

The Reality of Religion. Putting Things in Context

By Michael A. Ledeen

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It's notable, I think, that religion--not so long ago pronounced irrelevant by most everyone in proper society--now dominates the global debate. Even a Communist like Hugo Chavez used religious terms to denounce W., perhaps because he is now in a tag team with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who speaks for a theocracy. But despite the fundamental importance of religion, most of our sages and scribblers are poorly equipped to deal with it, as you can see from the awkward coverage of the pope's speech at Regensburg. It was, as you'd expect from a pope, a religious text, but the religious content was rarely reported, aside from Benedict's remarks about Islam--themselves a part of a broader religious message aimed primarily at Europeans. A big part of his message was that Greek philosophical thought is central to Roman Catholicism, and that Catholicism evolved in Europe, in the constant interplay between faith and reason. It's almost impossible to find that in the discussion.

The stuff about Islam was predictably discussed in the usual context of political correctness, according to which it is always wrong to criticize another person's beliefs, and very wrong to criticize the beliefs of a foreign "culture." They seemed unable to comprehend that, in ultimate issues, this sort of total tolerance doesn't work. And the pretense that violently conflicting views of the world can be smoothed over in pleasant conversation only has the effect of intensifying the conflicts. We have arrived at the present unhappy situation not so much because we challenged those with different worldview, but because we ceased to assert our own values and advance our world view. In my graduate-student days, I met a fine New York editor by the name of Howard Fertig. Howard edited the books written by my boss, the great historian George L. Mosse, and from time to time I got to have lunch with him in Manhattan, usually at a long-gone German restaurant, Luchow's. At one of these lunches Howard shook his head sadly--we're talking 1963 or 64--and pronounced the death of America. Why? Because, he said, we had adopted the view that everyone is entitled to one hang-up. Yes, so-and-so was a child molester, but hey, that's his hang-up. This attitude used to be applied to great artists and writers, like Ezra Pound, whose hang-up was the embrace of fascism.

The combination of this crackpot toleration with a general contempt for religion made it difficult for us to comprehend the nature of the current war. Everyone from W. on down has been at great pains to assure us and themselves that we have no basic conflict with Islam, that our battle is with some lunatics who say falsely that they speak in the name of Islam. So we feel quite uncomfortable when the pope--quite deliberately--poses a question about Islam itself: Is it capable of responding to reason, or is it, as he put it, completely transcendent, beyond the reach of man, and hence unchallengeable by man under any

circumstances?

It's a big question, not easily reduced to newspeak like "did the pope anticipate the reaction?" Or "did the pope go too far?" That sort of banter is embarrassingly silly. Of course the pope anticipated the reaction, he's one of the smartest and most learned men in the world, and he's spent a lot of time studying Islam. He wanted to draw a line. He is not prepared to extend total, blind toleration to people who use violence in the name of faith, and he's challenging the Muslims to answer the real questions. That quotation he chose--the one that asks, Is there anything positive that has emerged from the expansion of the domain of Islam?--wasn't generated at random. He picked it quite wittingly. Of course he knows that, for several centuries, Islam conserved the wisdom of the West, the same "Greek" wisdom he invoked as the indispensable partner of Christian faith. He's defying the Muslims to admit that, because he knows that the jihadis don't want to hear about it, and that an open debate about it may undermine the sway of so many dogmatic mosques, schools, TV stations, and Internet sites.

And a surprising number of Europeans understood it, and responded positively. Did you notice that the former archbishop of Canterbury weighed in with a statement even tougher than anything the pope said? Lord Carey said that our problem was not with a minority of Muslims but with Islam itself, whereas the pope left the question open, and called for dialogue. Even the famously wimpy Spanish President Zapatero had words of support, an amazing spectacle for a man who has delighted in flaunting his laicism and challenging numerous Catholic doctrines.

But I'm afraid that we're not engaging this debate, because our leaders are afraid to do so, and poorly equipped to participate. Our educational system has long since banished religion from its texts, and an amazing number of Americans are intellectually unprepared for a discussion in which religion is the central organizing principle. I learned from a teacher at one of the best private high schools in this area that it was virtually impossible for him to teach the Reformation properly, since the major metaphors came from the Book of Daniel, and virtually none of his students was familiar with the text.

Ignorance of things religious is terribly damaging for other reasons as well, not least of all because it prevents us from understanding the nature of our most dangerous enemies. Michael Rubin wrote a fine [piece](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* the other day, listing some of the lies produced by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and noting that there was actually a provision in sharia that made such lying to infidels completely acceptable and on occasion admirable. Yet the Europeans, who preen themselves on their cultural superiority, continue to be gulled by the Iranians, and W. has now completely swallowed the notion that if the Iranians ignore one ultimatum, we must not act, but simply set a new deadline. Down this path lies ruin. Yet the self-proclaimed "realists" always color themselves "surprised" when the Iranians do it.

In their latest attempt at realistic appeasement, the Council on Foreign Relations hosted President Ahmadinejad, obviously hoping to begin that "dialogue" so dear to their hearts. But, at least according to the *New York Times*, it didn't go well at all. "He is a master of counterpunch, deception, circumlocution," Brent Scowcroft said, shaking his head. Robert Blackwill emerged from the conversation wondering how the United States would ever be able to negotiate with this Iranian government..."If this man represents the prevailing government opinion in Tehran, we are heading for a massive confrontation with Iran," he said.

As usual, the most surprising thing about the likes of Scowcroft and Blackwill is that they are surprised. But then, these are the folks who gave us the debacle of the first Bush presidency--the desperate attempt to prevent the fall of the Soviet empire, the last-minute rescue of Saddam, etc. Let's hope they don't convince the second President Bush to follow in their tiny footsteps.

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