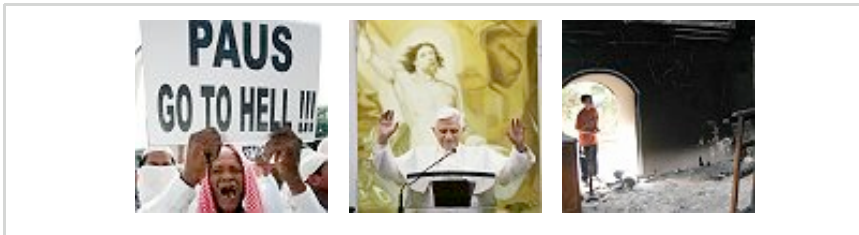


SPIEGEL ONLINE - September 18, 2006, 03:34 PM

URL: <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,437684,00.html>**OPINION****Rushdie, Hirsi Ali, the Pope -- Who's Next?***By Claus Christian Malzahn in Berlin*

The pope has apologized for the outrage amongst Muslims sparked by his recent comments. But the episode proves once again that criticizing Islam is dangerous.

Twenty years ago in the German city of Bremen, Dutch comedian Rudi Carrell's life depended on police protection. His offense? In a satirical program on German television, he let fly with a lewd joke about the then leader of the Iranian revolution Ayatollah Khomeini. Mass demonstrations in Iran -- orchestrated, no doubt, by the government -- were the result. The threats of violence led to an apology by Carrell, and he never again made a joke about any Muslim -- at least not on television.

PHOTO GALLERY: MUSLIMS ANGRY AT PAPAL COMMENTS

Click on a picture to launch the image gallery (10 Photos)

In February 1989, the Ayatollah then released a fatwa calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie for his novel "The Satanic Verses." The book, he and other Muslim leaders claimed, was a grave misrepresentation of Islam. Rushdie's Japanese translator lost his life as a result of the fatwa and Rushdie himself went into hiding, though the Iranian leadership

distanced itself from the fatwa in 1998. There remain, however, a number of fanatical Muslims who yearn to see Rushdie dead.

Feminist and Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the former Dutch parliamentarian who recently left Holland, also lives under threat of murder. In addition to a number of interesting books about the oppression faced by women in the Muslim world, she also wrote the screenplay for the short film "Submission." In one scene, a verse from the Koran -- demanding that women bend to the will of their husbands -- is projected onto a woman's naked body. The film was provocative, and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh paid for it with his life. He was killed on the streets of Amsterdam by a Muslim fanatic.

And then there's Flemming Rose, the Danish editor who a year ago published a series of Muhammad caricatures in his newspaper. Months after they originally appeared, the Muslim world erupted in protest against the drawings. He too must fear for his life.

One thing should be kept in mind, however: The often violent protests that erupted in the Muslim world in the wake of the cartoon controversy have often been manipulated and fuelled by Islamists. The bile currently being flung at the pope is no different.

But the attacks against the pope are especially grotesque. The severe criticism -- often coupled with threats of violence -- directed at the speech held last Tuesday by Benedict XVI is not just an attack on the head of the Catholic Church. The malicious twisting of the pope's words and the absurd allegations made by representatives of Islam represent a frontal attack on open religious and philosophical dialogue.

That so many in the Muslim world joined the protests against the pope merely show just how influential Islamist extremist groups have become. The political goal of the Islamists is clear: any dispute between Christianity and Islam must obey the rules handed down by political Islamism.

NEWSLETTER

Bending to this demand would be a mistake -- indeed it would be

 Sign up for Spiegel Online's daily newsletter and get the best of Der Spiegel's and Spiegel Online's international coverage in your In-Box everyday.



tantamount to turning one's back on freedom of expression and opinion. What will come next? Perhaps a complaint that Allah feels insulted by the numerous European women who don bikinis during a summer trip to the beach. It could be anything really -- militant Islamists will always find something. But the response needs to be firm. Freedom of speech, after all, is a vital value and needs to be defended. Any attempt to make political speech hostage to some imagined will of God must be resisted.

There are -- few -- critical voices that should be taken seriously when it comes to **the pope's comments**. Shouldn't Benedict XVI have known that the quote he included in his speech -- a passage he himself described as "brusque" -- might be misunderstood? Couldn't he have made his meaning a bit clearer? Even if he had, it should be welcomed by all, including leftist atheists and agnostics, that we now have a pope who can pose challenging academic questions. In any case, a close reading of his speech reveals not a single insult directed at a single Muslim.

And there's no reason to respond to every presumed insult. Consider an example from Denmark. Recently, a paper there published a number of rather tasteless Holocaust cartoons which had been shown in Tehran. The reaction of Copenhagen's rabbi was instructive when considered against the bloody response to the Muhammad cartoons -- outrage which ended up costing lives. When asked if he would call for protests, the rabbi merely said: "You know, I've seen worse."

© SPIEGEL ONLINE 2006
 All Rights Reserved

Reproduction only allowed with the permission of SPIEGELnet GmbH

More about this issue:

Related SPIEGEL ONLINE links:

- ▶ Photo Gallery: Muslims Angry at Papal Comments
<http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/0,5538,16247,00.html>
 - ▶ SPIEGEL Interview with Cardinal Walter Kasper: "Islam is a Different Culture" (09/18/2006)
<http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/spiegel/0,1518,437587,00.html>
 - ▶ Muslim Outrage Ebbs: Pope's Apology Rejected by Some, Accepted by Others (09/18/2006)
<http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,437636,00.html>
-