

Pope visits Bavaria: A broadside against the Enlightenment

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The German media's coverage of the Pope's six-day visit to the German state of Bavaria has been, to put it bluntly, scandalous.

The hours of live coverage by German state television of Joseph Ratzinger's every step and utterance could conceivably be justified on the grounds of public interest generated by the visit of the head of the Catholic Church. But when the two main German state television channels function as little more than subsidiaries of Radio Vatican, they are clearly violating the statutory independence of public broadcasting and the constitutional separation of church and state. German state television has made a mockery of every journalistic principle by uncritically propagating feudal obscurantism and singing the praises of Benedict XVI.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Bavarian television has produced "70 hours of Pope TV, with 46 hours of live coverage in the third programme alone" at a cost of "4 million euros in audience fees." Germany's two public channels have taken over most of this, broadcasting live several hours a day.

Most of the transmissions have featured the same moderator—the editor-in-chief of Bavarian television, the well-known conservative and bigot Sigmund Gottlieb. The "favourite journalist" (*Der Spiegel*) of Edmund Stoiber, the Bavarian prime minister and head of the conservative Christian Social Union, Gottlieb was awarded Bavaria's medal of merit one year ago.

Gottlieb has not limited his activities to Bavaria. On Tuesday, he delivered the commentary for the *Tagesthemen*, one of Germany's main national news programmes, produced in the Protestant city of Hamburg. The tone of his commentary was characteristic of the type of reporting that has accompanied all of the Pope's activities in Bavaria.

"The community of fans is growing! Where does this

approval and enthusiasm come from?" Gottlieb asked jubilantly.

It was not just a passing fad, no: "People are deadly serious about it. People are once again thinking about the meaning of their life. While the secular political and economic elites are stumped, the Pope moves in with his alternative: steadfastness instead of fickleness, humility instead of arrogance, resilience instead of the easy answer, the homeland instead of globalisation. He wants to reconcile science and faith with one another.... This Pope has arrived in the midst of a debate in this country about values. He is being heard! He is appealing!"

The "values" defended and spread by the Pope are, of course, backward and reactionary: a cult of the Virgin Mary, mysticism, amalgamation of belief in God with science and reason.

An impression of this leap into past centuries is given by the report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on Benedict's private benediction before the Black Madonna of Altötting (transmitted to public squares via huge video screens). The newspaper wrote: "As one would expect, the stop-off at Altötting was turned into a manifestation of religious and worldly incarnation. The Pope had made it known how, as a child, he had been fascinated during his pilgrimage to Altöttinger by this unmistakable mixture of darkness and candlelight, of frankincense and the murmuring of prayer, of semi-kitsch and complete devotion, which later shaped his religious development."

In a lecture at the Regensburg University, where he had at one point taught, the Pope pleaded against a positivist limitation of the sciences and for the inclusion of theology "not only as a historical and natural scientific discipline, but as actual theology...in the dialogue of the sciences." He warned against a

“reason that is deaf to the godly and relegates religion to the realm of subcultures.”

Freedom of religion prevails in Germany, and faith is the personal concern of every individual. It is certainly not the job of public broadcasting channels to promote a specific faith or ideology. The statute governing the work of the state broadcasters is very clear in this regard.

It states in Paragraph 10: “Reporting and information transmissions have to correspond to recognised journalistic principles.... They must be independent and factual.” Paragraph 3 states that the transmissions should contribute “to strengthen the respect for the life, liberty and the physical integrity, faith or opinion of *others*” (our emphasis). And paragraph 11 demands consideration of the “principles of objectivity and impartiality in reporting” and “the diversity of opinions.”

Such precepts have been rudely abused by the marathon transmissions on the Pope’s visit. There was not a critical voice to be heard—either from within or outside of the Catholic Church. This despite the fact that there are no lack of critics of the new Pope, who, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has repeatedly intervened to enforce his hard-line conservative views on such issues as contraception and the role of women and laymen in the Church. What about the rights of the members of other churches and non-believers, who are made to feel thoroughly intimidated by the unrelenting propaganda offensive for the Catholic Church?

There has been absolutely no criticism of this public relations campaign for Catholicism by any representative of official German politics. Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is the daughter of a Protestant minister, had already paid a visit to the Pope at his summer residence some weeks ago to plan his trip. Upon his arrival at Munich airport, Merkel stood side by side with another Protestant, German President Horst Köhler, to welcome the Pope.

With the growth of social tensions and increasing disillusion with all of Germany’s official political parties, the ruling elite, whether Catholic, Protestant or atheist, is urgently in need of the “faith” and “values” offered by the Pope. Religious obscurantism is an established means of diverting attention from social tensions, and there is no more practiced expert than the

Vatican. Sigmund Gottlieb spoke for the entire elite when he declared, “While the secular political and economic elites are stumped, the Pope moves in with his alternative.”

The enthusiasm detected by Gottlieb, however, is largely an invention of the media. Despite brilliant sunshine, the numbers turning out to welcome the Pope en route were well below the expectations of the Church, whose representatives manipulated the figures accordingly. According to police figures, just 75,000 turned out in Munich to wave at the Pope when he drove by, although the local diocese spoke of 200,000. In Regensburg, a large section of the vast field made available for the public to attend the Papal mass remained empty.

Initial explanations for the low turnout argued that people had stayed at home, preferring to watch the Pope on television. But then it was revealed that the TV ratings were disastrously low.

In reality, the Church in Germany is suffering a loss in the ranks of the faithful. Over the past 15 years, the number of Catholics has fallen by 9 percent, to a total of 26 million, of which only 15 percent attend church on a regular basis. In 1990, this latter category stood at 22 percent and a half-century ago at 50 percent. Despite the enormous media hype surrounding the Pope’s current visit, a recent poll has revealed that 60 percent of Germans have a critical opinion of the Catholic Church, and even amongst Catholics themselves this figure stands at 30 percent.



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