

POPE BENEDICT'S COMMENTS - A CLEAR SIGN

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According to Yahoo News, September 15, 2006, Pope Benedict the XVI recently spoke at a German University and quoted from an obscure book, remarks of an obscure king, "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 sword the faith he preached." The Pope was quoting from a book that contains a "record" of a conversation between the 14th century Byzantine Christian emperor Manuel Paleologos II and a Persian scholar on the truths of Christianity and Islam. This quotation of the Emperor's remarks has caused quite a stir and, sadly, some violence. Personally I do not see in those remarks anything that I should shout about. In fact what the Pope has said makes me very happy. I see the stand that Pope Benedict has taken as a sign. Emperor Manuel Paleologos made those comments in the 14th –century and after nearly half a century his "Empire" and much more was given to Muslims. Now the Pope has quoted him without repudiating him, this century will be the century of growth for Islam.

As is amply reported in the media the pope did not explicitly give his opinion on this comment. But of course he did not just say a couple of sentences. He must have fitted that quotation somehow. In these few lines we shall look at the background and possible consequences of the Pope's speech.

Let us study the situation a bit closely here. At the time of those remarks Paleologos II was irked by the Ottoman Turks, who were making inroads into his empire. The funny thing was that once those nomads would conquer an area it would be theirs to keep. I think lesser taxes and fair treatment by the rulers were the main reasons for the spread of the Turkish Empire, and of Islam, in those areas. Instead of realizing that he was losing to Turks because his officials were corrupt and cruel he chose to blame Islam for his misfortunes.

Now, the state of affairs with Catholicism is the same. "Catholic Priest" is synonymous with "Child abuse", Islam has a very good case against Jesus being the son of God, equality of all humans is a basic tenet of Islam and it is practiced by Muslims. There is no notion of segregation of blacks and whites among Muslims. Then there is the promise of the Living God that goes something like: those who seek God will be guided towards Him. (Indeed those who strive to seek God, ultimately find Islam.)

Now what Christianity has to offer is apparent from the fact that a lot of Christians are getting fed up with their religion. Some think that God is dead. Some think that freedom of females to go naked is all that Christianity and democracy are about and most have forgotten that the wages of sin is death. In fact they have forgotten that there is a living God watching how they act. If you do not have a deity to please you tend to please yourselves and that is what is going on in this mostly godless world including a vast majority of Catholics. It is ironic that when you are out to please yourselves you indulge in food and sex. Consequently obesity and/or sex related crimes, sins and diseases are on the rise in the West and Christian dominated countries.

Then there is Science that having been sculpted by early Muslim Scholars, in light of earlier thought (not all Greek) and the Quran, insists on evidence based on observable facts and reason, something that the Quran invites its readers to do. Reading the Pope's speech I came away with the feeling that the Pope feels threatened by efforts at moving away from Hellenistic presentation of Christianity and from Hellenistic Philosophy. The Hellenistic view of Christianity that presents Jesus' life modeled after the mythical story of Hercules the (mythical) son of the god Zeus. (Just insert "Satan" for "Hera".) For de-Hellenization means faith and communion with God on one-on-one basis, Abraham style) and de-Hellenization means reform and seeks to break away from an alien philosophy that is so dear to the Catholic Church.

On top of all that there is an information explosion and there are many outlets of expression, including the internet, and of course Christians, especially the Western Christians, are able to express their frustration and new ideas. It appears that the situation concerns Christian leadership a great deal. One way out may be to direct the criticism to the "appalling ways of the Muslims". One nice way appears to be to pick some very conservative Muslim countries and talk about the "plight" of women there. The other is to deplore the "Muslim propensity for violence".

It appears that in light of the world events the Pope has selected the violence angle. As is the habit of the shallow minded folks without any divine guidance the Pope too went for the religion of the people accused of violence and left aside the real cause of it.

Violence erupts when some "all powerful folks" keep on suppressing a certain group of people, beyond limit. (When suppression goes beyond a limit, the response becomes a mad rush to get even. It is hard then to look at the events and rationalize the situation for the victim.) It appears that in the modern days Muslims are that suppressed group. Palestine is one old example, Kashmir is another and now there is the matter of Iraq. The architects of these miseries are countries that are predominantly Christian. Muslims could have laughed away the Pope's comments if there were no history of Christian misinterpretation of Islam and there were no ongoing brutality in Iraq started by predominantly Christian countries.

Now let us see if such criticism of Islam is objective. When I was in Britain in the seventies, the IRA was very active. IRA caused disruption and loss of life yet no one - ever blamed Christianity for that. Hitler killed so many Jews and Germany was predominantly Catholic. No one ever blamed Christianity for producing such monsters behind the teaching of "turning the other cheek".

The Persians, during the reign of Khusru II, clashed with the Roman Empire in the seventh century CE and conquered Jerusalem. They had a large number of Jews in the army. The Jews were so cruel to the Christians that the hardened Persian generals were offended by their brutality. No one blames Judaism for that brutality. When the predominantly Christian USA dropped atomic bombs on two cities of the already subdued Japan no one blamed Christianity for it.

