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A professor pope wields some rhetorical jiu-jitsu

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In the Japanese martial art of jiu-jitsu, the key to success is turning your opponent's strength into a weakness. If your opponent is bigger or hits harder, you deflect his energy rather than directly opposing it, turning the blows back upon the guy delivering them.

In effect, Pope Benedict XVI has been practicing some rhetorical jiu-jitsu this weekend in the Czech Republic.

Time and again, the pontiff has taken charges that secularists commonly level at Christianity and turned them back around so that they become indictments of, rather than an apology for, a secular worldview.

The pope's address this evening to a group of academics at Prague's Charles University offered a classic case in point.

Secularists, for example, often accuse Christians of being dogmatists who are hostile to free, unfettered scientific thought. So, addressing an academic audience, Benedict XVI declared himself a former professor who remains solicitous of the right to academic freedom.

In fact, the pope argued, the very university in which the meeting took place was actually founded by the Catholic church, and was shaped by the rich heritage of classical wisdom which the church nurtured over long centuries.

Academic freedom, Benedict argued, lives up to this legacy only to the extent that it is in service to truth. Once intellectuals give up on the idea of truth, he warned, all that's left is the naked will to power and if

you want a real hornet's nest for academic freedom, there it is.

Relativism provides a dense camouflage behind which new threats to the autonomy of academic institutions can lurk, the pope said, speaking in English as he has throughout his trip.

Is it not the case that frequently, across the globe, the exercise of reason and academic research are subtly and not so subtly constrained to bow to the pressures of ideological interest groups and the lure of short-term utilitarian or pragmatic goals? the pope asked.

What will happen if our culture builds itself only on fashionable arguments, with little reference to a genuine historical intellectual tradition, or on the viewpoints that are most vociferously promoted and most heavily funded?

"What will happen if in its anxiety to preserve a radical secularism, it detaches itself from its life-giving roots?"

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Benedict didn't bother providing direct replies to those rhetorical questions, but the implied answer to what will happen? seemed fairly obvious: nothing good.

In a similar vein, secularists often accuse Christians, and religious believers of all sorts, of being enemies of tolerance and dialogue because they purport to possess absolute truth. Benedict turned that blow around as well, suggesting that it's actually secular relativism which is the true foe of dialogue.

Not only do the proponents of this positivistic exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason negate what is one of the most profound convictions of religious believers, the pope argued, they also thwart the very dialogue of cultures which they themselves propose.

An understanding of reason that is deaf to the divine and which relegates religions into the realm of subcultures, is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures that our world so urgently needs, he said.

Indeed, Benedict warned that a society under the sway of radical relativism will not be more reasonable or tolerant, but rather more brittle and less inclusive because they will struggle to recognize what is true, noble and good.

The pope's bottom line amounted to this: You academics prize academic freedom, tolerance and dialogue, and so do I. If you want to defend those values, Christianity is a better bet than secularism. Christianity is able to integrate reason and faith, while radical secularism breeds relativism and nihilism.

The nature of tonight's event didn't allow for any immediate sense of how the academics in Benedict's audience reacted to this bit of verbal jiu-jitsu. Nevertheless, the pope's rhetorical tradecraft at least seemed to offer confirmation of a point made by Professor Václav Hampl, a physiologist and rector of Charles University, in his welcoming remarks.

The power of your words and your judgment has always been praised, Hampl said to the pontiff, even by your opponents.

Before his speech, Benedict XVI was treated to a performance of several classical numbers by a university vocal chorus. Obviously touched, the pontiff got up from his throne and went over afterwards to compliment the conductor.

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