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**“Neither Conservative nor Liberal:
A Theology of Christian Engagement with Non-Christian Traditions”**

**By Ian Markham,
Dean of Hartford Seminary and Professor of Theology and Ethics**

Although it is an old joke, it is a revealing one. Two theologians sitting next to each other. One is a liberal and the other an evangelical. The evangelical turns to the liberal and says, “I will call you a Christian provided you call me an intellectual’.

This is a revealing joke because it speaks to a particular perception. The liberal is the person who recognizes that faith needs to recognize its changed situation. Having read Kant and engaged with scientific thought, the liberal recognizes that there is a need to think differently about the faith. The liberal comes across as intelligent and engaged. Meanwhile the evangelical recognizes that faith is located in a tradition. Belonging to a tradition entitles a certain commitment to that tradition; given this the evangelical comes across as clearly committed to the Christian tradition.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge this popular perception of the difference between the liberal and evangelical (which in this paper, I am calling conservative, thereby including the conservative Roman Catholics). The argument involves four stages: first, there are certain core commitments the Christians wants to make, but those core commitments include the commitment to openness and liberality. Second, the tradition that Christians are called to affirm is demonstrably open and, crucially, willing to learn from non-Christian traditions. Therefore, third, the orthodox Christian should be

open and constructively engaged with difference. And finally, Pope Benedict XVI is in danger of betraying a commitment to the openness of the Catholic tradition in his engagement with Islam.

Core Commitments

Christians follow Christ. Etymologically, this is what the word ‘Christian’ means. And, for Christians, the Christ is necessarily linked with two key doctrines – the Incarnation and the Trinity. These are our core commitments; for these doctrines provide the basis for our knowledge of God.

So let us unpack this a little. How do we know what God is like? The twin answers – natural and revealed theology – remain helpful. Following in the tradition of Aquinas, one might well feel able to deduce from the order in this world that it is more likely than not that there is a Creator. And if there is a Creator then this being must be some power (after all it is a big world to create) and some knowledge (after all you have to be pretty bright to create a world of this complexity). However, beyond these basics, natural theology cannot get us.¹

So as Karl Barth famously observed we need to recognize the importance of revealed theology.² Barth continues to be read because he gave us a straight choice, which makes considerable sense in our postmodern setting: either accept that God has revealed Godself

¹ Aquinas took the view that Natural Theology could take us much further. However, this brief summary is where many contemporary philosophers of religion belong. For my own view, which is largely along these lines, see my forthcoming book *Understanding Christian Doctrine*.

in some place or make it all up – live like a guessing agnostic. And for Christians, the place of revelation - the Word of God - is a life – namely the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Barth is very helpful on the location of the Word. The Word of God is the place where you find a clear, definitive disclosure of God. Unlike Muslims or Jews, the Word of God is not a text, but a life. Muslims misunderstand Christianity if it is assumed that the Bible is the equivalent to the Qur'an. This is wrong. It is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus which is the Word and therefore the equivalent of the Qur'an. And in the same way as Muslims and Jews recognize that the Word of God must have always been (God has always uttered) and therefore believed in the pre-existence of the Qur'an and Torah, so Christians made a similar shift. The Word of God of John 1 is eternal.

Now unlike Judaism and Islam, the Christian tradition felt uncomfortable with two aspects of God sitting together in eternity past (namely, the Eternal Word and the Creator). It undermined our commitment to monotheism.³ So the doctrine of the Trinity slowly emerged. The right way to understand God is as a dynamic entity that brings together the Creator with the Revealer and Redeemer. And to ensure that the actions of Creation and Redemption are not stuck in the past, so we talk about a third person who makes God present to us. We have three persons in one.

² Just to be clear, Karl Barth did not simply advocate revealed theology but insisted that 'revelation' was the only way a person could have knowledge of God. I would not go that far.

³ I am very grateful for the work of Thomas Michel on the Trinity.

Our cornerstone commitments are bound to make the Christian tradition open and flexible. It is precisely because the Word of God, in Christianity, is not a text but a life that we find ourselves handling an adaptable Word. Of course there is an important connection between the Word and the text of Scripture. For after all, it is the Bible that tells us about the Word, which is Jesus. And as Karl Barth put it the Bible becomes the Word as it witnesses to the Word which is Jesus.⁴ Nevertheless the primary Word is the Eternal Word which completely interpenetrates the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

As Christians, we are in the business of reading a life – a life, which was very enigmatic. Our definitive disclosure of what God is like is a poor young man from Nazareth, who took enormous risks as he reached out to include the marginalized – especially women, the poor, and the reviled. He found himself a victim of power – finally dying as a common criminal at the hands of the occupying power. Yet remarkably, the movement he birthed believed that death was not able to hold him. Reports of his resurrection started to circulate and so the church was born.

