famously, returning to Plato’s Cave Allegory, Moslem mystics argued that way beyond the philosophers’ advanced stage of perceiving the light, there was a cognitive/ontic mystical level of union with that light, where the perceiver as subject *becomes* the very object of perception, in a kind of epistemic nirvana. That is why –or the sense in which- Ibn Hazm (quoted in the Papal homily) refuses to “bind” God (i.e., how *we* articulate our knowledge of Him) to human reason.⁴ It is true that Ibn Hazm is also a “literalist”, i.e., one who refuses to accept there being different levels of meaning in the written text of the Qurán. But his literalism is an expression of his discontentment with the bickering of linguists and jurists on this matter, as much as in his faith in what lies *beyond* the text- in his case, of that “bond-ness” between subject and object which can only be discovered/acquired through love. Actually, and in spite of his having been singled out negatively as an Islamic example of anti-rationalism in the Pope’s lecture, it is arguably only a (non-rationalist, or mystical) Ibn Hazm-type approach that might be drawn upon to explain, for example, otherwise rationally unfathomable oddities as the concept of the Trinity, or such as the part (a finite human being) being capable of becoming the whole (the

⁴ Another Islamic intellectual school which also refused to “bind” God to human reason were the Ashárite theologians (contra the Mu’tazilites): an entire debate between those two schools of theology in the Islamic world centered precisely on the question of whether or not, e.g. God can be unjust. If God’s essence is Justice, as Reason tells us, He cannot act unjustly. But if He is omnipotent, as the Qur’an states, he surely can act unjustly -though he will/would?? choose not to.

infinity of God). Love, for Ibn Hazm, rather than Reason (as it is for Alfarabi or Averroes), is what makes the world go round! But whether it is Reason (Logos) or Love (Eros), the roots of Hellenism (whether pre-Socratic, Aristotelian or neo-Platonist) are as indubitably imprinted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, as they are in the Christian intellectual tradition- in spite of the implied contention in the Pope's speech that it is significantly Christianity which, in some basic manner, is "Hellenistic".

2. Of course, when Hellenism is referred to in this kind of "reverential" context -as being a cultural fountain or spring feeding an evolving human civilization- what is normally singled out is that one shining thread of light in an otherwise complex tapestry of human history many other parts of which are dark and dismal. Our reverence for Hellenism does not blind us to the existence of the dark side. After all, we are just as cognizant of those "Thucydidean" intellectual heights from which an advanced understanding of human nature is reflected, as we are of the violence and barbarism itself exhibited by the Greeks and which Thucydides himself laments in his writings. But it is clearly not the massacres perpetrated by Athenian soldiers that lie at the source of our inspiration (or the work of Thucydides himself as an Army General) as it is the works of Thucydides the historian, and the works, likewise, of Athenian philosophers and lawmakers and architects and sculptors; the Hellenistic heritage of which we are commonly proud simply and exclusively picks out that spirit of intellectual inquiry, that creative achievement, that marriage between principles of morality and those of reason, which we may find expressed indifferently in Pythagorean numbers or Euclidean geometric shapes as in poems, or in syllogisms as in monuments or statues. We neither discount the existence of similar shining threads in other cultures and periods in the overall human tapestry (e.g., India, China, etc.), nor are we blind to other threads in Greek history which are barbaric and shameful. But it is precisely and primarily this Hellenistic "imprint" of the rational/cultural *motif* in the Christian tradition, or the claim of a spiritual contiguity or consistency between Hellenism and Christianity, which seems to have come under criticism -on three counts- from within the Church Itself, the charge being that (Hellenistic) rationalism is foreign to Christianity, besides being inconsistent with Christianity's core essence as a Faith. And it is precisely *this* criticism (that Christianity should shed any Hellenism attached to it, or should shed any pretense to Hellenism It might have) that His Holiness seems to be preoccupied with and wishing to challenge in His homily. This beautiful humanitarian *motif* which is typically identified with Hellenism is not foreign to Christianity, the reader

understands His Holiness as arguing, nor is it a fortuitous addendum introduced to the religion by some ill-informed or misguided Aristotelian-inspired cleric during the Church's long history, but is on the contrary an expression of what is fundamental to the Church and its message. And as for, specifically, that attitudinal serenity and the cerebral disposition one finds in civilized human beings of resorting to reason in the face of disagreements as a bridge to other minds for winning them over, or of tolerating others when they cannot be rationally wooed by one's values and beliefs- this, surely, is intrinsic to the Church, and is not an imported doctrine from some foreign or Hellenistic "secular" source.

