

AlbertMohler.com

The Pope, the Prophet, and the Crisis of Truth

Tuesday, September 19, 2006



Pope Benedict XVI visited his native Germany last week and delivered an address to the science faculty of the University of Regensburg. His address dealt mainly with the relationship between faith and reason, but that theme was eclipsed by the Pope's comments on Islam. These comments were made with respect to a statement made by "the erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus" just after the year 1391:

In the seventh conversation . . . the emperor touches on the theme of the holy war. The emperor must have known that surah 2, 256 reads: "There is no compulsion in religion". According to the experts, this is one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat. But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur'an, concerning holy war. Without descending to details, such as the difference in treatment accorded to those who have the "Book" and the "infidels", he addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness which leaves us astounded, on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: "Show me just what Mohammed 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".

This citation, included in an academic address, ignited a world-wide firestorm of protest, especially in the Islamic world. The secular elites in the West also piled on protest. By the first of this week, the Vatican was expressing public concerns about the Pope's safety.

In response to the protests, the Vatican appeared to offer apologies of sorts — ranging from claims that the Pope's statement had been misunderstood to a declaration that the quotation did not indicate the Pope's own view of Islam. It may take some time for the confusion to clear.

There are a host of issues of interest here. In the first place, this incident is yet another reminder of the danger of the papacy. This is not a popular point to make — even among some confused evangelicals — but it is a necessary point. Pope Benedict XVI is a man of incredible brilliance. His indictments of secularism and liberal theology are among the most masterful theological documents of recent decades. Nevertheless, the office he holds is an unbiblical institution based in a monarchical ministry that is incompatible with the New Testament's vision of the church. Furthermore, he claims also to be a head of state — a situation that adds untold layers of additional confusion. The problem of the papacy is much larger than this short summary can address, but the important issue here is that the Pope's comments — whether for good or for ill — are given a prominence that is unbiblical and dangerous.

Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church bears much responsibility for confusing the question of Christian-Muslim relations. Worse than that, Catholicism confuses the Gospel of Jesus Christ in addressing Islam. In *Nostra Aetate*, also known as the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, the church declared:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, (5) who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

Similarly, in *Lumen Gentium*, another major document from the Second Vatican Council, the church defined its understanding of Islam in these words:

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.

In other words, the Catholic church teaches that Muslims are included in the economy of salvation by virtue of the fact that they worship the one true God. This is simply unsustainable on any number of fronts. Most importantly, the Christian doctrine of God is irreducibly Trinitarian. We know no other God than the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Islam explicitly denies that Jesus is God's Son. Muslims acknowledge no God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Christians know no God who is *not* the Father of Jesus Christ. We do not claim or worship the same God.

But, what about the Pope's comments in Germany?

The use of specific words and the citation of an ancient authority should not obscure the fact that the Pope's comments were largely accurate — and most accurate at the point of the greatest outrage. Islam and Christianity are locked in a spiritual and theological conflict. The logic of Islam — based in the goal of universal Qur'anic rule — ensures that this will be one of the defining conflicts of the present age.

Pope Benedict XVI is right to see Islam as a threat to secular Europe — a continent that is determined to undermine the very foundation that gave it birth. The Pope's concerns about secularism and encroaching Islam are based in reality. If these trends are unchecked, Europe will become the new territory of Islam. As author Melanie Phillips warns, London is fast becoming Londinistan.

For evangelical Christians, the controversy over the Pope's comments can serve as a catalyst for responsible Christian reflection on these urgent issues. We must be reminded that the struggle is a spiritual struggle. The only proper Christian response to this conflict is witness to the Gospel — not a holy war. We must also be reminded that our most critical concern is not the survival of Western civilization, important as that is, but the eternal destinies of our fellow human beings. This is no time for confusion or cowardice in the face of this challenge. We must tell the truth about both Christianity and Islam — and we must share the Gospel.

The question of how Christians should discuss Islam was the topic of our conversation on Monday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#).

Here is coverage from *Newsweek* magazine. I was asked to respond to the significance of the Pope's comments. Here is the section of [the article](#) by *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham:

The episode also marks the first widely noted break with the spirit of the papacy of Benedict's beloved predecessor: A reassuring pastor, John Paul II was the first pope to visit a mosque (in Damascus, Syria, in 2000), and he managed to project an air of ecumenicism while holding fast to the fundamentals of faith and doctrine. "This is clearly not John Paul II," says R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. "It's a very different direction for the papacy, and reflects Benedict XVI's worries about secularism, Islam and a declining Christian vigor in Europe."