So what do we know about God? We know that God is on the side of those who are least fortunate. We know that the love of God is willing to go to any length for the sake of humanity. We know that in our moments of despair, God promises to create hope. We know that we should treat this life as authoritative. We should imitate the ‘words and deeds’ of Jesus of Nazareth.

⁴ For Karl Barth’s view of Scripture see *Church Dogmatics I/2*, p. 530. See also the very helpful lecture in this same series by Professor Douglas John Hall, called ‘Who can say it as it is. Karl Barth on the Bible’

Now our obligation as Christians is to recognize the authority of this life in guiding our witness today. This obligation extends to our interpretation of the rest of the Bible. If the Bible is interpreted in such a way to contradict what we ‘read’ from the life, death, and resurrection of the Eternal Word, then we have an obligation to revisit the text of the Bible. Although slavery is instituted in Leviticus and condoned in 1 Timothy, the legitimacy of slavery is clearly incompatible with the disclosure of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Reading the Qur’an can be difficult, but reading a life is harder.⁵ So Christians are, right from the outset, bound to have to live with a pluralism of positions. Although the slave-traders are outside the zone of acceptable pluralism, there are a multitude of positions with which the life of Jesus might be compatible. The areas of debate include the following: gratuitous war is clearly unacceptable, but the use of force to create a just peace might be acceptable; exploitative capitalism is clearly wrong, but the use of the profit motive to create an effective system of resource allocation might be acceptable; and life should not be created to be destroyed, but the cultivation of stem cells for the advancement of medical techniques that heal genetic diseases might be appropriate.

Reading a life does have a major advantage over a text. It permits significant flexibility over time. We are imitating the ‘words and deeds’ of Jesus. This exercise starts in the New Testament and we can see how the Church struggles to arrive at the appropriate

<http://www.christchair.ucalgary.ca/cevents.html> (accessed January 26, 2007)

⁵ Just so I am clear: it is also difficult to read the Qur’an. Muslims have the challenge of distinguishing between local and universal texts. All I mean here is that it harder to read a life.

inclusive position over the Gentiles and the Jewish Law. And so it continues with Augustine and Aquinas.

The movement for Christian thought is to constantly move, to and fro, from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (as it flows through the sacraments and life of the Church) to the particularities of each situation. With the Spirit of God constantly making the Eternal Word present to each situation, we can and should allow our faith to engage with each situation making use of all the resources available to us. The resources flow from our conviction of the three-fold nature of God: a creator who creates every single life and loves each particular life and seeks to disclose truth to those lives; a revealer and redeemer who discloses the nature of God (thereby providing a definitive norm) and also redeems all people; and a Spirit who is constantly making God present and allowing us to see God in new and different ways.

These core convictions are responsible for a theology which is constantly engaging and changing. It might be ironic: but to be completely orthodox, one should be liberal.

The Christian Tradition

The epitome of an orthodox theology is Augustine of Hippo. If I can show that Augustine is really a liberal, then my case will be complete. Naturally, such an argument will upset both the conservatives and the liberals. The conservatives do feel Augustine is a model theologian who is completely faithful to the Christian witness and would be appalled to learn that Augustine is really a liberal. The liberals take pride in rejecting the

Christian tradition. For Bishop John Shelby Spong, for example, the tradition is in deep error: and a modern form of Christianity needs to repudiate those errors. So let us look more closely at this hugely significant figure.⁶

Let us concede that there aspects of Augustine which are problematic. The exercise of finding shocking passages in Augustine is a game that many like to play. For example, his doctrine of *massa peccatrix* as stated in *De Natura et Gratia* where Augustine writes:

This grace of Christ, then, without which neither children nor adults can be saved, is given gratuitously and not for our merits, and for this reason it is called “grace.” “[They are] justified,” says the Apostle, “freely by his blood.” Consequently, those who are not liberated through grace, either because they have not yet been able to hear, or because they have not wished to obey, or also because, when on account of their age they were not capable of hearing, they did not receive the bath of regeneration, which they could have received and by means of which they would have been saved, are justly condemned. For they are not without sin, either that which they contracted originally or that which they added through their own misconduct. “For all have sinned,” either in Adam or in themselves, “and are deprived of the glory of God.” Consequently, the whole human mass ought to be punished, and if the deserved punishment of damnation were rendered to all, beyond all doubt it would be justly rendered. This is why those who are liberated from it by grace are not called vessels of their own merits but “vessels of mercy.”⁷

⁶ This section on Augustine is an edited (and reduced) version of the material found in my *Theology of Engagement* Chapter 2.