It is in this context, I would argue, that the unfortunate misunderstanding (?) attributed to His Holiness occurs: for, wishing to underline Christianity's firm standing (or is it its uniqueness?) in this regard, a quote by contrast is mentioned by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II (1391-1425) (from a purported exchange with a Persian) about Islam's violent nature, its disregard for reason and its support of war (as a means of expanding its human bounty). Christianity can easily be contrasted at least with *that* image of religion, and it is surely *that* tradition of Islam, (one can hear the subliminal argument continuing), which is truly disconnected from any Hellenistic roots (in the specific sense meant) -disconnected even from anything to do with rationalism, as that reference to the "anti-rationalist" Moslem Ibn Hazm should show us!

3. This particular (and, if one may also say, unnecessary) "detour" in the Pope's remarks aroused much anger among Moslems, unfortunately diverting attention from the need to understand, and debate the very important, underlying assumption on which the Pope's argument seems to rest, and which needs to be ferreted out and discussed, namely, the claim that there is a mutually exclusive relationship between violence and reason, or that to be rational (or to be informed primarily by one's cerebral constitution) is in some mysterious way to be non-violent. I shall return to address this questionable assumption below. Meantime, attention in the aftermath of the Pope's speech was focused, in a sorry way, on a kind of religious "beauty contest", rather like it used to be in the medieval tradition from which the Pope derives the reference to the exchange between the Persian and the Emperor. Of course, purported debates and exchanges between exponents of contending intellectual positions (as that reported in the Pope's speech) were used quite commonly in the medieval literature to expound and propound one or the other of those positions, and a reference to

one such exchange in the Pope's homily (on whether Islam is a peaceful religion) should not therefore come as a surprise. In his **al-Imta' Wa'l-Mu'anasah**, al-Tawhidi (d. 1023) reports on an exchange which it would be useful to recall in this context, if only to remind us of the problems the Moslem world faced as the Hellenistic heritage began to seep into it, between a linguist "representing" the indigenous traditionalist culture of Islam (al-Sirafi), and a philosopher (Matta -the Arabic for Mathew) "representing" the early Nestorian Christians credited with beginning the Greek-into-Arabic translation movement, which supposedly takes place in the court of some Abbasid Wazir. The debate revolves around whether there is any need to translate the Greek sciences (especially philosophy) into Arabic. The linguist contends that truth cannot be disembodied from language, and since the Qur'an as the revealed word is the depository of all truth, there is nothing to be learnt by studying what the Greeks have to say. Surely, all they could do is to expound on the truth which their language embodies. But since it is not in their language that the Qur'an was revealed, studying what they say in search for the truth would be like barking up the wrong tree. The enterprise would be doubly foolish if we translated Greek into Arabic to do this, since what we would end up studying would be incoherent concepts expressed in the amateurish Arabic of Nestorian clerics. Try as he might, the logician Matta is "shown" to be incapable of bringing forth any coherent argument to defend his point of view. His strongest argument, that truth is independent of a specific language, and can therefore be expressed in any language, is not given the full space it deserves. The purported exchange, written up by the pro-Sirafi traditionalist al-Tawhidi, ends up being a comic treatment of an incompetent Nestorian Arabic speaker, rather than a record of the actual minutes of the debate. But quite independently of whether the reported exchange is an honest rendering of what took place, the debate's dramatization reflects something else of equal importance, or possibly even of far more importance, namely, the actual question on people's minds at the time whether the Arabic milieu was in need of importing "foreign ideas", and of opening up to other cultures and civilizations. One assumes, in a similar vein, the purported exchange between the Emperor and the Persian (regardless of how literally true) similarly reflected the (legitimate) question in some people's minds, then, or now, of whether Islam is a "peaceful" or "rational" religion in the first place.

We now know that the first question -and in spite of Matta's "loss" in the polemical exchange with Sirafi- was settled finally and fortunately in favor

of the Greek sciences. These were translated into Arabic with full force⁵, and incorporated into the Arabic intellectual tradition (later percolating, and then pouring into the Latin West). But in spite of this, the incorporation of the Hellenistic tradition into Islamic culture never was, and is still not, totally acculturated. Just like His Holiness points out with regard to the Church and its internal critics, there have been, and still are, “purists” in both traditions who will suspect every idea whose origin is not literally found in their Holy Books. Such purists have been, and will continue to be, a source of challenge to religions or ideologies which set out or purport to be inclusivist or open rather than exclusivist or closed. But it is, significantly, the second question- of whether Islam is in its nature peaceful and rational, or even “civilized”- which, unfortunately, exploded with full force in people’s minds in recent years as, first, the historic Buddhist structures in Afghanistan were dynamited by self-assigned Moslems; and as, second, the towers of the World Trade Center in New York imploded and collapsed on impact with planes hi-jacked by terrorists acting in the name of Islam. Terrorist attacks in the name of Islam in different parts of the world soon followed, making the question whether Islam is by nature rational or non-violent one which is very much on peoples’ minds, thus explaining the reference, in medieval style, to a medieval exchange on the issue.

