

Between Pope and Prophet

► [Faisal Devji](#)

26 - 9 - 2006

Muslims' response to Pope Benedict's address at Regensburg is a fresh chapter in the arrival of global Islam on the world's political stage, says Faisal Devji.

Pope Benedict XVI's citation of a medieval text disparaging the Prophet Mohammed, in his [address](#) at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006, has allowed Muslims across the world to mount yet another spectacle of their religion's globalisation.

The statements, demonstrations and acts of violence fuelling this controversy do not match the scale of those protesting the Danish caricatures of Islam's founder in February-March 2006. But the fact that they should have occurred so soon afterwards, and so much more rapidly, is telling given that nearly twenty years separated the cartoon controversy from the first spectacle of Islam's globalisation, which had as its cause the publication of [Salman Rushdie's](#) novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988.

That all these spectacles are concerned with the portrayal of the Prophet Mohammed, rather than with any adverse treatment meted out to Muslims, their mosques or even the Qur'an, is not accidental. The prophet thus defended is not a religious personage so much as a model for Muslim identification, which is why it is not blasphemy that is at issue here but defamation, as is clear from the rhetoric of protesters throughout the Islamic world.

Moreover, [Mohammed](#) brings his followers together in this way because he represents a community whose global presence is mediated neither by any religious nor any political authority, which is quite unlike Roman Catholicism in this respect. Despite the political uses made of these controversies by Muslim leaders, the prophet does not serve merely as a channel for the political [grievances](#) of his devotees, but instead permits them a global voice for the first time in Islam's history.

Globalisation's addicts

As the slender reed upon which global Islam rests, the prophet becomes also a lightning-rod for any perceived insult. In fact such insults are even required to provoke the spectacle of Islam's globalisation and thus allow Muslims to see themselves as actors on a planetary stage, perhaps because they tend to have so little voice in the running even of their own countries.

Furthermore, these insults have themselves become global to the degree that Muslim demonstrators take offence at books, images and speeches only as they are represented in the media, and not as texts to be consulted in their own right. By refusing to consider these texts in their original form, to say nothing of the contexts in which they portray the prophet, Muslim protesters point to the irrelevance of such origins. Their anger is informed by the very media portrayals it is directed against, and is unrelated to the intention of their authors.

When authors like Rushdie or [Pope Benedict XVI](#) are made responsible for the offensive portrayals of Mohammed circulated in the media, they are attacked not as individuals but as the media-enhanced representatives of abstractions like the west, Christendom or Zionism. However involuntary this representation may appear, the task of Muslim protest is to compel such individuals to take responsibility for its global effects.

Indeed such protest is concerned with holding specific persons or groups accountable for these geographically dispersed and institutionally unmoored abstractions, as if to demonstrate thereby the universal inter-connectedness that globalisation makes possible. So it is a fitting irony that these Muslims arguably attend more closely to the pope's words, and even expect more of him, than many Catholics themselves do.

As with the previous spectacles of [Islam's globalisation](#), demonstrations against the pope's words have secular rather than religious meaning, because they are occasioned only by the "hurt" caused to Muslim feeling and make no claims about the truth of Mohammed's revelation. By recognising this hurt and

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(13 April 2006)

responding to it in as secular a manner, the pope undercut his own speech on the relationship of faith and reason at Regensburg University by showing how difficult it is to use religious language outside sectarian borders.

On the other side, the more violently that Muslims protested, the less secular their hurt became, since its expression now damaged the very image of Mohammed's character that his followers sought to defend. In other words, by damaging their own cause these Muslims took leave of secular reason without adopting a particularly religious reasoning in the process. Maybe this is how the relationship of faith and reason that Benedict XVI had addressed at Regensburg University manifests itself outside the academic institutions of rich European democracies.

An even more interesting feature of the secularisation of Muslim protest is its overwhelming rejection of the language of law. Whether marked as sacred or profane, the vocabulary of legal transgression and punishment has been left unpronounced, and there have been no *fatwas* issued as in the Rushdie affair. It is also significant that *jihad*, which the pontiff had referred to in his speech, has not been declared against him; this illustrates the multiple ways in which Muslim protest is manifested globally.

