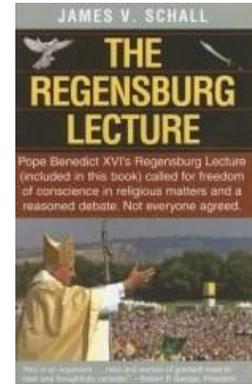


REGENSBURG REVISITED

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a review of
The Regensburg Lecture
By James V. Schall, S.J.
St. Augustine's Press, 2007, 180 pages



Of those occasions on which Pope Benedict XVI received global media coverage, three remain memorable in the popular press. As Dean of the College of Cardinals, he presided over the funeral rites of John Paul II, standing in solemn silence while the massive assembly of the faithful chanted “*santo subito*” (“make him a saint right away”). As newly elected Pontiff, he greeted the world from the *loggia* of St. Peter’s basilica, while the pundits pondered what this new pontificate would hold in store (and how long it would last). And, during his apostolic voyage to his native Bavaria, he spoke words that would be heard round the world, as clips and quotes from “The Regensburg Lecture” sparked global outrage and even violence.

That last moment has passed, as news cycles seem quickly to do, but his remarkable insights there, and the power of this pope to incite thought everywhere, should not be forgotten. In his masterful analysis of this papal speech, James Schall explains why.

By way of overview, the book contains an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, followed by two appendices, one of which is the text of the pope’s speech.

The book is short, but classic Schall, mixing metaphysical instruction with caustic criticism of thought gone awry. And in that realm of thought, of reason, Schall sees the profound and timely value of the pope's speech, which he posits as "one of the fundamental tractates of our time. It is almost," he writes, "the first one that really understands the fuller dimensions of what our time is intellectually about" (9).

In that intellectual realm, Schall provides a far-reaching analysis in keeping with his expertise in political history and philosophy. He begins by putting the pope's speech in its proper context, namely a university lecture. He then considers the nature of God and the violence that contradicts it. And he goes on to examine the implications of this belief as it affects Europe, modernity, and modern.

For the sake of a brevity even greater than his book's, we consider here just five thoughts that flow from Schall's analysis, representing five areas in which the world has failed in its thinking. Conversely, they are five realms in which we might examine what we are intellectually about.

The *first* failure has to do with context, namely **the failure to appreciate this speech as a university lecture**. Though pronounced by the pope, the Regensburg lecture was not typical magisterial teaching (i.e., one concerned with faith and morals and to be accepted with religious belief). With so much of the reaction focused on who spoke the words, rather than what was meant by them, it was easier to ignore the point of the speech (for those, in the minority, who had actually read the text before reacting to it). As Schall glibly notes: "For not a few, it would be a distinctly unsettling thing if, in the end, the Pope of Rome proved indeed to be a man of superior intelligence who

did understand the truth of things and the nature of modernity, with its science and its intellectual foundations. ... Put more positively, however, we really want to hear a clear, insightful statement of our condition. If it is a pope who can best present the dimensions of what we need to know, we are less than human if, on such a ground, we refuse to consider it" (5).

This is not an uncommon approach, this tendency to dismiss a thought because of who gave voice to it. Conservative or liberal, religious or secular, pundit or provocateur – whatever labels we use, when we attach them, they risk hiding what may actually be worthy of our consideration. Perhaps our media culture is to blame, but the failure to grapple with what is said simply because we fixate on the one who says it is a fault which we should all strive to avoid.

Benedict's speech at Regensburg was, in the proper sense, a university lecture. Out simply, his words were of the academic kind. "Words at their best are intended to move us. And they do move us. But academic words have a somewhat different purpose. They are intended primarily to enlighten us, to take our minds to the heart of what is. This enlightenment is the purpose of the Regensburg Lecture. It is what has been lacking in our understanding of where we are" (14).

Academic words are spoken in what should be a safe environment, in a context of freedom of expression in the exploration of thought. This lecture "presupposed from Western tradition that a place existed within society wherein serious issues could be brought up and presented for no other immediate reason but to understand what they are. Thus, it could not be a place where certain issues, such as the relation of religion to

violence, had to be withheld, lest somewhere, someone might be offended by the very discussion itself" (33).

