



The Pope and the Koran

[Daniel Pipes](#)

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Islam and Muslims are expected to be a priority for Pope Benedict XVI, but he has been publicly quite muted on these topics during his first nine months in office. One report, however, provides important clues to his current thinking.

Father Joseph D. Fessio, SJ, recounted [on the Hugh Hewitt Show](#) the details of a seminar he attended with the pope in September 2005 on Islam. Participants heard about the ideas of a Pakistani-born liberal theologian, Fazlur Rahman (1919-88), who held that if Muslims thoroughly reinterpret the Koran, Islam can modernize. He urged a focus on the principles behind Koranic legislation such as jihad, cutting off thieves' hands, or permitting polygyny, in order to modify these customs to fit today's needs. When Muslims do this, he concluded, they can prosper and live harmoniously with non-Muslims.

Pope Benedict reacted strongly to this argument. He has been leading such annual seminars since 1977 but always lets others speak first, waiting until the end to comment. But hearing about Fazlur Rahman's analysis, Father Fessio recalled with surprise, the pope could not contain himself:

This is the first time I recall where he made an immediate statement. And I'm still struck by it, how powerful it was. ... the Holy Father, in his beautiful calm but clear way, said well, there's a fundamental problem with that [analysis] because, he said, in the Islamic tradition, God has given His word to Muhammad, but it's an eternal word. It's not Muhammad's word. It's there for eternity the way it is. There's no possibility of adapting it or interpreting it.

This basic difference, Pope Benedict continued, makes Islam unlike Christianity and Judaism. In the latter two

religions, "God has worked through His creatures. And so, it is not just the word of God, it's the word of Isaiah, not just the word of God, but the word of Mark. He's used His human creatures, and inspired them to speak His word to the world." Jews and Christians "can take what's good" in their traditions and mold it. There is, in other words, "an inner logic to the Christian Bible, which permits it and requires it to be adapted and applied to new situations."

Whereas the Bible is, for Benedict, the "word of God that comes through a human community," he understands the Koran as "something dropped out of Heaven, which cannot be adapted or applied." This immutability has vast consequences: it means "Islam is stuck. It's stuck with a text that cannot be adapted."

Father Fessio's striking account prompts two reactions. First, these comments were made at a private seminar with former students, not in public. As "[Spengler](#)" of *Asia Times* points out, even the pope "must whisper" when discussing Islam. It's a sign of the times.

Second, I must register my respectful disagreement. The Koran indeed can be interpreted. Indeed, Muslims interpret the Koran no less than Jews and Christians interpret the Bible, and those interpretations have changed no less over time. The Koran, like the Bible, has a history.

For one indication of this, note the original thinking of the Sudanese theologian [Mahmud Muhammad Taha](#) (1909-85). Taha built his interpretation on the conventional division of the Koran into two. The initial ver-

ses came down when Muhammad was a powerless prophet living in Mecca, and tend to be cosmological. Later verses came down when Muhammad was the ruler of Medina, and include many specific rulings. These commands eventually served as the basis for the Shari'a, or Islamic law.

[Taha argued](#) that specific Koranic rulings applied only to Medina, not to other times and places. He hoped modern-day Muslims would set these aside and live by the general principles delivered at Mecca. Were Taha's ideas accepted, most of the Shari'a would disappear, including outdated provisions concerning warfare, theft, and women. Muslims could then more readily modernize.

Even without accepting a grand schema such as Taha proposed, Muslims are already making small moves in the same direction. Islamic courts in reactionary Iran, for example, have broken with Islamic tradition and now [permit women the right to sue for divorce](#) and [grant a murdered Christian equal recompense](#) with that of a murdered Muslim.

As this suggests, Islam is not stuck. But huge efforts are needed to get it moving again.

Jan. 17, 2006 update: It was Christian W. Troll, SJ, who explained Fazlur Rahman's thinking at the seminar mentioned above. In a note replying to my article, Dr. Troll replies to Father Fessio's account of the discussion, disagreeing with a key point in it:

Sir,

I took part in the seminar that Fr. Fesio mentions and I happen to be the person who presented the paper about Fazlur Rahman referred to by him.

I can only say that the reported remark of the Holy Father, among others, points to the well-known point of essential difference between classic mainstream Muslim and classic mainstream Catholic theology concerning the Word of God and of revelation/inspiration. It also suggests that Muslim theological thinking must deal with the weight of this deep-rooted faith conviction and the theological vision it continues to shape.

However, I cannot remember at all the Holy Father having said the words reported at the end of the indented paragraph in D. Pipes's report, "The Pope and the Koran," that "There's no possibility of adapting it or interpreting it."

The Holy Father is well-informed enough to know that there have existed and that there exist today, probably increasingly, other interpretations of the Qur'anic evidence with regard to a theology of revelation. These considered Muslim views and approaches do not (yet?), it would

seem, inform the thinking and approach of a sizable Islamic movement or organisation – and we do not know what future problems lie ahead in this regard – but it does exist and is vividly discussed in many places, both in academia and beyond.

An open debate on these matters does not yet seem to be possible within the Arab world but Turkish and Indonesian society grant relatively more room for airing and discussing such ideas, and the so-called Western countries offer even more space.

Recently, I published "Progressives Denken im Zeitgenössischen Islam" ("Critical Survey on Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam"), *Islam und Gesellschaft*, Nr. 4, that looks at such religious thinking. The German original (and the English translation of it) are available from Franziska Bongartz, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. D-10785 Berlin, Hiroshimastr. 17, Franziska.Bongartz@fes.de.

Sincerely,

Christian W. Troll

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