4. Regardless, then, of the authenticity of the exchange reported in the Pope’s speech –and we saw that the literal veracity of such exchanges is questionable; and regardless of His Eminence’s real views on the nature of Islam– and again, clarifications were later made on the Pope’s behalf that he did not share the view attributed to the Emperor in this regard, the Moslem community just happens practically and in any case to be faced with the challenge of having to defend Islam from the charge (however unfair) –and arising primarily from horrendous acts rather than from written doctrines- that theirs is an inherently violent, uncultured and intolerant religion. Of course, to say this is not to exonerate followers of other religions of a similar onus. Secondly, and more generally, however, and as a matter that has to do less with this or that religion as it has to do with what rationality means, there is that other, more sweeping challenge of whether to accept the hypothesis- clearly upheld by His Eminence in that speech- whether rationality and violence are indeed mutually exclusive.

⁵ The role which early Christians played in the transmission of the Greek heritage into the Moslem milieu, in parallel fashion to the role Jews played in the transmission of the Arabic heritage to the Latin West, should dispel the notion of a discontinuity between the cultural heritages of these religions.

As to the first charge, this is clearly not a matter that can be proven or dispelled by words⁶, however scholastically argued or supported: it is a matter, rather, that can only be addressed through the actual behavior of Moslem communities –their codes of behavior, their conduct amongst themselves and towards others, their legal institutions, etc, and the self-image, therefore, that they succeed in conveying both to themselves and to others. But the second challenge which is embedded in the Pope’s speech does indeed lend itself to a conceptual analysis: surely, it should be possible for us through conceptual analysis, and through the study of the relevant human behavior, to decide whether it is really the case that a religion (or any ideology more generally) whose tenets are consistent with those of reason is less likely to be disposed to (i.e., to have true followers who are less likely, insofar as they are followers of that religion or ideology, to be disposed to) the use of violence. This is, after all, in the way it is presented, and in my view, the more challenging, and intellectually questionable, of the hypotheses contained in the Pope’s speech.

Let me, in order to address this issue, which seems to invoke what “Reason” or “Rational” means, especially in a “Hellenistic” context, recall the opening remarks by Ibn Khaldun. There we saw that a clear distinction was being made between “science” as a noun (which could include theological disciplines) and “rational” as an adjective which modifies an altogether different set of disciplines. The so-called transmitted sciences, including the different theological schools within Islam, clearly used reason to the best of their abilities in explaining and defending their respective tenets, and it cannot be in this respect, therefore, viz. in the use of reason as a methodology in the pursuit of truth, or in the defense of an argument, that Ibn Khaldun would have identified them both as belonging to the category of the non-rational sciences. As a matter of fact Ibn Khaldun’s only “test” was whether one science or the other (and both categories of pursuits were scientific according to his definitions, we recall) was based on potentially fallible (as opposed to falsifiable)⁷ premises, or premises which the pursuer

⁶ One example “The Pope As A Dubious Academic Lecturer”, by B.Z.Kedar and M.Abu-Sway (unpublished mimeo), questions whether the *Sura* in which the Qur’anic verse (2:256) occurred is Meccan (as the Pope suggests) or Medinian. The writers also point out that the oft-cited word “*jihad*” in association with Islam doesn’t occur even once in the Qurán in the context of war, but occurs rather in contexts having to do with spiritual self-improvement. But correct as these contentions may be, this does not by itself dispel the image in peoples’ minds –against the background of Taliban and al-Qa’idah, etc., and the references to such writers as Ibn Taymiyyah- of Islam being an irredentist religion.

⁷ Of course, the notion of falsifiability in the scientific sense was only introduced by Karl Popper in the 20th century. Even so, we could countenance a “family resemblance” in the notion of fallibility, which is premised on the principle that, if it is human then it could be false.

of that science did not regard as being above or beyond question (even if they didn't regard them as empirically falsifiable). The rational sciences were founded on (human) reason, and the principles on which they are founded could always be revised, if only because human reason is fallible; whereas the transmitted sciences were founded on faith in the revealed truth, and the principles on which they are founded, being divine truths, are infallible.

