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In response to Muslim demands following his Regensburg address, Pope Benedict XVI should



COLUMNS

Pope's Islamic stumble baffles the experts

19-Sep-2006

By Daniel Madigan

Pope Benedict is learning the hard way that interreligious dialogue these days is a complex and delicate business. Though he has now affirmed his respect for Muslims, in a long quotation from the official policy enunciated forty years ago by Vatican II, his decision to quote a polemical medieval text against Muhammad and the Qur'an during a lecture last week remains puzzling.



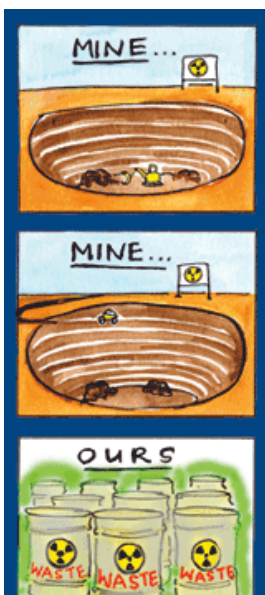
The quoted words were not really germane to his theme, and the lecture would have lost nothing had they been omitted. Ironically perhaps, one of the main aims of the speech was to warn the West that not taking faith seriously and the exclusion of God from the realm of rationality was perceived by the world's religious cultures as an "attack on their most profound convictions". The Holy Father's apologies have failed to convince his critics, as he expressed sorrow not for the offence he caused, but rather for the reactions to that offence. The days to come may shed further light on the puzzle and perhaps bring a measure of reconciliation, but some Christians in vulnerable situations are already paying the price.

There were two related issues in the Christian emperor's attack on Islam which the Pope took as starting points for his reflection: the rationality of God and the irrationality of violence. Neither in Muslim nor in Christian history have these principles always seemed self-evident. In both traditions, contrary to what the Emperor may have thought, it is recognised that any real act of faith must be free and that forced conversion is therefore meaningless. There are several Qur'anic verses to this effect: for example, 2:256; 10:99; 16:125; 26:3-4. The Pope quoted the first of these—"There is no coercion in matters of religion"—though he asserted, against the consensus of both Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, that that chapter of the Qur'an came from the early period of Muhammad's career when he had no political power and so could not have coerced anyone even if he had wanted to.

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In spite of the shared conviction that faith is a gift of God and that forced conversion is therefore irrational, both our traditions have been ready to use coercion and violence to root out schism and heresy, to prevent the practice of other religions, and to enforce at least outward conformity to religion. War and violence still find support among religious people of both traditions, and Benedict seems poised to go even further than John Paul II in his opposition to it.



On the question of the rationality of God, the New Testament itself puts us on our guard against presuming that God conforms to our notions of what is rational. We have to learn God's kind of rationality—what Paul calls the wisdom of the God—through the Cross, which to many who consider themselves wise and rational is simply scandal and folly (1 Cor 1:17-25). Indeed the Pope's speech, whilst extolling rationality, has a very particular kind of rationality in mind—one that has been "purified" by the encounter with Biblical faith. A rationality of love.

The Islamic tradition, too, has been wary of presuming that God is somehow subject to our preconceived notions of rationality and justice. Taken to its extreme for the sake of philosophical argument, this has led some thinkers to assert, for example, that a God who is absolutely sovereign is therefore not obliged to tell us the truth, or to command us only to do good things. However, this kind of speculation hardly touches the mainstream of the Islamic tradition, which remains convinced that God is Truth and reveals the Truth. The whole thrust of the Qur'anic preaching is to encourage people to use their reason to reflect on what can be known about God from the "signs" of God's activity in creation and history. In this the Qur'an's thought is very close to what Paul says in Romans 1, quoted by the Pope in his lecture.

Vatican observers often predict that this Pope will engage much more than his predecessors in substantive dialogue with Muslims about the issues between us. That may be true, and such a dialogue is surely urgent. However, it cannot be done without allowing Muslims to speak for themselves. We cannot presume first to tell them what they believe, and then to criticise them for it. In Regensburg the Pope engaged not with Muslims, but with a version of Islam enunciated by a Christian locked in battle with them. Is it so surprising that conflict resulted?

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