By contrast when Saddam Hussain tried to quell an uprising in his country he was a monster and Islam was responsible for it. If some members of misguided Al-Qaeda demolish twin towers, Islam is to blame. If some Turkish Kings crushed some rebellion Islam is to blame. If two factions of Muslims resort to violence, Islam is to blame while in Europe, Christian kings and often Clergy kept fighting, for territory, for supremacy, or for treasury, for centuries without any blame on Christianity. Shouldn't someone point

out that the Christianity presented to us today is a double faced lie? On the one hand there is the teaching of turning the other cheek and giving to Caesar what is his and on the other hand producing monsters who for minor gains plunge continents into abysses, and who kill humiliate and rape in the name of humanity and democracy. Of course it is my belief that the original teachings of Jesus would not have permitted any cruelty to other nations.

Now the question is why all this Islam-bashing now? The trouble is, after centuries of being bashed about by non-Muslims, the Muslims are waking up. Thanks to the “cheap labor” needed in European countries, after World War II, there are a lot of Muslims in Europe. In the US as well, there are quite a few Muslims. Social intercourse often causes dialogue between Muslims and Christians and pure souls get attracted to Islam. It is true that modern day Muslims especially those living in the West are not exemplary Muslims, but every now and then the basic training shows.

Often, as a result of the peaceful dialogue, questions such as the divinity of Jesus come under discussion. Also come up some darned questions such as “OK Jesus expressly came to gather the lost sheep of Israel, how come we see so many gentile converts? How come he died before completing his mission?” The “lost sheep of Israel” usually refers to the tribes scattered in various parts of Asia by Nebuchadnezzar. These are hard questions even for the clergy and are apt to sow the seeds of suspicion in the hearts of ordinary Christians who in turn can turn on their clergy.

Then there is the fact that the Christians have forgotten Christ but they have not forgotten their defeats in the Crusades. The reason why I say the Christians have forgotten Christ is that they have forgotten how and at whose hands Jesus and his mother suffered. They have made peace with the Jews who still hold the view that Jesus was fathered by a Roman soldier, and that he died on the cross like a common criminal. This is a result mainly of their indifference to their own religion and history. But Muslims, they are the killers who captured Jerusalem, without much bloodshed, and each time let the Christian and Jewish population live in peace quite unlike the brave Crusaders. On top of that they fought like maniacs when attacked and would not let the visitors win.

Another reason why Islam-bashing becomes important is that Muslims are waking up to find that learning is truly a Muslim pursuit. With learning comes prosperity and know how, with know how can also come the weapons and with weapons they can threaten the Christian supremacy, which has now turned into Jewish supremacy at least in today's US. It appears that they are so afraid of the Muslims countries becoming technologically advanced, that if they have their way they would avail the first chance of hurling Muslim countries into the Stone Age. When Pakistan was developing Atomic Bomb capability there were visible efforts to do away with the “Islamic Bomb”. Iraq has been routed on “suspicion” of developing nuclear capability. Iran is under fire for the same suspicion and various means of disrupting the country are under consideration. On the other hand Israel has had the nuclear capability for a long time and North Korea seems to have recently acquired it, but no one seems to bat an eye! The only conclusion: Some powerful Christian countries are suffering from a phobia that can only be called “Islamophobia”. I can name other areas where this “Islamophobia” is at work but that may not fit this note. The next paragraph however does contain a hint.

It also appears from the speech that the Pope wants to keep the reason on his side, but just the Greek reason (used by that emperor) and is ready to condemn inquiring minds that stray from it as followers of Ibn Hazen a Muslim Scholar. I believe Ibnal-Haitham's main point, I trust the Pope has quoted him correctly, was that God does what He wishes. We cannot bind God with our reason! If we believe in an all powerful God Who created us and who sustains us, and who is the Master of His own will, then how can we judge His actions. Let us say we want to decide if God is reasonable. How can we do that if our notion of "reasonable" keeps changing with time? For example once it was considered quite reasonable in England to kill a poacher or a thief (cf. the bloody code) and I believe the church did not object to that. It is not reasonable now, as the code was repealed in the 19th century. So, with our ever changing concepts of right and wrong, we cannot judge, pinpoint or define away our God (Who according to the Quran has innumerable attributes).



The Pope in his address also dittoed Emperor Manuel Paleologos' comments on the "nature of God". But it is surprising to see that the "peaceful God" presides over violent volcanic eruptions and wild fires, which kill indiscriminately. Recently He saw through a tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands. I can only offer King Manuel and Pope Benedict the XVI a snub styled after a Quranic snub by saying that: were you there when God's nature was being formed? God Almighty does as He pleases. He gave us our instincts, we fight back when we see in danger what we cherish most and he gave us our basic sense of right and wrong, and a will to improve, and we spend our lives looking for what is best. A religion that puts to good use these basic human traits is the best religion for all of humanity.

I invite Pope Benedict to do some study of Islam as compared to other religions. After studying I am sure he would see that, disregarding the deplorable actions of some Muslims, Islam is the religion closest to human nature and to reason. He would also find that there is no command by the Holy Prophet of Islam to spread his message by the sword. If that were the case Spain would still be all Muslim, there would be no Hindus left in India, there would be no Islam in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, and most of Europe would be Muslim. (I mention Indonesia and Thailand. These countries never saw any invading Muslim army. They were impressed by the dealings of the Muslim Arab merchants they came in contact with.)

Finally, though the Pope does not seek a dialogue with Muslims in his speech, I am sure his comments will stir up a positive reaction from Muslims and a healthy curiosity among the Christians. It is about time that the Muslims started teaching the World about Islam rather than Christian and Jewish orientalist and theologians.