⁷ Augustine, *De Natura et Gratia* IV 4 -V 5.

Most Christians are unhappy with Augustine's views on predestination, which is linked with his conviction that only a minuscule number of people will be saved; and for his view that unbaptized infants are damned to hell, it is not surprising that limbo was invented by the medieval church. The package of original sin and eternal damnation is held to be responsible for a multitude of difficulties. Adherents in other faith traditions find his exclusivism problematic. Feminist theologians blame Augustine for a dualism (inherited from his neo-Platonism) that celebrates spirit and denigrates the body.⁸ This, they argue, has directly underpinned patriarchy. The male was considered more spiritual and the female was less spiritual because of a link with sex and nature. The evidence for this analysis is built on Augustine's intricate analysis of the possibility of sexual intercourse found in his *City of God*: there, you will recall, Augustine arrives at the extraordinary view that prior to the Fall, passionless sex that leaves women in a virginal state would have been possible.

So to suggest that Augustine can also be a liberal hero seems manifestly problematic. Surely he is the great villain? My argument will be that methodologically Augustine is a liberal and therefore sympathetic to a theology of engagement. The argument is simple: Augustine's methodology involves three central components. First, reason clearly has a central role. Second, he draws heavily on non-Christian sources. Third, the experience of his life transformed by Christ and therefore the centrality of 'experience'. I shall show

⁸ See Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: ecology, feminism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991). It is a moot point the extent to which these criticisms are justified. A. Hilary Armstrong makes a strong case that both Christians and Platonists have a much more positive view of the body and the material universe than opponents give them credit for: he writes, 'Augustine in particular is often more balanced and positive – and not, as sometimes seems to be assumed, more unbalanced and negative – in his attitude to the body, sex and marriage than most of his Christian contemporaries.' (See A.

that in these three elements we have a surprisingly modern methodology operating: reason, the use of non-Christian wisdom, and experience. It is his willingness to learn from a range of sources that is Augustine's great strength. It is also this willingness that must make it both legitimate (in that it is true to Augustine's own method) and necessary to develop the tradition.

At the most basic level: if we start by considering a commitment to 'reason' as involving the recognition of the importance of our human rational capacity and therefore the importance of reasons and good logical arguments, then no one can doubt Augustine's commitment to reason. Good arguments pervade his work: intellectual puzzles are stated and grappled with. There are numerous illustrations of this: for example, his reflections on the nature of time at the end of the *Confessions* or the problem of human knowledge and divine foreknowledge discussed in the *City of God*.⁹

His commitment to reason also arises out of his anthropology. So in *De animae quantitate* (On the greatness of the soul), Augustine writes, 'If you wish a definition of what the soul is, I have a ready answer. It seems to be a certain kind of substance, sharing in reason, fitted to rule the body.'¹⁰ Later in *De trinitate*, Augustine writes:

'Desiring to train the Reader in the things that were made, in order that he might know Him by whom they were made, we have now at last arrived at His image which is man, in that whereby He is superior to other animals, namely, in reason

Hilary Armstrong, *St. Augustine and Christian Platonism* (Villanova: Villanova University Press 1976) p.11.

⁹ See *The Confessions* Book 11 and *The City of God* Book 5 Chapter 9.

and understanding, and whatever else can be said of the rational or intellectual soul that pertains to that thing which is called the mind or *animus*.¹¹

The mind then, for Augustine, is the highest point of the soul. So it is not surprising that Augustine has a high regard for the rational capacity of the mind. Etienne Gilson brings out the significance of this for Augustine's view of the relationship between faith and reason when he points out that for Augustine 'the very possibility of faith depends on reason. Of all the beings God created on earth, only man is capable of belief, because he alone is endowed with reason. Man exists, as do wood and stones; he lives, as the plants do; he moves and feels, as do animals; but in addition, he thinks. Moreover the mind, whereby man knows what is intelligible, is in his case the mark man left of His handiwork: it is in the mind that he is made to God's image. . . .In short, man is the image of God inasmuch as he is a mind which, by exercising its reason, acquires more and more understanding and grows progressively richer therein.'¹²

Additional evidence that reasons and good arguments mattered to Augustine is demonstrated in his capacity to revisit older arguments and want to correct them. *The Retractationes* is a remarkable phenomenon that reflects well on his commitment to intellectual integrity. The opening of the *Retractationes* reflects both this commitment and a delightful self-deprecating irony. He writes:

'For a long time I have been thinking about and planning to do something which I, with God's assistance, am now undertaking because I do not think it should be

¹⁰ *De animae quantitate* (On the greatness of the soul) chapter 13. Unless otherwise stated all translations are taken from *The Fathers of the Church*.

