

THE PROFESSORS AND THE POPE

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When Pope Benedict XVI succeeded Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church was blessed to have two back-to-back intellectuals of the highest order ascend to the throne of Peter. Even though most professors couldn't compete with John Paul, and most today are no match for Benedict, it from the professoriate that their most vociferous critics have emerged.

Take Benedict. He has often been slammed for not being open-minded and unappreciative of dialogue. This is pure bunk. Here's the proof.

The fact is that no sooner did Benedict assume the mantle of the papacy than he decided to break bread with those not in communion with the Church. Just four months after his election, he met with Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci on one occasion, and soon after met with Bishop Bernard Fellay of the Society of St. Pius X; a month later he sat down with Catholic theologian Hans Küng.

Fallaci, while supportive of Benedict's resolute stand against radical Islamist politics, was nonetheless a self-described "Christian atheist." Fellay is the leader of the rightist group that was declared to be in schism with the Vatican in 1988. The dissident Küng was stripped of his license to teach theology in 1979; he also once compared then Cardinal Ratzinger to the head of the KGB. But none of this mattered to the man who previously engaged Jurgen Habermas, Germany's most famous Marxist philosopher.

So it is not Benedict who is afraid of dialogue, it is his adversaries. That is why the fascists at La Sapienza University, led as always by the professors, bullied him away from speaking on campus. They can't stand what he has to say, and they can't beat him in debate, so they resort to censorial

measures. Ironically, he planned to discuss the faculty of reason in settling human problems.

The 67 professors who signed a letter earlier this year protesting his planned visit to La Sapienza cited the Galileo affair of proof that the Holy Father represented an institution that was at war with science. Their ignorance is appalling. As any fair historian will admit, the Catholic contribution to the Scientific Revolution was pivotal. As for astronomy, the Catholic role was preeminent. Here's how Berkeley professor J.L. Heilborn put it: "The Roman Catholic Church gave more financial aid and social support to the study of astronomy for over six centuries, from the recovery of ancient learning during the Middle Ages into the Enlightenment, than any other, and, probably all other, institutions."

As for Galileo, here's what another Berkeley scholar, and professed agnostic, Paul Feyerabend, said: "The church at the time of Galileo was much more faithful to reason than Galileo himself, and also took into consideration the ethical and social consequences of Galileo's doctrine. Its verdict against Galileo was rational and just, and revisionism can be legitimized solely for motives of political opportunism."

Feyerabend is right. Cardinal Bellarmine, as well as Pope Urban VIII, welcomed Galileo's research, presenting him with gifts and medals. It was only after Galileo persisted in promoting his hypothesis as fact (this was the heresy, not the claim that the earth revolve around the sun) that trouble ensued.

Now if the average faculty member was as open to dialogue as the pope, we'd really be able to have an open discussion. Sadly, it is the pope's critics who continue to fail their own test of tolerance. Indeed, they are still carping over his 2006 address at Regensburg University in Germany.

In that speech, the pope stressed the need to link faith to reason, and vice versa. When faith is unhinged from reason, the result is religious fanaticism. While no religion can claim to be without its lunatic fringe, the real problems begin when the fringe captures the center. There is adequate evidence today to at least wonder whether this has happened to Islam.

While His Holiness drew a firestorm for merely mentioning Islam, what really got under the skin of the professorial class was the pope's discussion of what happens when reason is unhinged from faith. That's because such reasoning ineluctably leads to a consideration of such moral issues as abortion, assisted suicide and embryonic stem cell research. For the Catholic Church, these are not just ordinary matters: they are rightly dubbed to be "intrinsically evil." And there is nothing that sends shivers up the spines of the "open-minded" professors than discussions of this kind.

It is not just professors at secular universities who need to measure up—the same problems exist on most Catholic campuses. That is why it was so important for Benedict to address the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities when in Washington.

Finally, there is something unseemly about professors who couldn't walk in Benedict's shoes berating him for being close-minded. Having spent 20 years in education, sixteen of them as a professor, I can say with authority that no segment of society is populated with more dogmatic and parochial persons than the professoriate. Benedict, and John Paul before him, excluded.