On the contrary, in this safe intellectual place for discussion, those words are very much needed. Why? Because, according to Schall, "No one else, especially in the academy itself, was really making this essential clarification of mind about our present lot. The public order was perplexed because the intellectual order was confused. Not knowing is always precarious" (21).

For Schall, the confused order of thinking is widespread and enduring, so much so that "this failure to confront the intellectual and religious roots of this issue in Islam, in the academy, in the Church, and in the state, is one of the main reasons that the problem still exists and continues to grow in seemingly an exponential manner even in our own time" (23)." Here, I think, Schall hits upon a crucial matter in today's world: we have lost our ability to argue.

From my own university experiences, I see two explanations for this. On the one hand, students have been thoroughly conditioned by the cultural attitude that making judgments is being judgmental, and is therefore to be avoided. I see this routinely in the classes I teach. Each semester, to introduce the section on morality, I pose this statement about which the students must agree or disagree: "we cannot say that someone else is wrong, because that person may be just as right as we are." The vast majority always agrees. And it never ceases to amaze me how even the brightest students will argue in favor of this ... that is, until I point out that it means I could arbitrarily give them a

failing grade for the course, and they couldn't dispute it or complain about it because I might be just as right as they are!

On the other hand, people today find intellectual argument to be of limited usefulness and, therefore, of little value. Busy with trying to accomplish the next thing on our "to do" list, we tend to think arguing has no practical purpose, other than, perhaps, mere entertainment (thanks to the likes of Jerry Springer or Bill O'Reilly and others). About this devaluing of debate, I vividly recall a recruiting event at our university where the Admissions office was trying to convince scholarship-level students to commit to enrolling here. They invited me to speak about our Faith & Reason Honors Program, which features a series of seminars exploring the big questions of life (what is beauty, truth, goodness, etc.). One parent stood up and asked me how being in this program would help her daughter land a good job. I replied, with no tongue in cheek, that if padding a resume was the reason his daughter wanted to be an honors student, then she should look for another program, because we value the thought process for its own sake. (I hasten to add that the Admissions Office has not since invited me back as a panelist!)

Local anecdotes aside, the crucial point remains that unless we challenge, confront, consider, and debate, we cannot progress as a society. Thought does have consequences, a truism that reaches far beyond a university campus. What Schall finds especially laudable by the pope's speech is that "Some things need to be addressed, whatever the reaction. ... Outside reactions should not be what decide whether an issue needs to be discussed. The outside reaction itself rather indicates the need. Sometimes

not to speak the truth is itself an act of cowardice, not of prudence. It takes intellectual courage to state the truth. Courage is not only a military virtue" (29).

The *second* failure identified in the Regensburg lecture is a failure concerning religion, that is, **the failure to appreciate what religion is and what it entails**. The Reformation sought to separate religion from the Scholastic philosophy that seemed to absorb it. In Schall's view, "Understood this way ... the Reformers were right. Philosophy had subsumed faith. But this was not what the central tradition held about the relation of faith and reason" (94).

Later, Kant took this disjunction between faith and philosophy to its conclusion by relegating religion to practical, not pure, reason. Schall makes clear how remarkable is this shift. The norm that previously held "I believe in order that I might understand" (*credo ut intelligam*) now becomes "I believe because I don't think" (*credo quia non cogito*) and, thus, "thinking and faith are precisely unrelated" (96).

As a result, religion in today's world has been reduced to one of two viewpoints. On the one hand, we see the enormously popular mega-churches, whose worshippers gather in arena-style facilities, replete with high-tech communications and rock concert-quality sights and sounds. This is the religion of ecstatic feeling, whose cultivation of vibrant emotion easily drowns out any thought. God just makes us *feel* good. On the other hand, many conceive of religion as a collective, faith-based initiative that puts how we act on a level higher than, and unconnected to, the differences in what we believe. This is the religion of social activism. In the name of God, we can *do* good.

But Schall readily sees through this religious reductionism when he points out that “If faith deals only with what we do, with practical intellect, it can have nothing to do with what we are or what reality is, something about which we certainly would like to know” (97). Not only that, it also minimizes what we know of the Lord, Jesus: “We follow Jesus, therefore, not because of who and what He is (that is, a divine Person whose meaning requires metaphysics to assist us in understanding what has been revealed to us about His being), but because of his simple ‘humanity.’ We do not ‘worship’ or follow Christ as if He were God. Rather we imitate Him because He has good manners, because he is merely human. We do ‘practical’ or ‘effective’ things in imitation of this good man” (100).

