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Christianity Today, November, 2006 |  | 

TIDINGS

Does Islam Need a Luther or a Pope?

American pundits debate whether centralized religious authority restrains violence.

Ted Olsen | posted 10/20/2006 08:42AM

For years, Western pundits have proclaimed the need for a "Muslim Martin Luther" who could reform Islam. Actually, the pundits' description of what this reformer would do suggest that they're more interested in a Muslim John Shelby Spong than a Luther: someone who would dismiss the Qur'an as unscientific silliness and bring Islam in line with Enlightenment values.

The Muslim outrage over Pope Benedict XVI's comments now has some pundits saying that what Islam needs is not a Luther, but a pope of its own. As John F. Cullinan observed in National Review Online, the pope attempted to heal relations by meeting with Muslim diplomats rather than Muslim religious authorities. He had to, Cullinan argued: "Not only does the pope have no counterpart in the Muslim world, there's nothing remotely equivalent to the Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy and ordained priesthood." Yes, there are "Muslim clerics who play enormously important political roles," but the pope can't play kingmaker.

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So it's "the pope vs. 10,000 imams, scholars, and other self-anointed spokesmen for Islam," Jonah Goldberg wrote in *USA Today*. "It's a bit like Gulliver vs. the Lilliputians. ... What the Muslim world needs is a pope. Large, old institutions such as the Catholic church have the 'worldliness' to value flexibility and tolerance, and the moral and theological authority to clamp down on those who see compromise as heresy."

Better to see a Muslim Council of Nicea, said Paul Krugman in *The New York Times*. "I'm all for a respectful dialogue between Islam and the West, but first there needs to be a respectful, free dialogue between Muslims and Muslims. What matters is not what Muslims tell us they stand for. What matters is what they tell themselves, in their own languages, and how they treat their own."

July's anger and violence didn't illuminate the problem with Islam's lack of authority, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Al Mohler wrote. It illuminated the problem with the existence of a Catholic authority. "The pope's comments— whether for good or for ill—are given a prominence that is unbiblical and dangerous."

A similar argument was made in *The New York Times's* first editorial on the papal remarks. An apology was required from Benedict XVI, it said, "because the world listens carefully to the words of any pope."

The argument might have been stronger had the *Times* listened carefully itself. A news article two days after the editorial described Benedict's comments as appearing in "largely a scholarly address criticizing the West for submitting itself too much to reason." The pope actually criticized the West for not submitting to reason enough.

So one wonders: If a Muslim pope existed, would anyone listen carefully to him?

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