

The Pope and Islam

Ratzinger's Crusade

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The Vatican has gone to some lengths to dampen down the controversy following the lecture given by Josef Ratzinger, alias Pope Benedict XVI, at Regensburg University in Germany. Ratzinger's remarks provoked violent protests by Muslims across the globe.

The Pope expressed his regrets over "the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address," but he did not address the passages themselves. Instead, the Vatican instructed its ambassadors in Muslim countries to "explain" the contents of the speech.

The press, particularly in Germany, tried to explain away the angry responses to the Pope's speech as some sort of misunderstanding.

It is no such a thing. It would be thoroughly naive to believe the Pope could not have anticipated the consequences of a speech he gave one day after the fifth anniversary of the terror attacks of September 11. During his recent trip to the German state of Bavaria, nothing was left to chance. Every gesture was prepared, every word he spoke carefully rehearsed. After all, the Vatican embodies almost 2,000 years of experience in dealing with other religions.

Ratzinger's speech came at a time when increasingly ideologically-driven arguments are being given to justify the colonial suppression of the Middle East. What began as a "war against terror" has been broadened into a struggle against "violent Islamism" or "Islamofascism," and aimed at defending "Christian Western civilisation."

The speech must be also seen in connection with previous comments by Ratzinger, e.g., his opposition to Turkish membership in the European Union and his advocacy of an acknowledgment of God in the European constitution, which would define Europe as a Christian entity.

Naturally, the Pope cannot undertake an offensive against Islam in the crude manner of a George W. Bush or along the lines of recent comments by the Bavarian prime minister. For one thing, many of the world's one billion Catholics live in Muslim countries.

Therefore, he hid his message in a lecture on faith and reason and expressed through the words of a Byzantine emperor from the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Nevertheless, the message was unmistakable: "Christianity is peaceful and reasonable, Islam violent and irrational." And the Pope is well aware that his message remains, despite his expression of regret.

Along with many outraged Muslims, President Bush was clear about Ratzinger's message. Bush immediately defended the Pope and linked Ratzinger's comments with his own "struggle against terror."

In an interview on CNN, Bush said, "This fight is not about religions. This is a fight between people who use religions to kill and those among us who are for peace." It is not about a struggle between cultures, he added, but "a struggle over culture."

The Iraqi people, who have experienced first-hand Bush's brand of Western civilisation in the form of American bombs and the terror of

US occupation, have paid their own horrendous price in this "struggle over culture."

Ratzinger's Regensburg lecture was broadly praised by the German media as the brilliant product of a leading intellectual. In reality, it is a piece of clumsy, dishonest and malicious historical distortion.

The fact that the Pope cited the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologos in order to give—as he and his cardinal-state secretary later maintained—a clear "rejection of the religious motivation for violence, from whatever side it may come," is a particularly shameful example of historical falsification.

By no means did Manuel II reject "holy war." The decline of his Byzantine Empire was already so advanced in the fourteenth century that he served as vassal in wars for the Ottoman Empire, before eventually breaking his links with the latter and agitating in Europe for a crusade against his former allies—without any great success. His fortunes were eventually saved by the Mongol hordes led by the Muslim Tamerlane, who laid waste to the first Ottoman Empire with enormous brutality. Manuel II sent gifts to Tamerlane after his victory over the Ottomans at Ankara.

This is the man who Ratzinger now declares to be a role model for the peaceful and rational nature of Christianity. He quoted from a discussion with "an educated Persian," in which Manuel II says: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

Even if the Pope now maintains he was only quoting from a medieval text while not associating himself with its contents, the fact is that during his entire speech he never sought to distance himself from the content of this quotation. Quite the contrary, he repeatedly accused Islam of legitimising violence and force against other religions.

If Ratzinger had genuinely sought to condemn religiously motivated violence in all its forms, he need not have referred to the Islamic faith. There are plenty of examples in the history of his own church of spreading the faith by means of the sword.

Nearly three hundred years before Mohammed was even born, the revered St. Augustine of Hippo developed the concept of the just war—"bellum iustum." At the time, Christianity had been declared the state religion of the Roman Empire, and only Christians were allowed to serve in the Roman army.

The predecessors of Benedict XVI refrained from theological debate when it came to countering the later expansion of Islam. In 1095, Pope Urban II proclaimed the first Crusade, and in the years following armies of Christian knights plundered and ravaged the territory of the Middle East.

The brutality of the Reconquista, which established Christian rule

over Moorish Spain, has been documented in numerous works. Only a handful of buildings which survived the fury and destruction of the Christian conquerors testify today to the advanced state of Islamic culture at that time. Needless to say, the patron saint of the Reconquista, St. James the Moor-Slayer, is still revered by the Catholic Church in Spain.