This religious reductionism can be considered an underlying cause, perhaps the fundamental problem, with today’s dearth of religious and priestly vocations. We try to “sell” this way of life based on what one can do, the “ministries” in which one can be involved in order to make a difference in the world, as if the Church seeks vocations in the same way as military or job recruiters. We have not yet figured out that that is not what young people seek. They can get jobs (and, I might add, much better paying ones!). What they want, what they need, what they long for, is meaning. And meaning proceeds from thought that springs from eternal wisdom; it does not ordinarily come from marketing by way of humanitarian posters.

With this emphasis on thought, on what Schall calls “theoretical rectitude” that points above and beyond the practical (97), we come to the *third* failure, **the failure of reason itself**. Ironically, this manifests itself in somewhat opposite ways.

On the one hand, we defer to reason, as the mode by which we can all agree, free from any divergences that may arise from cultural, ethnic, political, or religious differences. Reason understood here as “science” has become the universal arbiter of life; the technology that follows from it helps manage our existence. Today, the science of medicine turns healthcare into a matter of pharmacology. The science of sport makes record-breaking possible through performance enhancement. The science of the marketplace exalts cost-benefit analysis as the key to growth and development. The science of public policy gives priority to compromise, as the way to get the most one can for one’s own constituents.

However, this is reason reduced to positivism, a mathematical approach to life that restricts what we know to what we can determine (through scientific proof), what we can produce (with technological know-how), or what we can decide (by political or legal judgment). But, as Schall notes, “Some things can be usefully measured, but not necessarily everything or the most important things” (105). And without recourse to the benefits that can come from beyond the scientific or the legislative realms – that is, from what is *super-natural* – “essential elements of our real experience have no place in our picture of the world” (119).

On the other hand, we also defer to reason when we are faced with cultural divergences. Where it is a question of things that are not rational, that cannot be measured, that cannot be controlled, that cannot be known scientifically – and we seem to have placed religion and ethics in these categories – there we consider ourselves free to disagree and to follow our own subjective consciences.

However, this seemingly reasonable pluralism does little more than deny reality by means of the subterfuge that, in matters involving morality, we simply cannot know for sure. Determinations about right and wrong, about good and bad, are thus reduced to personal preference. But, as Leo Strauss wittily concludes, much to Schall's delight, "if all positions are of equal intellectual merit, then cannibalism is only a matter of taste" (90).

Schall spends a good portion of his book detailing this failure of reason, what Benedict in his speech refers to as the "dehellenization" that has come with modernity. He explores the three waves that have led to this sorry state: the rejection of philosophy in the Reformation, the historicization of theology in the university, and the advent of cultural pluralism. From this he concludes that "Modernity, in its philosophic sense, means that we are bound by nothing. There is no order in things or in the mind, for that matter, that would ground any order [in the universe]. There is only the order we ourselves make and impose on things. This view of modernity was developed, in large part, to protect us from the notion that truth obliges us" (106).

Theologically, this leads to all kinds of variants, not the least of which is to disparage the study of theology at a university. No longer do we speak as much about divine commandments as we do preferential options. Gone are devotions, now replaced by prayer styles. And sacramental confession has given way to maximizing psychological profiles. Obligations are out and choices carry the day.

That juxtaposition of truth and obligation, of the knowledge and free will that distinguish us as beings in this world, leads to a *fourth* failure - **the failure of**

appreciating what makes us fully human. Here the difficulty is similar to the problems with faith and with reason mentioned above. As Schall notes, “Indeed, the word ‘humanism’ in some conceptions came to imply this same notion that only man knows what man is. In all relevant aspects in this understanding of modernity, man is created to be what he is by man, not God. Not only is ‘nothing human alien,’ but nothing higher than human has anything to teach us. Put in another fashion, it means that all causes are human causes. The practical intellect, contrary to Greek priority, is superior to the theoretical intellect which, in this understanding, has no claim to our normative attention, especially in things that pertain to how we live, to what we are, to our ultimate destiny” (92).