¹¹ *De trinitate* Book 15 Chapter 1.

¹² Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House 1960) p.29.

postponed: with a kind of judicial severity, I am reviewing my works -- books, letters, and sermons -- and, as it were, with the pen of a censor, I am indicating what dissatisfies me. For, truly, only an ignorant man will have the hardihood to criticize me for criticizing my own errors. But if he maintains that I should not have said those things which, indeed, dissatisfied me later, he speaks the truth and concurs with me. In fact, he and I are critics of the same thing, for I should not have criticized such things if it had been right to say them.¹³

It might be objected that too much is being made of the obvious intellectual depth of Augustine - this is after all why he is so widely read and why he was so influential. The point being stressed however is the important, but often overlooked fact that Augustine was rigorously self-critical and committed to formulating an account of faith that was both coherent and justified in terms of good arguments.

The second area is his use of non-Christian traditions to shape this theology. Once again, in much the same way that 'reason', interpreted as a commitment to good argument, is universally affirmed as true of Augustine's work so everyone agrees that Augustine was certainly shaped by his reading of neo-Platonism (the Platonism of Plotinus and beyond). But as with the debate about the extent of reason's involvement with authority, so there is a comparable debate about neo-Platonism.

At one extreme we have Adolf von Harnack, who in 1888, argued that at the conversion, Augustine was no more than a Platonist influenced by Christianity rather than the other way round. At the other extreme we have G. Quispel who argued that there is no

¹³ *Retractationes* Prologue

important doctrine in Augustine that is not grounded in the Bible.¹⁴ The truth, like so many of these debates, is firmly in between.

There are two areas that require exploration. First, the influence of neo-Platonism on his conversion; and second, Augustine's explicit sympathies for neo-Platonism and his interpretation of their insights. It will be shown that Augustine affirms truth where ever it is found and allows non-Christian insights to shape his Christianity.

We start, then with the influence of neo-Platonism on his conversion. The primary source for this is the *Confessions*. Perhaps a comment is necessary on the attention I propose to give the *Confessions*. There are difficulties here: first it is not a traditional autobiography; it is more a chronicle of the journey of the heart. The traditional background to a biography is entirely neglected. So while we are fascinated by his concubine and find ourselves indignant about his decision to seer back to Africa because his career needs a socially advantageous marriage, this does not concern Augustine. What troubles us is not what troubles Augustine. Given the conventions of his age, this was not an issue. Second, some have questioned the historicity of the *Confessions*. For example, in the *Confessions* Augustine decides to leave his teaching post for religious reasons, elsewhere he suggests that he leaves on the grounds of ill-health. It is not my purpose to defend the *Confessions*, although I do take the view that most of the apparent

¹⁴ See G. Quispel, *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (1951) pp.115-40 as cited in John J. O'Meara, *Understanding Augustine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1997) p.92.

discrepancies identified are more imagined than proven.¹⁵ Anyway my interest in Augustine is methodological, given this the precise historicity is unimportant.

It is clear that Augustine's underlying principle is that all 'truth belongs to God. So a love of wisdom wherever it is found drives Augustine on. He writes,

'In Greek the word 'philosophy' means 'love of wisdom', and it was with this love that the *Hortensius* inflamed me. There are people for whom philosophy is a means of misleading others, for they misuse its great name, its attractions, and its integrity to give colour and gloss to their own errors. Most of these so-called philosophers who lived in Cicero's time and before are noted in the book. . . .(T)he only thing that pleased me in Cicero's book was his advice not simply to admire one or another of the schools of philosophy, but to love wisdom itself, whatever it might be, and to search for it, pursue it, hold it, and embrace it firmly.'¹⁶

Cicero's *Hortensius* is Augustine's way into philosophy. From it, Augustine learns the importance of seeking wisdom. As Augustine became disillusioned with Manichaeism, so he discovered neo-Platonism (probably the writings of Plotinus). He finds in these writings good arguments for the existence of God and his eternal word. Augustine explains:

So you [i.e. God] made use of a man, one who was bloated with the most outrageous pride, to procure me some of the books of the Platonists, translated from the Greek into Latin. In them I read - not, of course, word for word, though the

¹⁵ Alfred Matthews sets out the debate with some care. His response to the difficulties, I largely find persuasive. See Alfred Warren Matthews, *The Development of St. Augustine from Neoplatonism to Christianity 386-391AD* (Washington: University Press of America 1980) pp7-10.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions* trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1961) p.59.

sense was the same and it was supported by all kinds of different arguments - that *at the beginning of time the Word already was; and God had the Word abiding with him, and the Word was God.* . . . In the same books I also read of the Word, God, that his *birth came not from human stock, not from nature's will or man's, but from God.* But I did not read in them that *the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us.*¹⁷

Augustine's readings in Neoplatonism persuade him of God and the eternal word, although there is nothing about the Incarnation. He treats the illumination that these books provide him about God as intended by God. Although Cicero and Platonius are non-Christians, he has no difficulty in acknowledging the truth about God he finds within their writing.

