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Why quote a Byzantine emperor?

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WASHINGTON Muslims and the pope

Throughout the tumult over Pope Benedict XVI's recent speech, he and Vatican spokesmen have beseeched journalists, critics and the public not to take the contentious passage "out of context." Let us try, then, to elucidate this context.

Not, however, the purely textual context of the now infamous "Paleologus quote," but the real context - the historical and intellectual backdrop that helps explain why the pope (whether or not he agrees with it) turned to this passage to introduce the main argument of his speech.

It is at best ironic, and at worst disturbing, that a Roman pope should have quoted a Greek Orthodox emperor from around 1400 with respect to Muslim violence.

Emperor Manuel II Paleologus was forced by Ottoman strategic pressure to seek a humiliating rapprochement with Rome; yet Rome, to most contemporary Byzantines, was still profoundly alien, and ultimately hostile.

Barely 150 years after the end of the violent occupation of Constantinople by Latin Crusaders, there is no doubt that Manuel would have been tempted to indict Roman Christianity's inherent violence in terms very similar to the remarks he made about Islam.

Moreover, Constantinople in 1400 was under siege. A half a century later, it would succumb to Turkish military pressure. It is telling and also disturbing that Benedict chose - among all other texts and periods - to refer precisely to this one.

In doing so he opened a window into his own perception of Islam, one that is under the shadow of a siege mentality - a siege that the Vatican believes it is losing. In this light, the pope's speech at the University of Regensburg and his recent comments about the decline of faith in the West, which he opposed to the vitality of Islam in the East, turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

The literary context of Benedict's quote is equally problematic. Some have wondered why, among all potential sources, the pope chose a medieval text - a testament from the so-called "Dark Ages."

In fact, he did more: He singled out one of the darkest passages from an era and a genre that otherwise gave credence to Islam's faculty to reason.

Manuel II's "Refutation of the Muslim faith" was only a late avatar of a literary genre that had deep historical roots. No lesser scholars than Peter the Venerable (1094-1156) and Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274) had made significant contributions to this tradition.

However, they tended not to impugn Islam in the same spirit as did Manuel II. On the contrary, they started from rational premises that they assumed Muslims shared, and, on that basis, discussed whether reason made Christianity or Islam more compelling.

In this intellectual joust, Christian authors never put into question the Muslims' capacity to combine reason and faith. They merely claimed that their own arguments were the more cogent.

If the pope inexplicably dug out one of the most culturally antagonistic texts from the Middle Ages, might this not suggest that it is our era, our interfaith and intercultural dialogue, that is "dark"?

The difference of outlook between the treatises of Peter the Venerable or Thomas Aquinas and Manuel II's passage is easy to explain.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, when Peter the Venerable and Thomas Aquinas wrote, Christianity was on the rise. It was re-conquering, or simply conquering, land from weaker Muslim states. (In the process,

incidentally, the Christian world was doing most of the killing and most of the "conversions by the sword.") Christianity trusted its strength, including its intellectual strength.

Nothing could be further removed from the Constantinople of 1400. Manuel II and his predecessors had dedicated their lives to a battle they knew they must lose.

Islam was on the offensive. The emperor was under siege, humiliated by Muslims and Roman Christians alike. He was at war, which is not conducive to trusting one's own reason, or the adversary's.

So the real question is why the pope felt such cultural proximity with an emperor under siege, at war, humiliated, and on the losing side of history.

It is to be hoped that the West, in its dialogue with the Muslim world, does not share Manuel Paleologus's bleak outlook, or the conviction that his and our historical circumstances are in any way comparable. Giving credence to such notions would doom us to turn the "clash of civilizations" into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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