



The Pope's Divisions

(Published in *The Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2006)

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Colaboraciones n° 1231

September 26, 2006

Although many Muslims have apparently found Pope Benedict XVI's recent oration at the University of Regensburg deeply offensive, it is a welcome change from the pabulum that passes for "interfaith" dialogue. Since 9/11, his lecture is one of the few by a major Western figure to highlight the spiritual and cultural troubles that beset the Muslim world. Think of the awfulness that we've observed in the last years: the suicide terrorism in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, but especially the holy-warrior carnage in Iraq, where Sunni diehard believers have tirelessly slaughtered Shiite women and children. Then think of the tepid, not always condemnatory, discussions these atrocities have provoked among devout, especially fundamentalist, Muslims. We should have seen many more Westerners and Muslims posing painful questions about the well-being of

Islamic culture and faith. With the exception of President Bush's remarks about "Islamofascism," which provoked dyspeptic reactions inside the U.S. government and out, the administration has generally avoided using powerful language connecting Islam to terrorism.

Let us be frank: There is absolutely nothing in the pope's speech that isn't appropriate or pertinent to a civilized discussion of revealed religions and ethics. Even if one is not a believer in any revealed faith, or has some memory of the conflict, daily cruelty and forced conversion meted out by representatives of Rome's bishops, or has some skepticism about the church's commitment to defending the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment, one can be thankful that the pope sees Christianity as a vehicle of peace and tries to explain why he thinks this is so.

And by extension why Islam is so often today the loudly proclaimed faith of men who define their relationship to God through violence. Joseph Ratzinger's explanation, as befits a former professor of theology and philosophy, is an abstract one, but it is in the broadest sense undeniably true.

Popes ought to help clarify--not camouflage--the great troubling issues, as Shiite Islam's most senior ayatollahs try to illuminate the most perplexing questions that confront their followers and Muslims in general. The odds are good that few of the pope's most vociferous Muslim critics read his highly philosophical disquisition, which affirms a position on a needed harmony between reason and faith that many of Islam's great jurists and philosophers would quickly recognize. Benedict is trying to tackle many of the very same subjects that Iran's former president, Mohammad Khatami, approached in his book, "From the City World to the World City"--but with considerably more erudition and tact. Mr. Khatami's language, thought and historiography are often an intellectual mess and egregiously insulting to Christians, Jews and, most of all, Western atheists and agnostics. Yet Mr. Khatami is esteemed by many of those who scold the pope.

Is the pope wrong to imply--in a rather roundabout way--that there is today something amiss inside Islam, as a community of believers sharing one faith and a long, common cultural tradition? There probably isn't a single liberal editor at a major

American or European paper who doesn't think that there is something a little dysfunctional--a disposition that tolerates, if not encourages and admires, violence as expression of religious outrage--among young Muslim males from Northern Europe to Indonesia. We might not be able to put our finger precisely on it--the problems of a radicalized British Muslim of Pakistani ancestry are not the same as a Sunni Iraqi suicide bomber who blows up Jordanian and Palestinian women and children--but we know there is something wrong within Islam's global house, something that cannot be blamed exclusively on Western prejudice, bigotry, military actions or colonialism.

Many Muslims know it too, even if they are not inclined to say so publicly--it's often dangerous and always enormously difficult for believing and nonbelieving Muslims to aggressively critique their own when they know non-Muslims are listening. Self-described Muslim intellectuals (often meaning the traditionally devout, clerics) really have a hard time engaging in self-criticism that fortifies non-Muslim critiques of Islamic society. The notion of "us" and "them" is very powerful in Islam, even though Muslims have often aligned themselves with infidels against their religious brethren. The truly hard-core, radical Muslims of the West--the most frightful of the jihadists--have much more in common temperamentally and culturally with militant European left-wingers than they do with the devout farther east, yet they ferociously separate the world into

two camps like the most primitive Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia.

