

Editorial

Ratzinger and science (communication)

The death of Pope John Paul II, the “Polish pope”, in Rome and the subsequent election of Benedict XVI, the “German pope”, have been two great events gaining world-wide media coverage and affecting the whole world. This was due to Karol Wojtyła’s ability to reach everyone’s heart – thus once dubbed the “Great Communicator” – and to the Vatican’s spiritual, cultural, and political influence all over the world.

The death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI also concern science and science communication issues, which the “Polish pope” held in great consideration during his 27-year papacy – i.e. the “rehabilitation of Galileo” and his deep distrust for human biotechnologies.

During the first years of his papacy, John Paul II stressed the importance of scientists’ ability to communicate directly on matters concerning society and religion alike. Wojtyła thought – and wrote – that there is no structural conflict between science and religion. Moreover, religion’s pursuit of the essential unity of nature, along with philosophy and theology, may help overcome the “fragmentation of knowledge”, leading to the “secularisation of the world”. However, the Polish pope regarded modern technology as a major factor in upsetting the balance which took over one thousand years to perfect – with special reference to the ability of biotechnology to manipulate the genome, in particular the human genome.

In this respect, he believed that scientists’ communication with the general public had a major role to play. John Paul II did not assign scientists responsibility for the management of technology, which is essentially a political and economic task. He regarded catholic and non-catholic scientists as playing an apparently minor, but definitive role, i.e. constantly and thoroughly informing society, as they could establish more effectively where “the shoe hurts” – as Einstein put it – and, therefore, where new knowledge and related technological innovation would lead. In short, they “are required to” communicate. In this regard, Pope Wojtyła realised – sooner than the majority – how significant the role of public communication is in today’s society where interest in science is widespread even outside academic circles.

In his last years of papacy, John Paul II radically changed his strategy in science communication. Distrust of and even open opposition to human biotechnology became central to his pastoral view of assisted fertilisation, cloning, and embryonic stem cell research, together with the long debated issues of birth control and the use of condoms for HIV prevention. Thus, the supreme head of the Catholic Church chose powerfully and directly to intervene in the relationships between science, technology, and society in a rather unprecedented way: he personally undertook both the burden of communication and of political action, which had previously fallen to scientists.

Incidentally: this shows once again how deeply pope Wojtyła understood this new era of public interest in science, in which the significant decisions on science development are shared in the mixture of cooperation and competition by a range of social groups with different legitimate interests.

In recent years, the whole complex structure of the Roman Catholic Church has been mobilised – from the Vatican to the parishes – in order to communicate, convince, and modify the lawmakers on important issues raised by biotech innovation. This ongoing action of communication and direct political action had its repercussions on all UN general assemblies and on political events in different countries, i.e. US, Spain, Italy, and Poland.

A significant role in defining this direct strategy combining bioethical communication and political action, was played by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – now the new Pope.

Before he was elected Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger expressed much interest in and concern about biotechnology issues becoming even more mistrustful than John Paul II, and quoted human genetics among the “destructive pathologies of reason”, even in its basic molecular investigations into the genetic code (see *In Search of Freedom; Again Reason Fallen III and Religion Abused*).

Joseph Ratzinger seems to believe that genetic knowledge of the human being has the potential to create more harm than good and possibly is an evil in itself. Thus, neither reason nor science, but only religion can – and is entitled to – investigate the intimate aspects of human life.

Therefore, asking questions is understandable, even though these questions may remain unanswered. Will the new pope end up emphasising his direct strategy of communication and political intervention in bioethics? And, if so, what consequences will this have in the world of science? Will it eventually divide catholic and non-catholic scientists? And what consequences will that have on the relationship between science and society? Are even catholic nations moving towards the creation of “moral majorities” which will be trying to build a (mono) ethical society, as is seemingly happening in the US? And in order to reach these goals, will “parishes be mobilised” and – as is happening in Italy and Spain – will strategies of personalised communication be used, that is, unprecedented strategies of micro-communication for the laymen interested in scientific research?

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