The second area we need to explore is his explicit treatment of neo-Platonism in some of his writings. Although in the *Retractions* he does express disquiet about the extent of his praise and admiration, the praise and admiration is still there and presumably reflects his view at the time. The discussions of neoplatonism are extensive that selection is a major difficulty. Both in terms of content and method, the neoplatonism is important. On the content front, we find in *Civitas Dei* that Augustine explicitly lists the connections between neoplatonism and Christianity. John O'Meara, helpful summarises thus, 'They [i.e. the neoplatonists] taught the existence of an incorporeal Creator, of Providence, the immortality of the soul, the honour of virtue, patriotism, true friendship, and good morals. Final happiness, moreover, they held to be attainable through participation of the soul in

¹⁷ Ibid. p.144-5. (Book 7:9)

the Creator's unchangeable and incorporeal light.'¹⁸ On the method front, Etienne Gilson insists that Augustine's debt to Plotinus is considerable. He writes, 'To Plotinus he is indebted for almost all the matter and for the whole technique of his philosophy. He is indebted to the Bible for the basic Christian notions which compelled him to make the inner transformation he performed on the Plotinian theses he borrowed and to construct in this way a new doctrine which represents one of the first, and one of the most original, contributions Christianity has made to enrich the history of philosophy.'¹⁹ Interestingly given the next chapter, Gilson goes on to draw an explicit parallel between Augustine and Aquinas, he writes, '[A]ll we can say is that he did for Plotinus what St. Thomas Aquinas was later to do for Aristotle, i.e. to make, in the light of faith, a rational revision of a great philosophical interpretation of the universe.'²⁰

Indeed such was his regard for the neoplatonists, which he attributes directly to Plato he gives a very positive interpretation of Plato. Indeed he makes two striking claims:

1. If Plato was alive today, then he would be a Christian.
2. Plato has so much insight that it seems plausible to believe that he must of learned from Jeremiah the great Jewish prophet.

For the first this can be seen in *On True Religion*. Augustine writes,

'Suppose Plato were alive and would not spurn a question I would put to him; or rather suppose one of his own disciples, who lived at the same time as he did, had addressed him thus: "You have persuaded me that truth is seen not with the bodily eyes but by the pure mind, and that any soul that cleaves to truth is thereby made

¹⁸ John J. O'Meara, *Understanding Augustine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1997) p.84-5.

¹⁹ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House 1960) p.234.

happy and perfect. . . .Therefore the mind has to be healed so that it may behold the immutable form of things which remains ever the same, preserving its beauty unchanged and unchangeable, knowing no spatial distance or temporal variation, abiding absolutely one and the same. . . . To the rational and intellectual soul is given to enjoy the contemplation of eternity, and by that contemplation it is armed and equipped so that it may obtain eternal life. . . . You, my master, have persuaded me to believe these things. Now, if some great and divine man should arise to persuade the peoples that such things were to be at least believed if they could not grasp them with mind, or that those who could grasp them should not allow themselves to be implicated in the depraved opinions of the multitude or to be overborne by vulgar errors, would you not judge that such a man is worthy of divine honours?" I believe Plato's answer would be: "That could not be done by man, unless the very virtue and wisdom of God delivered him from natural environment, illumined him from his cradle not by human teaching but by personal illumination, honoured him with such grace, strengthened him with such firmness and exalted him with such majesty, that he should be able to despise all that wicked men desire, to suffer all that they dread, to do all that they marvel at, and so with the greatest love and authority to convert the human race to so sound a faith." . . . Now this very thing has come to pass.'²¹

The argument here is interesting and subtle. Platonism discovered the problem facing human existence: knowledge of the good, the true, and the beautiful depends on transcending our human propensity to lust and preoccupation with matter. However, if

²⁰ Ibid. p.234.

Plato was asked don't we need a person who can demonstrate how this is possible. Plato would reply 'yes, but it would be very difficult'. And this, argues Augustine is precisely what has come to past.