Although Ibn Khaldun's remarks were made primarily with Islam in mind, one assumes that he would have made the same remarks concerning any religion, or any body of beliefs founded upon (i.e. originated by) revelation rather than reason. But it is not at this juncture or in this manner that our problem arises. Because, it is certainly not being claimed in the Pope's speech that Christianity is *founded* on Reason (rather than on Revelation). The claim, rather, and as we stated above, is closer to being that Christianity's tenets are *consistent with* the tenets of rationality (and that, given the mutual exclusivity of rationality and violence, Christianity is less disposed to the use of violence). I have already alluded to Averroes' double-truth theory, and its invocation in this context is extremely relevant, for he too, wished to show that Islam and rationality are consistent with one another. His argument, phrased simply, went in the following way: pick up any tenet of religion you will. This tenet will either be consistent with Reason or inconsistent with it. If it is the former then the problem of Reason and Revelation being contradictory does not arise. If the latter then what we need to do is to re-interpret the revealed tenet. An interpretation will eventually be found –within the body of the revealed truths- which is consistent with the article of Reason⁸.

We might be able to understand Averroes' project of trying to prove to his fellow Moslems that Islam and Rationalism are harmonious if we took into account the existence of an environment which was potentially hostile to the study of the "Greek", or rational "sciences". The existence of a Revealed Truth in Islam, we could hear Averroes saying, does not preclude the pursuit of knowledge through Reason. Indeed, there is nothing to fear from the rational sciences, since all the truths that can be generated by them will not, indeed, cannot be inconsistent with the truths of the Qur'an. But this does not

⁸ There is a common tradition interpreting Averroes' project (in his *Fasl al-Maqal*) to be one of trying to harmonize between revelation and reason. But the comments here I believe reveal a clever but clear Averroistic preference to (tilting of the scales in favor of) Reason: statements which are up for interpretation are always to be those from the Qur'an.

seem to be what concerns the Pope in his speech- even as he pleads a “Hellenistic” *motif* in Christianity. He is certainly not worried about the continued pursuit of science in the Christian world. Nor is He, for example, proposing a marriage between Reason and Faith in the image of a Cartesian rationalist proof for the existence of God –the Vatican’s library is in any case already replete with such “proofs”. Rather, in what seems to be a dangerously polarized environment, what seems to be uppermost on the Pope’s mind is *violence*, or the extent to which different ideological actors on the world stage can co-exist peacefully with, and respectfully of one another.

Needless to say, such a concern is quite different from the concern over whether the tenets of one’s religion are consistent with the tenets of Reason, especially when we interpret “reason” or “rationality” simply to mean a calculative skill or an organizational ability or a methodology. Yet it seems that it is this aspect of “reason” or of “rationality” -unquestionably of course a mark of the Aristotelian tradition- which is underlined in the Pope’s argument –even though these aspects have little bearing, if any, on the use of violence. Indeed, considered neutrally, there is no reason whatsoever to support the argument that being rational somehow precludes, discourages, or deters people from resorting to the use of violence. Quite the contrary, there is a “respectable” international relations theory tradition rooted in such eminent figures as Machiavelli and Clausewitz, for example, claiming a natural correlation between a calculative reasoning faculty and the use of force whenever necessary in the pursuit of a perceived interest. Furthermore, there is nothing in the tradition of rational decision-making or choice theory that sets the use of violence up as a taboo. In short, even a murderer (such as the hijackers of the 9/11 planes) can be rational, strictly speaking, and act rationally. That is why, after all, we consider them culpable for their actions. “Rational” simply identifies a method of using one’s mind, a systematic manner of thinking, as well as of acting, but it does not identify a specific set of beliefs or acts, or necessarily imply a set of moral beliefs. This leads one to wonder whether what is really on the Pope’s mind is not reason or rationality as mental skills, but something more like *reasonableness* or intellectual serenity as a psychological disposition or a moral sentiment. In other words, what the Pope may really be claiming –and what may indeed be more reasonable to claim- is that Christianity’s “Hellenism” ultimately consists in its reasonableness, rather than in its rationality. It is this reasonableness that might draw the line, for example, between a believer being pious and being fanatic, or being a peace-maker and being a killer.

