



Alien or Allied Muslims?

‘Both sides invoke the name of God.’

IN THE LATEST OF MY WEEKLY telephone conversations with a colleague who lives in France, the first question she asked was, “What do you think of the pope and Islam?” Rarely inclined to talk politics, she was testing me out. And my response was testing her as well. “Well, I think he could have said it differently, but I think he has a point.” As we talked, more substantial points were raised. While the French, English and German press and European Muslim leaders were moderate in their response, there was nonetheless a roar of anger around the Muslim world. My French friend said to me, “It proves his case.”

Certain Muslims exploded into outrage, infuriated that the pope had quoted from an early 14th-century dialogue in which a besieged Byzantine Christian emperor (his city’s name would soon be changed from Constantinople to Istanbul) complained that Islam’s contribution was “*only* evil and inhuman,” exemplified by “spreading faith through the sword.” There are two parts to this quoted passage. I emphasize the word “only” because on the face of it, the claim is false. There is indubitably much good in Islam, and the pope knows this quite well. It would have been good for him to reject such a statement. Yet he was likely more interested in the second part of this quotation about spreading faith through violence.

So it ironically came to pass that some Muslims, offended at the thought that Islam is associated with violence, themselves resorted to violence. It felt

like: “How dare you call us violent! We will assassinate you.” Web sites warned, “Choose Islam or Death.” The Australian Herald Sun reported that an armed Iraqi group vowed: “We swear that we will destroy their cross in the heart of Rome and that their Vatican will be hit and wept over by the pope.” Protesters at Westminster Cathedral had their own twist: “Pope Benedict, go to Hell. You will pay, the Mujahideen are coming your way.” Mohammed Galadari in The Khaleej Times of Dubai, while asking for dialogue, called the pope’s words a “diatribe,” a “harangue” having as its purpose to “berate Islam.”

It is impossible to believe any of these people actually read the address the pope gave. If you inspect it, you will find it a sophisticated rejection of violence in the name of God or any religion. He calls for reason, dialogue and self-examination. The Koran’s statement, “There should be no compulsion in religion,” is duly noted by the pope. But he gives the historical example, wherein compulsion and violence were indeed the case.

This was the problem. He mentioned the unmentionable. It infuriated many Muslims. It should infuriate many Christians as well. If you do not think parts of Islam are connected with coercion, you are ignorant of the present world. If you don’t think parts of Christianity are besotted with violence, you are ignorant of history.

Soon after the uproar, the pope said, “I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg, which were considered offensive to the sensibility of some Muslims.” The words, he said, were a quotation from a medieval

text that did not represent his own thought. He might have added that he could understand why the words “no good in Islam” were so deeply wounding.

To many, it looked like an apology worthy of Bill Clinton or any other politician. And you can be sure it would likely fan other Islamic fires or alienate Muslims rather than invite their alliance. We Christians must first acknowledge our own sinfulness. If violence cannot be justified by religion, what must we Christians, we Catholics, say of violence—from Constantine to George W. Bush? Are we willing to have the Hebrew Scriptures closely examined? Are we willing to inspect how Christians have justified forced conversions and war (not by appealing to Christ, but by using biblical texts)? Remarkably enough, Pope Benedict is willing to do just that, as we shall see.

People have written to me that I do not realize the threat of Islam. Yes, I do, painfully. There are indeed murderous extremists in Islam. And the data of continued support among Muslims for Osama bin Laden is deeply disturbing. But are we Christians poised to announce to our brother and sister Muslims that we are their greatest threat?

The issue I raise here is not one of being “sensitive” to Islam. The issue is how to break through to dialogue, confession and reform of us all. The pope’s talk at the University of Regensburg may have failed on this account, not only with Islam, but also with modernity. He, like us all, is most effective when he names the good and calls it forth from others. That is what separates us from those who see only evil threats from the outside and no sinfulness within.

This truth was noted by the pope in a warm and affirming address to Muslim communities at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, in August 2005: “How many pages of history record battles and wars that have been waged, with both sides invoking the name of God, as if fighting and killing the enemy could be pleasing to him. The recollection of these sad events should fill us with shame, for we know only too well what atrocities have been committed in the name of religion.” How true. **John F. Kavanaugh**

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