The third element is 'experience'. He admits that he is driven to the doctrine of the Incarnation because he needs the strength to enjoy God. He writes, 'I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you, but I could not find this means until I embraced the *mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who is a man, like them, and also rules as God over all things, blessed for ever.*'²² John Rist captures Augustine's meaning extremely well when he writes, 'Neoplatonism is incomplete; its underlying weakness is that it is theoretical, without the power to instigate right action.'²³

Augustine finds the 'power' at the end of book eight. He is in a Milanese garden in August 386, tormented by sinfulness and asking God to explain why it was all so difficult. Then he writes:

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take it and read, take it and read'. At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I

²¹ *De vera religione* iii, 3 - 4. Translation taken from St. Augustine, *On True Religion*, Introduction by L. O. Mink, translated J.H.S. Burleigh, (South Bend, Indiana: Regnery/Gateway 1953).

²² *Civitas Dei* Ibid. p.153. (Book 7:18)

²³ John Rist, *Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994) p.3.

stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. . . . So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul's Epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: *Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.* I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.²⁴

This is an old-fashioned religious experience. As many others have, before and since, Augustine tormented by his moral failures finds in Jesus a confidence that he can triumph over sin.

Once again the term 'experience' has a potentially anachronistic association. It is not the case that Augustine is the same as Schleiermacher. Instead it is more accurate to say that Augustine would not want to separate his experience from his philosophy. Armstrong is helpful here when he insists that for Augustine and his contemporaries there is no distinction between philosophy and theology: 'It was an activity embracing the whole of human life, an attempt not merely to direct but to bring man to his goal through an understanding of the whole of reality. . . . If this is what philosophy meant, it is easy to

²⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions* trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1961) (Book 8. part 12) p.177-8

see that for Christians the only true philosophy could be nothing else but a lived and living theology, a reflection on the mysteries of faith, using all the resources of a Greek-trained intelligence, which determined the Christian way of life.’²⁵

Although Augustine would not appreciate my attempt to disentangle three sources of his theology, I want to suggest that the case can be made that Augustine arrives at faith using these three sources: reason, non-Christian sources of wisdom, and experience. So now bringing Augustine together with the cornerstone section, we now have the following. Augustine is transformed by a sense of Jesus. As he seeks to live life true to that core commitment, he continues to use his reason, welcome and embrace movement in his thought, and crucially learn from non-Christian traditions. He uses platonic terminology in his understanding of the faith. For Augustine, ‘reading the life of Jesus’ was difficult. Methodologically, he is clearly liberal. And even if we would now reject some of his conclusions as incompatible with the core disclosure of God in Jesus of Nazareth, we can still relate to his struggle to discern the truth and interpret the pressures on his situation in the light of his understanding of what God reveals in Christ.

What is true of Augustine is also true of other great theologians. Aquinas, for example, is trained as an Augustinian Platonist and then engages with the philosopher Aristotle. In addition, he thinks through his faith in conversation with Jewish and Islamic thinkers. However, for the purposes of time, I am confining myself to one illustration. Suffice to

²⁵ A. Hilary Armstrong, ‘Reason and Faith in the First Millennium A.D.’ in A. Hilary Armstrong, *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Variorum Reprints 1979) p.108.

say, Christians who seek to be true to the Tradition should be open to non-Christian influences and insights.

Orthodox Christians are Liberal

So we arrive at the slogan of this paper. Orthodox Christians should be liberal. Grounded in the core convictions of our faith, we are called to apply our reason and search for a recognition of what the Spirit of God is saying through the encounter with difference. In one sense this is the classic Roman Catholic position. For this position shares with Rome an appropriate emphasis upon both tradition and Scripture. And it understands Christian entirely through the prism of Jesus. In addition, it builds on a Catholic anthropology. Such an anthropology takes issue both with the 19th century optimistic view of humanity (we are all good really) and with the pessimistic anthropology of the Reformed tradition (we are all completely depraved). Instead we are both/and. We are made in the Image of God (and therefore have the capacity for some limited right reasoning about the world and morality) and simultaneously we are fallen (and therefore have constant propensities towards egoism and selfishness). Such an anthropology would strongly suggest that all religions contain both insight and error – Christianity included. Given this, we have an obligation to learn of God from the encounter with the other.

A constructive, engaged theology grounded in our core convictions disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus should be the Christian attitude to other faith traditions. The act of dialogue where you learn of God those truths that are not contained in our

tradition, but are nevertheless compatible with the core convictions, is an act of Christian faithfulness. Countless Christians have discovered this. Pioneers who lived this spirit settled in India, learnt from Sufis, and have been shaped by Rabbis. Such pioneers are models that we should seek to emulate.