As with the Danish cartoon controversy, Muslim anger at the pope's citation does not follow the al-Qaida line, and in fact puts it quite in the shade by setting another kind of agenda for Islam's globalisation. After all, the pope was asked for an **apology** so that forgiveness might be extended him. However coercive in its violence, this Muslim demand can be taken as an invitation to the kind of dialogue that Benedict XVI called for in his speech, and it should be seized upon as an opportunity by all concerned. The meeting held at the Vatican between the pope and diplomatic representatives from Muslim states on 25 September 2006 is a notable **development** in this regard.

Contrition and forgiveness are of course religious acts, which is why their entirely secular deployment in this controversy becomes significant. If it is not before God but Muslims worldwide that the pope is meant to repent, and not from God but these Muslims that he is to receive forgiveness, then nothing separates such contrition from that expressed by the Hollywood actor **Mel Gibson** for anti-Semitic remarks.

Yet there is a difference here that goes beyond the fact of Muslim violence, which is that **ethics** provide the only language for dialogue in a global arena whose lack of political institutions stands in contradiction to humanity's increasing **interdependency**. How else was the head of the world's largest religious organisation to communicate with Muslims belonging to many organisations or none at all? Certainly not by way of international organisations like the United Nations, which exist only to express the voice of nation-states.

The longing for Christianity

If Muslim anger appears to be so raw, this is because it voices a global presence that remains as yet unmediated by any institution or authority. And if Muslim hurt appears so intensely felt, this is because it expresses disappointment at the supposed lapse of a religious leader who had otherwise enjoyed considerable respect in the world of Islam.

If not the pope himself, then certainly his title evokes for many Muslims as well as Hindus and others a specifically Christian aura of otherworldliness and sanctity, one that leads them to expect a different kind of language from him. This is why Benedict XVI's alleged **lapse** into what seemed to be common prejudice was so shocking for Muslims, who (as it were) overheard the pope speak of their prophet, since he did not choose to address them while doing so.

That such a reaction has not even been afforded President Bush, despite his much-resented talk of a "crusade" in the immediate **aftermath** of 9/11, bears testimony to the specificity of Muslim disappointment in Benedict XVI. It is as if the protesters were acknowledging, with sadness as much as anger, that the pope too had to be included in the ranks of those who would defame their religion.

What is extraordinary, given the steady diet they are fed by the militants among them of Christianity's crusading spirit, is that Muslims should have expected anything different. So it is in fact a hopeful sign that Muslims did not expect a description of Islam's violence from the head of a church that has contributed the words crusade and inquisition to our vocabulary.

Writing in the aftermath of the second world war, the political philosopher **Hannah Arendt** commented on the Vatican's silence at the doings of Nazi Germany, a state with which Rome operated a concordat. Unlike those who would find the church as a whole culpable of collaborating with fascism, Arendt not only pointed to the many priests who risked and lost their lives defending its victims, she also made it clear that the **Vatican** behaved in no way differently than any other state when it came to protesting the extermination of the Jews. But this precisely was Rome's greatest betrayal, to behave in a secular rather than a religious way, a betrayal that **Arendt** claimed lost the church an opportunity to renew its own mission, as much as that of religion in general for a humanity that so urgently required it.

It is this very betrayal of what they see as the church's mission that Muslims are protesting today, just as they have done before in celebrated instances like the Ayatollah Khomeini's message to **Pope John Paul II** in 1979. However disingenuous such expectations might be, they derive rhetorical effect from the very real hope that even un-baptised populations have of the world's largest religious organisation.

It is the disappointment of this expectation that also gives rhetorical force to Muslim dissatisfaction with the speedy retractions and clarifications that have proceeded from the Vatican in response to their protests. For what appears to dissatisfy these protesters are precisely the secular remnants in the pontiff's carefully couched apologies. Yet if for all their rage, today's protesting Muslims have the audacity to expect Christian humility of the pope, this in no way contradicts Benedict XVI's own audacity in asserting the role of faith within a secular dispensation. Such indeed was the import of his address at Regensburg University.