The remainder of Ratzinger's speech also represents historical falsification of the most blatant and pernicious sort.

This applies to the claim that the Christian faith had from the start "converged" with Greek philosophy and is therefore fundamentally rational. According to the Pope, with Islam the will of God "is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality."

Ratzinger continued: "Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way round: this convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what rightly can be called Europe."

That is, frankly, absurd. It was Islam that was much more responsible for bringing Greek philosophy to Europe. A standard work on the history of Islam states that the discovery of Greek philosophy and science "affected Islam to such an extent that for a while one was inclined to deny of its spiritual world any originality." It was thanks to Islam "that Europe was able to rediscover and revive the inheritance of Antiquity, from which it had been alienated."

In opposition to Ratzinger's hypothesis, the book maintains: "While this idea remains largely alien to Christianity, faith and reason for the Muslim represent no fundamental opposition." (Fischer World History [German]: Islam, from its origins to the beginnings of the Ottoman Empire, p. 127, 128).

The fact is that Modern Europe was founded in a direct struggle against the Catholic Church, which sought to combat with fire and the sword other faiths, the Enlightenment, humanism and all popular social movements.

The final surviving relic of feudal backwardness is the Pope himself. Article one in the Fundamental Law of the Vatican states: "As head of the Vatican state, the Pope possesses all legislative, executive and judicial force." And the Code of Canon Law declares the Pope to be "the Vicar of Christ, and the pastor of the universal Church on earth. By virtue of his office he possesses supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power in the Church, which he is always able to exercise freely."

Ratzinger accuses the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, liberal Catholic theology and, of course, "modern reason" of separating science and faith, but by declaring Islam to be irrational, he returns to a stance which not only predates Kant, but even Luther. He makes no secret of the fact that he not only rejects "leaving behind a state of immaturity and dependence" (Kant) but even the "freedom of a Christian" (Luther) to acknowledge, think and decide for himself.

Prior to taking up his post as Benedict XVI, Josef Ratzinger headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is the direct successor to the Holy Inquisition. That institution demonstrated in practice what the Catholic Church understands by the "convergence of Greek philosophy and the Christian faith," of reason and religion: It is the Church which determines what is true or false—in every sphere of life.

The "Socratic dialogues" of the Church with atheists, "heretics" and "witches" were conducted in the torture chambers of the Inquisition

and invariably ended at the stake or in the dungeon. According to some estimates, millions died at the hands of the Inquisition, while countless were tortured and abused.

Today, the Catholic Church no longer practices torture against unbelievers—if one excludes the still existent practice of exorcism—but the Church is still willing to give its support to dictatorships that employ torture if they profess their adherence to the Catholic faith. This applies in particular to Latin America. In 1992, Ratzinger personally ensured the expulsion of the well-known priest Leonardo Boff from office after Boff sought to intervene on behalf of the poor and oppressed in line with this own version of liberation theology.

Fascist regimes in Europe in the twentieth century also shared close links with the Catholic Church—e.g., in Spain, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Slovakia. In Germany, six months after Hitler came to power, the Vatican signed the *Reichskonkordat*, which is still in force today.

Ratzinger's speech had nothing to do with the intellectual speculations of an unworldly theologian who forgot that he is no longer a professor. It was a deliberate provocation.

It embodies a very distinctive, thought-out political perspective, aimed at establishing the Catholic Church as an ideological bulwark on the domestic front of "Western Christian civilisation" against all liberal and progressive forces, and as the ideological spearhead of an imperialist crusade intent on expropriating and controlling the resources of the mineral-rich Islamic countries.

With respect to his attitude to Islam, Pope Benedict has departed from the line taken by his predecessor, John Paul II., also a hard-line conservative, but one who sought to encourage a dialogue between different faiths.

Shortly after taking office, Ratzinger sacked Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, who was responsible for encouraging relations with other religions and was the acknowledged Islam expert in the Vatican. Ratzinger then made a number of comments and remarks in which he attacked Islam. Last year he gave a long interview to the recently deceased Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, who made a name for herself with her own hysterical broadsides against the Islamic faith and community.

Ratzinger's provocation takes place at a time when European powers are intensifying their involvement in the Middle East and his speech found broad support with the European media and leading politicians.

Italian ex-prime minister Silvio Berlusconi called the speech "a positive provocation." German chancellor Angela Merkel promised the Pope she would campaign to ensure the acknowledgement of God in the European constitution.

Following criticism of the Pope's speech by leading Turkish politicians, the Bavarian Christian Social Union has demanded that the European Union break off membership talks with Turkey.

Finally, German interior minister Wolfgang Schäuble has sought to follow the Pope's example by launching his own provocation, calling for the exclusive use of the German language in mosques, arguing that the Catholic Church no longer conducts its services in Latin.



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