

# A CRITIQUE OF POPE BENEDICT'S CLAIMS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN CHRISTIAN LIFE AND DOCTRINE

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On 12 September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI (Josef Ratzinger) gave a now famous lecture at University of Regensburg in Germany entitled, "*Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections*". In this lecture, he claimed that philosophy was itself a necessary component of Christianity, and that early Christian philosophers attempted to replace the knowledge and wisdom of the Old Testament with Greek philosophy. Referring to Clement of Alexandria, he said:

*For philosophy and, albeit in a different way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding. (Ratzinger, Faith, Reason and the University, Memories and Reflections, 2006)*

He has also famously said that:

*"The Christian faith has made a clear choice: against the gods of religion for the God of the philosophers..." (Ratzinger, Introduction to Christianity, 2004)*

*The divine power that Aristotle at the height of Greek philosophy sought to grasp through reflection, is indeed for every being an object of desire and of love — and as the object of love this divinity moves the world.<sup>1</sup> (XVI, DEUS CARITAS EST, 2005)*

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, Professor of Religion and Humanities at Reed College says:

*... the Pope affirms the rationality of Catholicism by drawing an organic connection between ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity in a way that harkens back to definitions of Europe as the civilizational outcome of Christianity's synthesis of Hellenism*

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<sup>1</sup> *Metaphysics*, XII, 7.

*and Hebraism, a synthesis that was credited for the achievements of the Enlightenment and in turn was used to justify European colonialism as a "civilizing" project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." (Bassiri, 2006)*

This view of philosophy is so much a part of the Christian milieu that James V. Schall SJ warns that

*In eliminating philosophy from Scripture, we ended up by eliminating the divinity of Christ.' And that, for all intents and purposes, nullifies the essence of Christianity.*

But Jesus was neither a Greek, nor were His disciples and early followers any kind of philosophers. This kind of worldly revisionism is exactly what Saint Paul warned us about when he wrote that:

הָדָא דִּין אָמַר אַנָּא וּמְסַהַד אַנָּא בְּמַרְיָא דְּמִן הַשָּׂא לֹא תְהוּוּן  
מִהֲלַכִּין אֵיךְ שְׂרַכָּא דְּעַמְמָא דְּמִהֲלַכִּין בְּסַרְיָקוֹת רַעִינְהוּן

*This I speak in witness, that from now you do not walk as the rest of the nations, who walk in the [emptiness / vanity] of their [mind / thoughts]. (Ephesians 4:17)*

The impact that these ideals have on Christianity is greater than most realise.

Is God transcendent, or is He able to be bound up in our very human philosophical categories in order that we might understand him? To demonstrate this question Ratzinger asks,

*Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. (Ratzinger, Faith, Reason and the University, Memories and Reflections, 2006)*

But is God reasonable? Is throwing tables reasonable? Is breaking the rules of social propriety reasonable? Is refusing to defend oneself reasonable? Is calling us unto perfection reasonable? None of these things are reasonable by our modern standards, and they weren't reasonable by the standards of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century in which God lived in the form of Jesus the Messiah. So why should we regard this Eurocentric view faith in Jesus as having any value? Really that is the question that I pose to Catholic scholars, and await an answer.

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