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Benedict's Papal bull is worthy of Blair

21 September 2006

The Pope's sectarian attack on Islam at Regensburg was strikingly reminiscent of Tony Blair's Los Angeles speech on August 1, whooping it up for the War on Terror.

Benedict XVI outlined a conflict between the rational tolerance which he suggested was characteristic of Christianity and the irredeemable backwardness which he ascribed to Islam. Christians believe that "not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature," he claimed. Islam, in sharp contrast, "is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality."

Compared to Papal bull of this sort, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presentation to the UN General Assembly early yesterday morning was a model of balance and cool lucidity.

The Pontiff has previous in this area. In the immediate aftermath of the September 2001 atrocities, the then Cardinal Ratzinger declared that "the history of Islam ... contains a tendency to violence," but conceded that: "There are other aspects, too. It is thus important to help the positive line ... to prevail and to have sufficient strength to win out over the other tendency."

In Los Angeles, Blair referred to an "elemental struggle about values ... for the soul of the region," in which the West, perforce, must play a part: "We want moderate, mainstream Islam to triumph over reactionary Islam."

Both men defend Western intervention in the Muslim world to sort out good Islam from bad

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Islam. The difference between Pope and Premier is the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedle DD.

This is the main reason Muslims are outraged at Benedict. It doesn't have to do with irrational sensitivity on the part of religious fundamentalists. It has to do with the function of the Regensburg speech as war propaganda.

Aggressors in all wars call history in evidence to elevate their own purpose while demonising (it's the right word in this context) the enemy. Thus, Benedict's specific charge was that Islam, of its nature, in contrast to Christianity, endorses the notion of "spreading the faith through violence." The dishonesty is of positively Blairite proportion.

It was in the context of western invasion of what we now call the Middle East that the notion of suicide killers being rewarded by transportation to paradise was originally sucked from the thumb of a Pope. Urban II, in 1009, recruiting an army to avenge the destruction by the caliph al-Hakim of the Church of the Sepulchre in Jerusalem (allegedly built around the tomb from which Jesus supposedly rose up from the dead), promised a Plenary Indulgence to any volunteer who died in battle against the Muslims.

In 1198, Innocent III extended the offer to those who didn't fancy the trek to the Holy Land themselves but who had the wherewithal and agreed to underwrite the hire of a Crusader to kill and die in their place.

Daft and demented as have been the pronouncements of many an imam, none, as far as I'm aware, has yet caught up with that particular wheeze.

Of course, almost a millennium was to pass before a tiny minority of Muslims took up the idea of the supreme leader of the Roman Catholic Church that those who die in the course of slaughtering the enemies of God are instantly up-zapped into heaven. So, perhaps it will be some years yet before a wild-eyed preacher tells worshippers in some obscure mosque that they can pick up the suicide-bomb sponsorship forms on the way out.

Nor is the idea of killing for Jesus in the expectation of salvation a quaint episode from the dusty history of discredited popes. There's scarcely been a western army gone into battle in the last millennium without some version of Onward Christian Soldiers speeding them on their way.

It is still common to hear Christian clergymen here, as elsewhere, annually proclaim that the young men of Ulster who were lured by lies to spill their lives on the murder fields of Flanders in the service of corrupt Empire were engaged on God's work and assuredly will have earned Eternal Reward.

Some of us can remember Cardinal Spellman of New York ceremonially blessing US warplanes on the runway before they set off to napalm villages in Vietnam, the meantime urging the aircrews to see themselves as 'Warriors for Christ.'

Benedict is cut from the same altar cloth as these.

All religions are religions of peace, in the limited sense that they can provide the personally troubled with an ersatz sense of ease. They are all, too, and much more importantly as far as the rational world is concerned, ideologies of war, capable in any circumstance of supplying a justification for killing to override all human hesitation. Institutionalised religion is ever available to endorse wars promoted by its patrons.

Benedict, like Blair, has a single-cause explanation of evil in the world. Their message is that, yes, this is a Crusade. It's a message which has been well understood in the Muslim world.

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