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Benedict should speak as pope, not prof



WASHINGTON – I was tempted to defend Pope Benedict XVI's comments about Islam on the grounds that we journalists always profess to admire leaders who take risks to say what they really think.

In a lecture last week in Germany, Benedict said what he really thought.

The irony is that the pontiff's comments came in a lecture that took Islam and all other religious faiths more seriously than do many of the pope's secular critics. The whole point of the talk, after all, was to defend the rationality of faith in God.

But there is no getting around it: The pope made a big mistake, creating problems for himself, his church and the West. He spoke in the voice of the academic theologian he once was and not as the leader of one of the world's great religions. Being pope is very different from being professor Joseph Ratzinger.

In the controversial passage, Pope Benedict recalls a dialogue between "the erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam."

The emperor – "with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness which leaves us astounded," the pope noted, according to the Vatican's translation – had this to say: "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."

The pope didn't leave it there. He added that "the emperor ... goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul."

What went wrong here? First, if you read the whole, interesting lecture, the passage on Islam was not truly essential to the pope's argument. Indeed, he argued at least as strongly against a liberal Christianity in which "the subjective 'conscience' becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical" and in which Jesus is reduced to being "the father of a humanitarian moral message." (Those quotation marks around the word "conscience" reflect the pope's skepticism of individual moral choice unguided by the church's teachings.)

But then why did Benedict take his shot at Islam? And why didn't he pause to acknowledge that at various moments in history, Christians, including Catholics, have themselves been guilty of inappropriate uses of violence?

Pope John Paul II would probably have agreed broadly with Benedict's theological argument. But John Paul saw himself as a leader of a universal church with serious political responsibilities.

I suspect that John Paul, who was always keener on inter-religious dialogue than Benedict, would either have cut the passage about Islam, or developed it in a way that wouldn't have required the elaborate not-quite-an-apology Benedict issued on Sunday. (Benedict said the words of the "medieval text" he quoted "do not in any way express my personal thought.")

John Paul understood that the growth of Christianity requires religious liberty in nations where Christians are a minority. No institution has more of an interest in religious toleration and a sense of inter-religious comradeship than the Catholic

Church.

Benedict's defenders have a point when they question whether his comments fully justify the explosion against him in the Muslim world. A significant number of Muslim religious leaders have said some harsh things about Christians, Jews and Western secularists in recent years.

Would that all of Benedict's Muslim critics were as critical of anti-Christian or anti-Jewish statements from their own side.

But that is precisely why all who are hoping for a liberalized Islam should take Benedict to task, and why he needs to use that great intellect of his to move this discussion in a different direction.

The many Muslims who reject the idea that their faith should be "spread by the sword" will not see their cause advanced by Westerners who take us back to arguments rooted in an era when Christianity and Islam were literally at sword's point. We should all struggle to interpret our respective traditions in ways that enhance toleration and respect. Muslims who take risks on behalf of religious freedom need to know that non-Muslims are willing to engage with the best and not just the most extreme currents of Islamic thought.

Benedict made a good point when he said: "A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures."

It's true that Westerners who reject religion altogether may have trouble opening an authentic dialogue with Muslims. But religious dialogue will not progress very far if it starts off with a slap in the face.

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