Faith and good faith

A great deal has already been written about the complex role that Islam and its prophet play in the pontiff's now notorious quoted remark, to say nothing of the position that Jews and Protestants also occupy in it. What has so far gone unremarked is the pope's use of violence as a criterion to decide upon the truth of religion.

On the surface this is an extraordinary argument for **Benedict XVI** to make, not only because it goes against centuries of Catholic tradition, but also because it is secular to the core. Violence can only become a criterion of religious truth, or rather of untruth, if it is separated from the argument of secular betterment. Non-violence, in other words, can demonstrate religious truth only if it is good in its own right quite apart from any reason of utility. And this is a promise the church does indeed possess in doctrines like the sanctity of life; though to be fulfilled, it needs to be extended from abortion and euthanasia to execution and war.

The point of this controversy is not that Muslims have misunderstood the pope, that Benedict XVI has misunderstood the Prophet Mohammed, or that either party has acted out of hatred and prejudice. However true or false any of these points may be, the controversy's great irony is that the pontiff's Muslim protesters should engage so fully with the argument of his speech. They did so not by providing an illustration of what happens when faith and reason are separated, but rather by demonstrating how difficult it is for anyone including the pope himself to move beyond the language of secularism. This indeed is the crisis of religion to whose resolution Benedict XVI has dedicated his papacy.

It is telling in this respect that the leader of a venerable church, the world's largest religious organisation, should broach the subject of religion's crisis by referring to Christianity's old rival, Islam. Whatever his intent in doing so, the pope's invocation of Mohammed is remarkable for the importance it accords the prophet, doing Islam a perverse honour thereby.

Has not Islam taken control of the language of faith by posing as its most fervent exemplar in the sacrificial spectacles of its globalisation? And was not this position held, not so long ago, by the Roman Catholic church, which gloried in the mystery of doctrines that surpassed reason? Today these mysteries, of transubstantiation and consubstantialism, to say nothing of papal infallibility, have been placed under the fervid star of Islam, even in Catholicism's European homeland.

But it is precisely this situation that makes the kind of dialogue Benedict XVI has called for at all possible, if only by showing us how intertwined these religions are with each other as well as with secularism. This dialogue can be seen occurring in the extraordinary importance that the pontiff's address accords the prophet and his revelation, as well as in the corresponding importance that Muslims have accorded the speech. But given that it is occurring among large masses of people in an uneven global arena lacking any institutions of its own, it would be foolish to expect such dialogue to be conducted in parliamentary or academic fashion. Indeed the pope himself has made it very clear - the Vatican meeting on 25 September notwithstanding - that he attaches little value to **interfaith dialogue** of this kind.

In his Regensburg address, the pontiff described Europe as Christianity's **spiritual homeland**, though he knows of course that the majority of Christians, and indeed Catholics, live outside this partial continent. By explicitly forsaking the desire to return to Christianity's Asian origins, and even to "the God of Abraham and Isaac", Benedict XVI could not have been so crude as to reject his religion's Jewish heritage. By criticising Muslim and Protestant attempts to recover the moral transcendence of this heritage, as signified in the story of Abraham's sacrifice - which, like the reference to Mohammed, was literally and

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(19 September 2006)

Michael Walsh, "**The Regensburg address: reason amid certainty**"
(20 September 2006)

metaphorically "put in quotation marks" by being cited from another text - he seemed only to be asking Christian Europe to remain true to **its own past**.

But this Hellenistic past, the pope well knows, was shared by Judaism and Islam as much as it was by Christianity. Indeed this largely pagan heritage could be possessed by none of these religions because it was external to all three, and even to Europe itself within its current geographical boundaries. Might the pontiff's speech be heard as an invitation for Europe to contribute her own history to the dialogue of faith and reason, one in which all Europeans, however defined, could participate?

Perhaps this is too charitable a reading, but whatever the case, his **boldness** in turning to Europe's pagan past requires more attention than has been given the pontiff's address even by his staunchest supporters. In yet another irony, then, the pope's radical agenda has been registered and taken most seriously by the Muslim protesters, whom Benedict XVI has to thank for the unprecedented interest that his speech has evoked among Roman Catholics themselves.

