

Pope Benedict XVI's political resume: theocracy and social reaction

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The selection of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the new pope is a clear sign that the Vatican will seek to use its influence to promote the most reactionary political forces within the ruling elites of countries around the world, particularly in Europe.

Ratzinger's long record as enforcer of Church doctrine and chief adviser to Pope John Paul II strongly indicates that as Pope Benedict XVI, he will aggressively intervene into political affairs, using issues such as abortion and homosexuality to foster the development of a social base for right-wing parties and policies.

The new pope has close ties to ultra-conservative factions within the Catholic Church, such as Opus Dei, which are openly hostile to the core democratic principle of the separation of church and state, and seek to elevate the Church over civil authority. Such theocratic tendencies are increasingly being embraced by parties on the right as part of their ideological arsenal for attacking all of the social and democratic gains achieved in the course of the twentieth century.

One of the most blatant examples of Ratzinger's intervention into the political affairs of a country was his role in the 2004 US presidential election. A number of American Catholic bishops publicly declared in the run-up to the election that they would deny Holy Communion to Democratic candidate John Kerry, a Catholic, because of his pro-choice stance on abortion rights. Their intervention, a brazen violation of the secular foundations of the US Constitution, was tantamount to a religious injunction to Catholics to vote for George W. Bush.

In June 2004, Ratzinger issued a statement of guidance to US bishops that, in effect, gave the Vatican's seal of approval to Church officials who were using the abortion issue to discourage a vote for the Democratic candidate. In his missive to the bishop of Washington DC, Ratzinger wrote: "A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on

abortion and/or euthanasia."

In an obvious reference to Kerry, Ratzinger declared that a "Catholic politician consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws" should be denied Communion.

Since the Vatican officially opposed capital punishment and had denounced the US invasion of Iraq, Ratzinger was obliged to resort to casuistry to justify placing the Church's onus on Kerry rather than Bush, who had not only led the unprovoked attack on Iraq, but who, as governor of Texas, had approved more than 140 executions. "Not all ... issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia," he wrote. "There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not ... with regard to abortion and euthanasia."

The timing of Ratzinger's statement, coming just a few months before the elections, was not coincidental. A week before Ratzinger's statement, Bush visited the Vatican. According to the *National Catholic Reporter*, Bush complained to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican secretary of state, that "not all the American bishops are with me". He asked the Church to pressure bishops in the US to take a more open stance on cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage.

Ratzinger's remarks made clear the Church's position: anyone voting for Kerry could be adjudged to be in "formal cooperation with evil". His intervention helped elevate Bush's support among Catholic voters from 46 percent in 2000 to 52 percent in 2004.

Another statement by Ratzinger, in August 2004, was aimed at thrusting the Catholic Church into the political affairs of Europe by arguing that Turkey should not be accepted into the European Union. Ratzinger said in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, "In the course of history, Turkey has always represented a different continent, in permanent contrast to Europe. Making the two continents identical would be a mistake. It would mean a loss of richness, the disappearance of the culture to the benefit of economics."

He openly based his opposition to Turkey's admission to the European Union on the fact that Turkey is a Muslim country. "Europe has a culture which gives it a common identity. The roots which formed ... this continent are those of Christianity," he declared.

This perspective—one that appeals to religious chauvinism and anti-Muslim racism—has become the stock in trade of right-wing and fascist tendencies in many European countries.

The trajectory of Church policy under Pope Benedict XVI is further foreshadowed by the factions within the Catholic Church that most insistently promoted his elevation to the papacy. These include Opus Dei and Communion and Liberation.

Ratzinger is said to have gained the early and emphatic support of three prominent members of Opus Dei. Citing aides to two non-American cardinals, the *Washington Post* reported on April 21 that Ratzinger was supported by Julian Herranz of Spain, head of the Vatican's department for interpreting legislative texts, Dario Castrillon Hoyos of Colombia, head of the department in charge of the clergy, and Alfonso Lopez Trujillo of Colombia, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family.

Opus Dei members had been heavily promoted by John Paul II, who also elevated to sainthood Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. Escriva, an important backer of the fascist government of Franco in Spain, once said that Hitler was the "savior of the Spanish Church" for his role in the Spanish Civil War.

Trujillo, as president of the Pontifical Council of the Family, has been instrumental in promoting reactionary positions on abortion, birth control, homosexuality and other cultural issues. In a June 14, 2003 statement, "The Family and Life in Europe," he called for a greater intervention by the Church in European politics, arguing that "many dishonest and immoral proposals in the different European countries could have been stopped at the appropriate time through the intervention of the Bishops ..."

He called for the setting up of an "observatory" that "would be directed at [monitoring] apostolic movements, politicians and lawmakers in order to inform them and form them".

Opus Dei has close ties to the Spanish People's Party, whose roots go back to the Franco regime, and members of the organization occupied high-level government positions in the People's Party government of Jose Maria Aznar, which was ousted in March of 2004.

This extreme right-wing faction of the Catholic Church is also gaining ground within the American political establishment, particularly through the influence of Republican Senator Rick Santorum. Santorum has denied

being a member of Opus Dei, but was a prominent attendee of the congress marking the 100th anniversary of Escriva's birth, held in Rome in January 2002. There he denounced US president John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech in which Kennedy declared his defense of the separation of church and state and said he would not allow the Church to influence his political decisions.

The other Catholic faction that backed Ratzinger was Communion and Liberation, which is particularly influential within the Italian business and political elite. In an April 21 article, the *Los Angeles Times* noted that "a telltale sign" of Ratzinger's ascent "took place at the funeral of Monsignor Luigi Giussani, the founder of Communion and Liberation". The mass, which took place in February, was attended by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, among others. "Representing the ailing pope, Ratzinger presided over the funeral Mass instead of Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, archbishop of Milan, against the expectations of some. Ratzinger's homily brought enthusiastic applause. The audience responded to the remarks of Tettamanzi, a rival candidate for pope, with silence."

Tettamanzi had been promoted by more liberal factions of the Catholic hierarchy. Ratzinger's enthusiastic reception was a sign that the right wing of the Italian ruling elite was firmly behind him.

Communion and Liberation was most recently in the news because one of its members, Rocco Buttiglione, was chosen by Italy to head the Office of Justice and Internal Affairs at the European Union. He was blocked from the position by the EU parliament because he had declared homosexuality to be a "sin". In Italian politics, Buttiglione has been at the forefront of a movement to repeal abortion rights.

The US media has been virtually silent on Cardinal Ratzinger's reactionary intervention in the 2004 election. Likewise, the Democratic Party. John Kerry, the direct target of Ratzinger's intervention, called his elevation to the papacy "a great moment of hope, renewal and possibility for the Catholic Church". He said that he and his wife prayed that "Pope Benedict XVI's pontificate will touch the world in the same way Pope John Paul II did."



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