However, the new Pope has started his pontiff with an attack on Islam. So this paper will conclude with a brief analysis and description of that attack.

Pope Benedict XVI

Let it be acknowledged right at the outset that Pope Benedict XVI is an exceptionally able theologian: he is well read and creative in the way in which he engages with the tradition. He is starting his Pontiff with a certain set of concerns, which are interesting and significant. He is getting much that is right. However, it is my view that the Regensburg speech was not simply unhelpful, impolitic, but also a fundamental betrayal of the tradition he leads. This is a serious allegation: so let us examine briefly the concerns that are preoccupying this Pope and how the Regensburg speech fits into those concerns.

His first major concern is European Christianity. Taking the name Benedict was deliberate. Benedict, as Alasdair MacIntyre famously reminded us in *After Virtue*, created the forms of monastic life which kept the tradition of the virtues alive during the first dark ages. Pope Benedict shares with MacIntyre a concern about the spirit and shape of modernity as it has formed and developed in Europe: Europe is in the midst of a new

dark ages. And he sees the task of his Pontiff is to call Europe back to its religious roots. A civilized culture needs to be grounded in the Christian tradition.

His second major concern is Islam. And it is here that I wish to focus. His lecture in Germany at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006 provoked considerable controversy. So let us start by looking at that lecture with some care. The argument of the lecture can be examined in five stages.

First, he starts by exploring the Christian Muslim dialogue of the late 14th century between the 'Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian.'²⁶ As the Pope describes this dialogue, he endorses the view that the verses in the Qur'an friendly to religious diversity (e.g. Sura 2:256 'there is no compulsion in religion') were written in Mecca and were superceded by the verses in Medina which justify holy war. The Pope does imply that there is a tension in the Qur'an between a pro-pluralism strand (formulated when the Prophet is weak) and an intolerant strand (formulated when the Prophet had power).

Second, after quoting the Emperor's view of the Muhammad's 'evil and inhuman' contribution to the history of ideas, the Pope arrives at the key thought of his lecture, namely that the use of violence to further faith is unreasonable.

²⁶ All quotations from the lecture are taken from the version provided by the Vatican and available on the BBC website.

Third, the Pope draws a contrast between the development of Christianity, which is a mixture of Hebrew and Greek thought, and the emergence of Islam. For Christians, the Gospel of John is ‘the final word on the biblical concept of God.’ In John 1, the *logos*, explains the Pope, means ‘both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason.’ For the Pope, God’s providence ensured the meeting of the Biblical drama and Hellenistic thought: and the result is that Christianity recognizes that ‘reason’ is a control on faith. For Christians, we can be confident that God will not command the ‘irrational’.

By implication, the Pope explains that Islam is not so fortunate. The Pope explains, ‘But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality.’ Indeed he cites Ibn Hazn (the Spanish Muslim thinker of the 11th century) as an example of a thinker who advocated ‘the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness.’

Fourth, the problem of Islam is also the problem of the modern west. At this point, he suggests there are three factors that are underpinning modernity which are leading to a ‘dehellenization’ (i.e. the erosion of the Greek commitment to rationality). The first was the Reformation; the second was the liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth century. And the third is ‘cultural pluralism’ or to put it more accurately the quest to create a non-hellenistic form of Christianity which is found behind the New Testament (I suspect the Pope is thinking here of the work of the Protestant theologian John Hick.)

Fifth, he concludes the lecture with a plea for Europe as a whole to retain and recover the Catholic (presumably because the Reformation undermined it) commitment to faith and rationality. It is not a call to go back: instead ‘the positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly’. But it is a call for ‘faith and reason to come together in a new way’ – one in which ‘we overcome the self-imposed limitations of reason to the empirically verifiable’.

This in five stages is the Pope’s lecture. Reactions to the lecture have ranged widely. We had Muslim rage in parts of the Islamic world, where the most dramatic quotations were taken out of context and used to create riots. Ratzinger the academic was in conflict with Benedict XVI the Pope. Where the Cardinal could have delivered this lecture with virtually no interest being provoked, the Pope is the major leader of Christendom. Muslims are feeling battered: they have had to cope with colonialism, corrupt regimes supported by the West, constant denigration of their faith by a richer and more affluent western academy, and of course the running sore of the Palestinian people and the invasion of Iraq. For the leader of the world’s Catholics to decide to quote – in passing and for illustrative purposes only – a medieval attack on Islam was bad politics.