And self-confidence is a huge problem. Militarily triumphant in the past, traditional Muslims had an easier time being tolerant toward the minorities in their midst; they certainly were unperturbed by the theological arguments and invective put forth by practitioners of a superseded faith. As many believing Muslims have become less self-confident--and the world around them has become ever more incongruent with the imagined, pure world of early Islam, when the faithful were unceasingly victorious because they were more perfect in their submission to God's will--they have become more acutely conscious and aggressive about their Muslim identity. Clerics in London, Copenhagen, Cairo or Tehran dictating terms about the appropriate comportment of non-Muslims toward believers has naturally followed.

Pope Benedict nailed two facts about Islam that are contributing factors to the faith's very rough entry into modernity. The prophet Muhammad, the model for all Muslims, established the faith through war and conquest. His immediate successors, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, whom traditional and radical Muslims cherish, reinforced Islam's identity as a victorious faith through the rapid creation of a world empire. Christianity was also at times spread by "the sword," and its use of that sword against nonbelievers and heretics was more savage than any Muslim imperialist's. But Christian-

ity was not born to power. Jesus is not a conqueror. The doctrine of the "two swords" always existed in Christian lands--the division of the world between church and state--and created enormous tension. It helped produce Western civic society. And the image of God in Islam, which the pope underscores by talking about the Muslim philosopher Ibn Hazm, is a cleaner expression of unlimited, almighty Will than it is in Christianity. Islam is akin to biblical Judaism in accentuating the unannounced, transcendent awe of God. When radical Muslims take a hold of this divine fearsomeness, it can untether itself quickly from "conventional" morality, thereby allowing young men to believe that the slaughter of women and children isn't an abomination. In that sense, Muslim jihadism, like fascism, rewrites our ethical DNA, turning sin into virtue.

The pope doesn't tell us how we should proceed to counter the defects he sees in Islam. He should, since that would begin a real, painful but meaningful dialogue, which will surely cut both ways between the West and Islam. But what is most disturbing in the Western reaction to the pope's speech--and one sees the same reaction among those who are uncomfortable with President Bush's use of the term "Islamofascism"--is the often well-intentioned refusal to talk openly about the other side. No one wants to offend, so we assume a public position of liberal tolerance, hoping that good-willed, nonconfrontational dialogue, which criticizes "our" possibly offensive behavior

while downplaying "theirs," will somehow lead to a more peaceful, ecumenical world.

We won't talk about the history of jihad in Islam. We would rather emphasize that jihad can mean an internal moral struggle for believers, even though the most progressive, revisionist Muslim (unless he has been completely secularized in the West) knows perfectly well that when Muslims hear the word "jihad," they proudly remember holy warriors, from the prophet Muhammad forward. We won't probe too deeply, and certainly not critically, into how the Quran and the prophet's traditions, as well as classical Islamic history, have given all believing Muslims certain common sentiments, passions and reflexes. We don't even talk about how the post-Christian West's great causes--nationalism, socialism, communism and fascism--entered Islam's bloodstream and altered Muslim ethics, often catastrophically. Many in the West, on both right and left, prefer to see Osama bin Laden's terrorism as a violent reaction to Western, particularly American, behavior. It is thus something that could be avoided. (Israel usually enters the discussion here.) We shy away from the more existential arguments that suggest that bin Laden's popularity in Islamic lands is the product of an enormous religious and philosophical distemper that derives from the

world being the reverse of what God had ordained: Muslims on top, non-Muslims down below.

But we need to talk and argue about these things. We need to stop treating Muslims like children, and viewing our public diplomacy with Islamic countries as popularity contests. Given what's happened since 9/11, a dialogue of civilizations is certainly in order. To his credit, Benedict has at least tried to approach the invidious issues that will define any helpful discussion. For 200 years, the West has, for better and worse, helped create the intellectual framework within which all Muslims think. Muslim saints, like the Egyptian dissident Saad Eddin Ibrahim, or Muslim devils, like Ayatollah Khomeini, have Western ideas profoundly within them. If we withdraw from this civilizational debate, the decent men and women of the Middle East, most of whom are faithful Muslims, will have a very hard time defeating those who have brutalized and coarsened their culture and religion. Westerners are doing Muslims an enormous disservice--a lethal bigotry of low expectations--by telling the pontiff to be more diplomatic. This isn't how anti-Western Islamic theocrats, holy warriors and ordinary teachers in much of the Muslim world act. They're having a real, vibrant discussion. We should turn it into a debate.

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