5- Here, then, and away from the classical debate on Faith and Reason (Is religion in general, or this religion in particular, at all rational?); and away from Ibn Hazm's Epistle on Love (Is Islam inherently less bound by rationalism than another religion?), we find a legitimate concern for a *humanistic* message in religion, one for which the Christianity of *the written text*, His Holiness understandably reminds us, is best fitted. A true Moslem of course should have no quarrel with that assertion. Quite the contrary, to him or her Christianity, in this literal sense rather than in its manifestation as an instrument of war, is (and should be continued to be remembered as being) a spiritual fore-runner of Islam, and Christianity's virtues are (and should be) naturally carried over into Islam. Indeed, strictly speaking, that is, textually, and going by the Holy Qur'an, Islam is Judeo-Christian, (or Judeo-Christianity is nothing but Islam) in the sense that, from Islam's point of view, Abraham's is but one religion, revealed through the respective prophets and messengers in various ways, and culminating in Mohammad through the Divine Word. But what we (Jews, Christians, Moslems, or whatever) as ordinary people (rather than as religious leaders) have a problem with, especially in the modern world with which His Holiness the Pope is concerned, is not the *theory* of this or that religion but its *practice* by its self-purported representatives, in the past or now: it is with these representatives (sheikhs, clerics, rabbis, self-appointed spokespersons, or soldiers etc.) after all that we have to contend, and not with what is transmitted down to us in the Holy Books. Even Budhist monks, after all, and regardless of theory, have been known on occasion to break into rowdy brawls in spite of their theoretical discipline as spiritual meditators.⁹ Our quest, therefore, and in view of the Pope's concern, should be to seek that "wisdom stone" in the core of our Faith, or faiths, which, as regards the relationship between ourselves and the rest of the world, both reminds us of the fact that we occupy but one unit of space in it, and teaches us at the same time to respect the occupation of similar units by others.

This last observation leads us back to reasonableness, and to individual human beings. Being rational and being reasonable are of course etymologically related but the latter, often in contrast with the former, reflects a disposition to compromise, a preparedness to yield, to

⁹ It is a sadly mysterious fact, given the totally different origins of Shintuism and Budhism on the one hand, and the common history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the other, why a Shintuist can simply acquire Budhism as an additional faith, while Jews, Christians and Moslems insist on being so exclusive of one another.

accommodate others, not to hold on to radical positions, to co-exist in a pluralistic environment. To be reasonable in one's faith is, for example, not to impose oneself or one's practices on others, and it is to accept the show of a different faith by others, so long as that show is also reasonable. Above all, to be reasonable with regard to what one demands of oneself or of others is to be respectful of an ultimate *dignity* in the *humaneness* in which we all share, or to be respectful of that *freedom we all have to choose how to make ourselves better human beings*. This "reasonableness" of a religious faith is what would allow for pluralism, democratic discourse, and even inclusivism. It is these values, I would submit, that the Pope is searching for in his speech in a world he feels is threatened by the bigotry of polarization and the specter of violence.

One may conclude, in view of the last remarks, with an alternative medieval reference in the compendium of Christian-Moslem exchanges, namely, to the *Oration On the Dignity of Man*, by Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), which begins as follows :

I have read in the records of the Arabians, reverend Fathers, that Abdala the Saracen, when questioned as to what on this stage of the world, as it were, could be seen most worthy of wonder, replied: "There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man."

Here Pico, referring respectfully to the Moslem tradition, and even establishing legitimacy for what he is about to say by invoking that tradition, begins to expound on what one might view as one of the earliest "Western" accounts of a humanitarian philosophy –a philosophy where the values of freedom of choice and equality are paramount, and are what set human beings apart from God's other creations. What is unique about man, Pico explains, is precisely his location in the universe in free space, not being already cast in one corner or another of that universe, but having both the capacity to conceive of how to be better (or worse), as well as the freedom to choose to become better (or worse). Thus man is the master of his destiny, and it is precisely in this sovereign capacity that man possesses dignity, a dignity which is his by virtue of nothing but the fact that he is a man, and by virtue of which he commands the respect of other men.

Surely, a world order in which human beings are possessed of dignity and are respectful of each other simply by virtue of being human, and where different religions and ideologies can co-exist peacefully with each other, or where human beings possess the humility that enables them to appreciate

each other and to live fruitfully and joyfully with them, and where disagreement of opinion is esteemed as a value to be nurtured rather than feared as a fault to be ironed out, is precisely the “Hellenism” which His Eminence has in mind. Clearly, a religion –any religion- which does not at its core contain this outlook on the world and teach it to its followers, cannot be worthy of the name. It is this aspect of our civilization which we may confidently view as the “wisdom stone”, this part of our human history of which we can all be proud, and these virtues we all must learn to live by and to protect.

Sari Nusseibeh

Al-Quds University
15th March 2007