For the contrasting reaction, we have been those who have talked about this lecture as the ‘the Regensburg Moment’. Richard John Neuhaus, the Roman Catholic theologian (to coin Damon Linker’s phrase²⁷), writes:

Benedict has expressed regret about the violent Muslim reaction to what he said; he has continued to meet with Muslim leaders; he has reaffirmed the Church’s

continuing dialogue with Islam – but there is no chance whatsoever that he will retract or retreat from the argument he has made.²⁸

For Neuhaus, this was not a speech written by a Vatican official who did not appreciate the significance of what was being said. This was entirely deliberate. This is Benedict's view. Neuhaus even feels that the quotation of the medieval emperor was appropriate: Neuhaus writes, 'But the citation was also a way of reminding everyone that this conflict with Islam bent upon conversion by the sword is very long-standing'.²⁹ For Neuhaus, the Pope is an uncomplicated ally. The Pope sees the global threat posed by the jihadists who want to 'destroy the West ... and force the world's submission to Islam'.³⁰

Now I suspect that Neuhaus is right in his interpretation of the Pope's intentions. And if so, then I am wish to identity with those many Roman Catholics who are awkward that this is the Pope's position. Granted there is much that is interesting about the Pope's position. He is right about the need for the West to hold 'faith' and 'reason' together. He is also right to insist that Christian minorities should be treated as well as Muslim minorities are in the West. But there are major difficulties in his position: one at the level of detail and the other, more importantly, at the level of spirit.

At the level of detail, there are assumptions made in this lecture which are mistaken.

There is much greater continuity between the earlier suras in Mecca and the later suras in Medina. The Constitution of Medina, for example, did protect the entitlement of the

²⁷ See Damon Linker, *Theocons*.

²⁸ Richard John Neuhaus, 'The Regensburg Moment' in *First Things*, 167 (November 2006):59

²⁹ Richard John Neuhaus, 'On the Square: Observations and Contentions' September 18 2006 at www.firstthings.com (accessed 21 November 2006).

people of the book to worship. It is not true to say that Islam was unaffected by the Greek commitment to rationality; after all, it was Islamic culture that kept Aristotle's writings alive. And as in Christianity, there is the spectrum of positions. And in our comparative histories, the Christian does have to face the fact that in Syria and Egypt significant Christian communities survived Islamic rule, but no significant Muslim communities survived Christian rule (see, for example, Spain). And in terms of the contemporary threat from Muslims, we need to recognize that there is, for example, a large and growing non-violent dialogical form of Turkish Islam, namely the Nur movement. The failure to do so is to leave the world with a distorted view of the relations between traditions.

At the level of spirit, we see a Pope who is, I suggest, not being true to the dynamics of the Roman Catholic tradition. It is incompatible with Catholic anthropology to demonize a people. It is incompatible with the tradition's obligation to listen to the Spirit of God to generalize about the failure of Islam to reconcile faith with reason. Perhaps most seriously, it is incompatible with what we know of God in Christ to fail to see the 'fruits of the Spirit' in countless Muslim lives.

In one sense this is unfair to Pope Benedict. His subsequent trip to Turkey was adept and skilful in building bridges with the Catholic Church and Turkish Islam. His 2005 on World Youth Day, he stressed the need for dialogue with Muslims and that both Muslims and Christians 'agree on the fact that terrorism of any kind is a perverse and cruel choice which shows contempt for the sacred right to life and undermines the very foundations of

³⁰ Ibid.

all civil coexistence.’³¹ This sort of talk is much more compatible with the Catholic tradition he is called to represent.

It might be odd for an Episcopalian to accuse an exceptionally erudite Pope that he is failing to represent the tradition which he leads. However, the Christian Muslim dialogue is central at this moment. And I offer these reflections in the hope that the Christian communities can engage appropriately with Islam in all its diversity.

Conclusion

We live in an odd world. Conservatives imagine they are upholding the tradition by asking us to accept the unchanged message of our past. Liberals imagine they are challenging the tradition by asking us to reject the injustice, patriarchy, and racism of our past. Conservatives and liberals agree that the past is monolithic: one side insisting we need to still affirm it, the other insisting we need to reject it.

The truth is that we should be continuing to affirm the method of our tradition – a tradition that constantly engages afresh as our core convictions about the God disclosed in Christ encounters our historic moment. Our historic moment makes the encounter with Islam central. And gently I have attempted to show that the Pope Regensburg speech was not in the spirit of the tradition he represents.

³¹ Pope Benedict, World Youth Day, Cologne.

It is always tempting to over-simplify the other. But oversimplification is one thing we cannot afford. Faithfulness to our tradition involves a recognition of the complexity of the difference we constantly encounter.