

The Regensburg address: reason amid certainty

By Michael Walsh,
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"Should the Pope apologise further?" asked the young man from the BBC. "The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has said his apology was sufficient", I responded, relying on the BBC's own news service. There was a scuffle at the other end of the phone, presumably as the researcher consulted his producer. "Yes", he answered, "but they are saying it was not sufficient enough". What, I wondered, would constitute a "sufficient enough" [apology](#) [1]. More to the point, who would decide? Christians, and Catholics in particular, tend to forget that most world religions do not have a central authority that can speak in the name of all the faithful.

Did Pope Benedict need to apologise at all for quoting a remark in his [Regensburg address](#) [2] on 12 September 2006? Most commentators seem to think so. Karen Armstrong, writing in the *Guardian* ("[We cannot afford to maintain these ancient prejudices against Islam](#)" [3]), 18 September 2006), asserts that the pope quoted the 14th-century Byzantine emperor "without qualification and with apparent approval". I do not imagine that rioters in Pakistan had read Benedict's words in full, but I would have expected Karen Armstrong to have done so.

As an academic might, the pope put [Manuel II Palaeologus's](#) [4] words in context. He pointed out that they were the emperor's own record of the debate with the Persian sage, and said they were spoken "brusquely". More to the point, perhaps, the pontiff himself quotes the Qur'an as saying exactly the opposite of what the emperor alleges. In other words, even in the Regensburg address, quite apart from his [Angelus address on 17 September](#) [5], the pope distanced himself from the views of the emperor.

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Also by Michael Walsh in openDemocracy:

"[Cutting the Vatican down to size](#) [9]"
(5 April 2006)

"[From Joseph Ratzinger to Pope Benedict XVI](#) [10]"
(20 April 2006)

The Byzantine emperor had good reason for thinking as he did. His empire was under siege from the predominantly Muslim troops of the Ottoman Turks: Constantinople, his capital city, was to fall just over half a century later, in [1453](#) [11]. The Muslim army rolled on to the gates of Vienna. There they were finally stopped in 1683 by a Christian army commanded by the Polish king, [John \(Jan\) Sobieski](#) [12]. The Ottoman aim was, however, conquest rather than

conversion: Christians and Jews were - at least for the most part - allowed to practice their religion, so long as they paid higher taxes.

Conversion was rarely the issue. When in 630 the Muslim army first rode out of Arabia, Mohammed [13] was exporting the violence which had been endemic in the tribal warfare of the Arabian peninsula. He was also invading what were by then largely Christian lands. Curiously, it is possible to interpret the crusades in exactly the same light, and to see Pope Urban II's [14] launch of the crusades in 1095 as exporting the violence which was endemic in European society. And, after a particularly bloody initial slaughter, the Franks of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem largely left the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of their newly-conquered lands to get on with life much as before.

It seems to have been overlooked that the Regensburg address was hardly about Islam at all. The quotation Benedict used which created all the fuss was simply a starting-point for discussing a topic about which he feels strongly, the relationship between faith and reason. Some have commented that the pope appears to think that Islam is less "reasonable" than Christianity. He does indeed claim that in Muslim teaching "God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality", and quotes a Muslim theologian, Ibn Hazm [15], to that effect. How true of Islam this assertion is I do not know, but it is not a criticism of Islam as such. The pope takes to task some Christian theologians for holding similar views - specifically the 13th-century Scots theologian John Duns Scotus [16].

His point in all this is to assert vigorously the place of reason in religion, and of religion in the university. The address is aimed at those such as Richard Dawkins [17] who assert that only science has meaning, that religion is irrational. It is not without significance that shortly before he left the Vatican to visit Germany, the pope had held a meeting of scientists, to raise similar issues to those addressed in the Regensburg lecture. Moreover, he concluded the lecture by once more quoting Manuel II: "Not to act reasonably (with logos) is contrary to the nature of God. It is to this great logos, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures".

A question of Islam

There has not been much dialogue in the overwrought reaction to the Regensburg address. Many have questioned whether the pope wants dialogue with Islam at all. This is a rather different question to whether or not he insulted the prophet, and a much more complex one. On this issue Muslims have more reason to be suspicious.

When Pope Benedict [18] was elected in April 2005 many thought there would be swift changes to the Roman *curia* - the departments in the Vatican [19] that run the Catholic church. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he had himself been in charge of one for a quarter of a century. It was argued that, unlike John Paul II who came from a pastoral post in distant Poland, he knew the way the system worked, and would want to improve it.

Despite these prognostications there have been relatively few changes. But there has been one particularly surprising move. Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald [20], who headed the Vatican department which dealt with relations to non-Christian religions, was removed from his post and sent as papal nuncio (ambassador) to Egypt. This not only deprived Britain of a potential additional cardinal (Fitzgerald is English), but deprived the Vatican of its most respected expert on Islam.

In the present context this was unfortunate. Fitzgerald might have alerted the pope to the pitfalls of the quotation he used in his Regensburg speech. But the transfer was odd as well as

unfortunate. When Karol Wojtyla became John Paul II [21] in 1978 the Catholic church was in conflict with communism. That adversary has disappeared. Now the significant "other" - for Christianity in general as well as for Catholicism - is Islam.

Also in openDemocracy on themes related to Pope Benedict XVI's speech:

Judith Herrin, "How did Europe begin? [22]"
(4 July 2001)

Patricia Crone, "What do we actually know about Mohammed? [23]"
(31 August 2006)

When Pope Benedict XVI was still Joseph Ratzinger [24] he expressed the view that Turkey ought not to be a member of the European Union. He is, of course, a German, and the German government tends to hold a similar view. Shortly before the start of his trip to his native Bavaria he received a visit from the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, who flew in by private plane and stayed for a long discussion. Angela Merkel wants to revive the fraught issue of a European constitution and, like the Vatican, she wants the Christian roots of Europe [25] to be written into the constitution's preamble. European Muslims, with or without Turkey, obviously feel uncomfortable with the notion of Europe as a Christian club.

This was not something addressed directly by the Regensburg address, but it underlies papal thinking. Benedict XVI wants to re-Christianise [26] Europe. He believes that culture should be the vehicle for Christian evangelism. Clearly that will be much more problematic if the culture of Europe [27] is increasingly imbued with the culture of Islam. This is not to accuse the pope of Islamophobia, but to recognise that his approach to it is likely to be more cautious than that of his ebullient, and less theologically alert, predecessor.

Benedict believes that the culture of Europe should be one of open, rational debate in which, *pace* Richard Dawkins *et al*, religion has a place. In any such debate, religion will be exposed to critical questions. Christianity, certainly in the form espoused by Pope Benedict XVI, has become accustomed to this form of confrontation. The question must be, after the reaction to the Pope's Regensburg discourse, how ready for it is Islam?

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[1] <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article1616637.ece>

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[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1874786,00.html>

[4] <http://www.roman-emperors.org/manuel2.htm>

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[6] <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/faculty/library/walshm/walshm.htm> target=_blank

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[11] http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/byza/hd_byza.htm

[12] <http://www.poland.gov.pl/Jan,III,Sobieski,%281629,%E2%80%93,1696%29,1964.html>

- [13] http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp
- [14] <http://www.umich.edu/%7Eeng415/timeline/Urban.html>
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- [16] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/duns-scotus/>
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- [18] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/index.htm
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- [20] http://www.rcag.org.uk/flourish%20article_2.htm
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