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# THE NEW REPUBLIC ONLINE

What Benedict really said.

## Paleologus and Us

by David Nirenberg

Post date: 09.28.06

Issue date: 10.09.06

**"F**aith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections"--the title seems an unlikely one for a papal speech that has triggered protests, even violence, across large parts of the Muslim world. Benedict XVI's remarks, made on September 12 at the University of Regensburg, where he was once a professor, have been denounced by the parliament of Pakistan, protesters in India, Iraq's Sunni leadership, the top Shiite cleric of Lebanon, the prime minister of Malaysia, and the president of Indonesia, among many others. Less verbal critics (that is putting it much too politely) have thrown firebombs at churches in the West Bank and murdered a nun in Somalia. In Turkey, where the pope is scheduled to visit in November, the deputy leader of the governing Islamic party characterized Benedict's thinking as dark and medieval, the result of a Crusader mentality that "has not benefited from the spirit of reform in the Christian world," and predicted that "he is going down in history in the same category as leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini."

It is the rare homily, and certainly the rare academic talk, that triggers firebombs and comparisons to Hitler. So what did the pope actually say? At the center of the storm are a few lines of his remarks, quoted from the "dialogue with a Muslim" that the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus claimed to have had in the winter of 1391-1392:

Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.... God is not pleased by blood.... Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and reason properly, without violence and threats. ... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm,

or weapons, or any other means of threatening a person with death.

Muslim anger has concentrated on the first words of the papal citation, about Muhammad's essential inhumanity. In response to this anger, the papal palace duly announced that His Holiness's respect for Islam as a religion remains undiminished. Vatican spokesmen insisted that the offending line was incidental to the pope's broader message, and that he was not endorsing the medieval emperor's views, but simply quoting a historical text to make a historical point. In his extraordinary expression of regret on September 17, the pope himself adopted this position, declaring that "these were in fact quotations from a medieval text, which do not in any way express my personal thought." "The true meaning of my address in its totality," Benedict continued, "was and is an invitation to frank and sincere dialogue, with great mutual respect." Many in the First World will be inclined to accept the pope's clarification. Though few of them will say it openly (except perhaps Silvio Berlusconi), the violence following Benedict's comment will only confirm for them the legitimacy of his portrait of Islam. Hasyim Muzadi, the head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, was right to warn his coreligionists that a violent response to Benedict's words would only have the effect of vindicating them.

Still, we need to ask why, if the medieval text is so incidental to Benedict's argument and he does not endorse its meaning, he cited it at all. It was certainly not owing to the text's originality. The emperor's attack on Muhammad as a prophet of violence is among the oldest of Christian complaints (we might even say stereotypes) about Islam and its founder. Already during Islam's early conquests in the seventh century, Christians were suggesting that its spread by the sword was sufficient proof that Muhammad was a false prophet. Of course we cannot blame medieval Christians conquered by Islam for characterizing it as a violent religion, any more than we can blame medieval Muslims for later failing to appreciate the claims of Christian crusaders that their breaking of Muslim heads was an act of love. The history of the alliance of monotheism with physical force is both venerable and ecumenical. The question is, why in our troubled times did Benedict choose to bring the world's attention to the unoriginal words of this Byzantine emperor?

One answer is that Turkey has long been on the pontiff's mind. Readers may recall then-Cardinal Ratzinger's interview with *Le Figaro* in 2004 in which he commented that Turkey should not be admitted to the European Union "on the grounds that it is a Muslim nation" and historically has always been contrary to Europe. Like Ratzinger,

Manuel II Paleologus also worried about keeping the Turks out of Europe. As the antepenultimate emperor of Byzantium and the last effective one (he ruled from 1391 to 1425; Byzantium fell in 1453), he spent his life fighting--sometimes in the Muslim armies, but mostly against them--in the final great effort to keep Constantinople from becoming Istanbul. He traveled across Europe as far as London in a vain attempt to awaken the Latin West to the growing threat to European Christendom in the East. And he wrote letters and treatises (such as his *Dialogue With a Muslim*) against Islam, rehearsing for his beleaguered subjects all the arguments against the religion of their enemies. For all these reasons, history remembers the emperor Manuel as an exemplary defender of Christian Europe against Islam. In 2003, in fact, there appeared a German translation of *Dialogue With a Muslim*, and the book's editor states in his preface that the work is being published in order to remind today's readers of the dangers that Turkey poses to the European Union. The pope may have been making a similar point.



Manuel II Paleologus, 1409-1411

The emperor may serve the pope as a historical allegory, but the specific meaning of his words is useful as well. It is true that Manuel's sentence about Muhammad's inhumanity is incidental to Benedict's arguments. It was doubtless included for the simple reason that it opened the portion of the text that Benedict wanted to use. (Fortunately, he did not quote the preceding paragraphs of Manuel's treatise, which present Muhammad's teachings as plagiarisms and perversions of Jewish law.) But the medieval emperor's claim that Islam is not a rational religion--"To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm"--lies at the heart of the pope's lecture, and of his vision of the world. That vision should be a disturbing one, not only for Muslims but for adherents of other religions as well.

In order to understand why, we need to unpack the pope's learned thesis, which will be immediately intelligible to connoisseurs of German academic theology and to almost no one else. (The pope's website promises that footnotes are forthcoming.) Simply put, the theological argument is this: Catholic Christianity is the only successful blend of "Jewish" obedience to God (faith) with Greek philosophy (reason). This marriage of faith and reason, body and spirit, is what Benedict, following a long Christian tradition, calls the "logos," the "word of God."