By so denying, or at least ignoring, what is beyond the confines of this mortal (and rational) existence, we shortchange who we are and who we are destined to be. If our view of ourselves is limited to, and by, what our own eyes see, we miss and miss out on a lot. Instead, as Schall explains, Christian belief holds that “What exists from the actual beginning was God’s intention and carrying out of a plan in which man, whatever his own self-definition, was elevated to an end, the Beatific Vision of God, to which he could not aspire by the natural powers or end of what it is to be a human being. Yet, he could be so elevated to this purpose if God granted him the capacity. Aquinas’ phrase [*homo non proprie humanus sed superhumanus est*] means that this capacity was granted. Man as we know him is intended to a supernatural end” (91).

But if we do have an eternal end, an ultimate purpose that is beyond our own making and achieving, then it follows that our knowing and our doing are ordered to

something else, something beyond the here and now. And in that case, both our intellect and our free will are directed to what is not us. In other words, knowledge is bound to Truth and freedom to Goodness.

So, the bigger question broached in the pope's speech has to do with why people are not able, or choose not, to see things this way. One reason is the difficulty inherent in man's search for meaning. As Schall considers this, "a multiplicity of false notions can very well discourage us from pursuing the truth" (120). But, he rightly adds, "We can suffer great mental losses because of what we refuse to pursue, even midst the difficulties." The greater impediment to our human vision is selfishness. "Why do we refuse to pursue this 'truth of existence'? The only answer we can discover is because we do not want to find it if, as we suspect it might, it goes contrary to our expectations, to what we want to do or how we choose to live" (121).

Sadly, we think a truth that obliges is a limit to our freedom. Certainly young people, eager to learn and strike out on their own, are guilty of this fallacy. That's why they suffer anxiety when it comes to selecting and sticking with careers, places to live, or even spouses! What comes with experience - hopefully - is the realization that only in choosing to fulfill the obligations that are part and parcel of our lives will we find the happiness that we thought is the result of having free choice. In other words, Yogi Berra was right: when you come to a fork in the road, take it!

But deep within us there remains a powerful motivation for staying still and choosing not to pursue what is really true. In Schall's words, "There is, I suspect, on a larger scale, a fear that the truth exists and that it is in fact truth" (122). To admit as

much – that Truth is – is to confess to an ultimate reality, which brings us to the *fifth* and final failure to be considered, **a failure concerning God!** What is at stake in the pope’s speech, beyond the cultural and philosophical issues, is our very understanding of the divinity and our relation to this God.

The debate provoked in and by the lecture at Regensburg boils down to a question being asked not only by the pope but by most thinking persons. Schall states it thus: “is it or is it not true that Mohammed or the Koran permits violence in the name of religion?” This question, it seems, motivated the media-driven uproar in the days after Regensburg. Yet, as Schall makes plain, “To make it an insult, blasphemy, or crime even to ask the question is itself a problem with the most serious consequences. Logically, it means the question can never be objectively answered on the basis of reason. One cannot imagine that Mohammed himself would have been insulted by someone wanting to know the foundations and implications of his own teaching” (26).

That foundation is a voluntarist view of God – a belief in the sheer omnipotence of, and our blind obedience to, a divine will no matter how senseless. And one implication of that is the terrorism that has created such havoc in the world. Concerning this connection, Schall proclaims, “Here lies the real root of terrorism. This is the Allah who wills that all the world be submitted to the rites, principles, and law that are set down in the Koran. Such a voluntarist Allah sees no problem with the use of violence in achieving this purpose. Such a god, in the Christian view, cannot be reasonable. Indeed, he cannot be God” (46).

Thus does our conception of God and our relation to God have real, and sometimes all too tragic, consequences for life in today's world – which, of course, is the legitimate purview of the pope's thinking and speaking. Beyond political posturing and security strategies, the university-scholar-become-pope courageously raises the question that we all wonder about but dare to utter. Says Schall, in conclusion, "Many do not protest because they do not see anything wrong with it. To engage the rationality of this latter view is what must follow once violence itself is prevented. ... When violent action is a product of thought, it is time to examine the thought. This examination was the function of the Regensburg Lecture" (127).

The jacket cover describes The Regensburg Lecture as a call for freedom of conscience in religious matters and a reasoned debate, about which not everyone agreed! What we can agree on is that Jim Schall once again provides an insightful, scholarly service to anyone who has the desire, and the courage, to ponder Benedict XVI's examination of the single most important issue facing today's world.



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