

# Understand the real reason why Pope was wrong

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A FEW sentences from Pope Benedict were sufficient to touch off a firestorm of impassioned reaction. Throughout the Muslim world religious leaders, presidents, politicians and intellectuals joined their voices to protesting masses angered by a perceived "insult" to their faith.

Whatever their judgments, they should adopt a more reasoned approach in their critical remarks for two reasons. First, certain parties manipulate crises of this kind as a safety valve for both their restive populations and their own political agenda. When the people are deprived of their basic rights and freedom of expression, it costs nothing to allow them to vent their anger, over Danish cartoons or the pontiff's words.

Secondly, what we are witnessing is mass protest characterised primarily by an uncontrollable outpouring of emotion providing proof that Muslims cannot engage in reasonable debate. Some, arguing that the Pope had offended Muslims, demanded a personal apology. Benedict offered his regrets, but the polemic has not abated.

There is ample reason to be startled by an obscure 14th century quote attributed to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologos critical of the "malevolent works" of the Prophet of Islam. Indeed,

the Pope's choice of examples in the relationship between violence and Islam does raise questions, if not eyebrows.

Equally surprising was his reference to the Zahiri erudite Ibn Hazm (whose school of thought is marginal) to raise the issue of Islam and rationality. Perhaps the whole exercise was lacking in clarity, superficial and even a bit clumsy, but was it an insult for which

formal apology should be demanded?

Pope Benedict is a man of his times, and the questions he asks of Muslims are those of the day: questions that should be answered clearly with solid arguments. To start, we must not accept that "jihad" be translated as "holy war." Our priority should be to explain the principles of legitimate resistance and of Islamic ethics in conflict situations, not encourage people to protest violently against the accusation that they believe in a violent religion.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the crisis is that the real debate launched by the Pope seems to have eluded most commentators, particularly Muslim ones. He develops a dual thesis, accompanied by two messages. He reminds rationalist secularists who would like to rid the Enlightenment of its references to Christianity that these references are an integral component of European identity.

Then, in taking up the question of faith and reason, and in emphasising the privileged relationship between the Greek rationalist tradition and the Christian religion, the Pope attempts to set out a European identity that would be Christian by faith and Greek by philosophical reason. Islam, which apparently has no such relationship with reason, would thus be foreign to the European identity that has been built atop this her-

itage.

These messages cry out for an answer far more than talk of *jihad*. Pope Benedict is a brilliant theologian trying to set down the principles and framework of a debate on the past, present and future identity of Europe. This profoundly European pope is inviting the peoples of the continent to become aware of the central Christian character of their identity which they risk losing.

The message may be a legitimate one in these times of identity crisis, but it is deeply troubling and potentially dangerous in its double reductionism in the historical approach, and in the definition of European identity. This is what Muslims must respond to; they must challenge a reading of the history of European thought from which the role of Muslim rationalism is erased, in which the Arab-Muslim contribution would be reduced to mere translation of the great works of Greece and Rome.

The selective memory that so easily "forgets" the decisive contributions of "rationalist" Muslim thinkers like al-Farabi (10th century), Avicenna (11th century), Averroes (12th century), al-Ghazali (12th century), Ash-Shatibi (13th century) and Ibn Khaldun (14th century) is reconstructing a Europe that is not only a deception, but practises self-deception about its own past. If they are to reappropriate their heritage,

Muslims must demonstrate, reasonably and free of emotional reactions, that they share the core values of Europe and the West.

Perhaps what Europe needs most today is not a dialogue with other civilisations, but a true dialogue with itself, with those facets of itself that it has for too long refused to recognise, that even today prevent it from fully benefiting from the richness of its constituent religious and philosophical traditions.

Europe must learn to reconcile itself with the diversity of its past to master the imperative pluralism of its future. The Pope's reductionism has done nothing to help this process of reappropriation: a critical approach should not expect him to apologise, but simply and reasonably prove to him that historically, scientifically, and ultimately spiritually, he is mistaken.

It would also give today's Muslims a way of reconciling themselves with the immense creativity of the European Muslim thinkers of the past, who 10 centuries ago were confidently accepting their European identity, enriched with their critical reflection of the West.

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