The pope chose to make his point about the special greatness of his own faith through the negative example of Islam, which he claims has not achieved the necessary synthesis. Like Judaism, Islam in his view has always been too concerned with absolute submission to God's law, neglecting reason. It was to make this point that Benedict invoked his reading of Manuel II Paleologus, which he supplemented with an allusion to the claim by Ibn Hazm (systematically misspelled by the Vatican as Hazn) that an omnipotent God is not bound by reason. Like Manuel, Ibn Hazm (994-1064) is an interesting authority for Benedict to have chosen. He, too, lived through the collapse of his civilization, in his case the Muslim Caliphate of Cordoba. He, too, produced a defense of his faith against its rising foes, though his took the form not of a dialogue but of a massive history of religions, charting the eternal struggle of the godly against the evils of Judaism and Christianity. This view of history, together with his adherence to a Zahiri sect of Islam that emphasized obedience to the literal meaning of the Koran, have led some contemporary commentators to see in Ibn Hazm a precursor to modern Islamism. He thus serves the pope particularly well as an example, but he can scarcely be called representative of medieval Islam.

The role of Islam in Benedict's argument is important, but it is worth noting that it is not the only religion the pope finds deficient in reason. Even within Christianity, the marriage of faith and reason has often been strained by attempts at what Benedict calls "de-Hellenization," or de-Greeking. Luther's move toward faith, for example, occasioned his attack on the Catholic philosophical movement known as Scholasticism. This meant that much of Protestant Christianity became unbalanced, inclining too far away from "Greek" reason and toward "Jewish" faith, while the Catholic Church strove to safeguard the proper balance. And of course there have been movements inclining too far in the opposite direction, the most important of these being the triumphant "scientific" or "practical" reason of modernity.

All these systems of thought fail to make sense of man's place in the world insofar as they fail to achieve the necessary balance between faith and reason. That balance,

Benedict explains, was born in the New Testament, which "bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed." It was disseminated and preserved over the centuries through the Catholic Church in western Europe. Indeed, for Benedict, the "inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry" is really a European phenomenon: "Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this convergence ... created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe." The pope concedes that not all aspects of the Christian synthesis, brokered in the particular culture of Greco-Roman Palestine and consummated in that of Catholic Europe, need to be "integrated into all cultures." But the marriage of faith and reason does, for it is now universal, fundamental to "the nature of faith itself."

**I**n sum, the pope's essay is a declaration of the ongoing and universal truth of Catholic dogma: exactly what we should expect from the vicar of St. Peter. What we should not do, however, is confuse this declaration for an adequate description of Islam, medieval or modern. Any Islamic historian, any historian of religion, could easily object that Benedict has his history wrong. It is easy to show that Islam, too, was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy: indeed, the Catholic West would not have known much of that philosophy without the Islamic transmission of the ancient texts in Arabic translation. Aquinas learned his Aristotle from Muslim philosophers such as Averroës and Avicenna (as did Maimonides). And what kind of historian, what kind of serious intellectual, pretends to characterize a religion as vast and diverse as Islam with a single quotation from an embattled medieval Christian polemicizing against it? Insofar as the pope's job description is not that of historian but defender of the Catholic faith, such objections are to some extent beside the point. Still, we might have hoped for more from a learned leader at a time when the Western world is desperately in need of greater knowledge about Islam and its history.

There is another problem. Benedict's plea for Hellenization draws on a German philosophical tradition--stretching from Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity* through Weber's sociology of religions to the post-World War II writings of Heidegger--whose confrontations of Hebraism with Hellenism contributed to, rather than prevented, violence against non-Christians on a scale unheard of in the Muslim world. We may grant that such an intellectual dependence is hard to avoid, given the deep and abiding

influence of this theological and philosophical tradition on the modern humanities and social sciences. From a Eurocentric point of view, we might even concede the pope's well-worn claim that, as Heine put it in 1841, the "harmonious fusion of the two elements," the Hebraic and the Hellenic, was "the task of all European civilization."

What we cannot accept without contradiction or hypocrisy is the pope's presentation of the speech as an invitation to dialogue. It is true that the talk concludes with an invitation: "It is to this great logos, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures." But it also concludes with the claim that "only through [rationality of faith] do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today." The bulk of "Faith, Reason, and the University" is explicitly dedicated to the thesis that European Catholicism has effectively mixed faith and reason in the logos, and that other religions, specifically Islam, have not. Forget for a moment the historical inaccuracies (not just about Islam, but about other religions as well) in such a statement, and focus only on the logic. What kind of invitation begins by denying its guests the qualifications for attendance at the party? The pope's "invitation" at Regensburg was not to a "dialogue of cultures" at all. What he was advocating was a kind of conversion, or at least a convergence of all religions and cultures toward a logos that is explicitly characterized as Catholic and European.

Just like Manuel's medieval "dialogos" with a Muslim (the Greek title of the emperor's treatise means "controversy" or "debate" rather than "dialogue" in our modern sense), Benedict's lecture was a polemic posing as a dialogue. Some among the faithful will rejoice that Benedict, once known as "the Rottweiler" for his dogged defense of doctrine as a cardinal, has bared his teeth as pope. But his speech must not be mistaken for something more noble or more ecumenical than the articulation of Catholic dogma that it was, even if the extreme response in certain quarters of the Muslim world casts it in a more sympathetic light. There are no champions of dialogue in this story. In the harsh universe of religious polemic, there rarely are.

**David Nirenberg** is a historian and professor in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and the author of *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press).

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