The universal interconnectedness that globalisation makes possible means that the dialogue called for by the pope has already begun. But despite the fact that it has the whole world as its stage, this dialogue possesses no space of its own, for being global in dimension it can be conducted neither in the seminary nor the *madrassa*, to say nothing of the university.

This is also a dialogue that finds no place in the national and international politics of our time. So it occurs on the street and in the media, in demonstrations and soundbites rather than in treatises and contracts. It is easy to find examples of such dialogue outside Europe, where this controversy has received some of the most acute press analysis, and I will conclude by citing one of these cases.

The violence of dialogue

Indian and Pakistani Muslims were prominent by their presence in the global protests against the pope. And while both countries have a long record of contributing to international Islamic causes, this is by no means a uniform phenomenon. Pakistani Muslims, for instance, entered the Danish cartoon protests very late in the day, and certainly long after their Indian neighbours lost interest.

On the other hand the latter have never joined the **global jihadi movements** that so occupy Pakistani militants in any significant way. Both countries have a history of anti-Christian feeling, though in India it is **Hindu militants** who are involved in attacks on this minority. In both countries, moreover, it is Protestant evangelicals in rural areas, both missionaries and converts, who come under fire, and not the long-established Catholic communities in urban settings.

Conversion and western licentiousness are generally the causes, actual or ostensible, of prejudice and violence against Christians in India and Pakistan, though even on these grounds they are targeted far less than other religious groups, mostly Muslims of one sort or another. In the immediate aftermath of the Danish cartoon protests, Catholics around the world, but especially in India and Pakistan, began their own much more peaceable demonstrations against the showing of a Hollywood film called *The Da Vinci Code*, which retold Christian history by claiming that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had married and produced a line of descendants who survive to this day. The villain of the piece is the Roman Catholic church, which (according to the film) has spent more than two millennia tracking down and killing Christ's descendants.

These Catholic demonstrations were clearly and explicitly inspired by Muslim protests over the **Danish cartoons**, in a startling illustration of how Islam has come to occupy the language of faith globally. Like Muslim as well as Hindu protests in the sub-continent, Catholic demonstrations express themselves using the secular vocabulary of hurt, making no claims to the religious veracity of their feelings.

What is more, these demonstrations were **joined** by numbers of Muslims in both countries, with prominent Muslim clerics rallying their followers to support a cause they saw as being completely Christian. This support, in other words, was premised not on the fact that Muslims, too, were offended by the film's portrayal of Jesus (who is one of Islam's prophets), but on their sympathy for the hurt felt by their Christian compatriots.

While it was obvious that the Muslims who supported Catholic protesters in India and Pakistan, often against their own governments, did so for a complex set of reasons that might have included the assertion as much as the abnegation of self-interest, it is also true that in doing so they participated in an ethical

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Patricia Crone, "**What do we actually know about Mohammed?**"
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dialogue with their Christian **neighbours**. One part of this dialogue was to show that unlike many Christians in the west, who had refused to acknowledge Muslim hurt during the cartoon controversy, they were entirely capable of sympathising with the followers of other religions.

In the end the offending film was banned in Pakistan as well as in a number of Indian states, without, it seems, endangering freedom of speech more generally. Abstract rights were sacrificed to **concrete feelings** in a way that was constitutionally troubling while at the same time being socially ethical.

None of this meant, of course, that Christians and Muslims had suddenly become allies or even friends, only that a dialogue had been set in motion between them. So today, when the pope has become a target for Muslim ire, Catholics in India and Pakistan have to tread very carefully. All signs are, however, that they have responded in the ethical way that was demanded of them, though I do not mean by this that Roman Catholics have apologised to Muslims out of fear.

In India at least, where there is no history of Muslim-Christian violence, the pontiff's flock has announced its determination to endure the consequences of the controversy with fortitude, blaming neither pope nor prophet for their travails. Does not this expression of a truly Christian spirit illustrate in the most striking way the unity of faith and reason that Benedict XVI has called for?



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