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Both Sides Feel Threats in Pope-Islam Controversy

Tom Heneghan, Reuters

ISTANBUL, 18 September 2006 — One of the most basic human instincts is to defend oneself when threatened. It's a gut feeling that triggers vigorous reactions, often far stronger than those seen when calm prevails.

The crisis over Pope Benedict's remarks about Islam seems to play this pattern out on a global scale, Muslim and Christian analysts say. Only a few words suffice to turn a comment into an insult and conjure up an "Islam versus the West" conflict.

The uproar comes just months before the visit of the world's most prominent Christian leader to Muslim Turkey. It is not yet sure if his expressed regrets can save it from being scrapped.

The crisis — like recent controversies over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad or the death sentence for an Afghan convert to Christianity — reveals a deeper gulf between two world views that only a sustained dialogue can overcome, the analysts say.

"Both sides feel threatened and insulted," said Mustafa Akyol, an Istanbul commentator on Muslim affairs.

"Muslims see this as part of a whole campaign, in the same line as the Afghan and Iraq wars and Abu Ghraib," he said.

"In the West, they think they're under attack by 'jihad' and an intolerant Muslim religion."

The term "jihad", which is broader than the "holy war" interpretation given it in the West, is at the heart of this crisis. Benedict said in a lecture last week that a "holy war" was unreasonable and he implied Islam was inherently violent.

Leaders throughout the Muslim world denounced this as a bid to paint all Islamic believers as terrorists. Palestinian gunmen firebombed churches in the West Bank in protest.

While the West feels threatened by the deadly militant attacks in New York, London, Madrid and other cities in recent years, Benedict has a particular reason to feel besieged.

The German-born pope sees the once-Christian West being undermined by a relativism that is "deaf to God" and morality.

The most dynamic faith in Europe now is Islam, a trend that troubles him. The Vatican often asks why Muslim states restrict the rights of their Christian minorities while Muslims in the West can build mosques and openly spread their faith.

This is a minefield because Christianity and Islam, the world's two largest religions, both profoundly believe they are right and the other is wrong about God and the world.

John Wilkins, former editor of the London Catholic weekly The Tablet, said a sensitive dialogue was the only way for both sides to live with each other without giving up their beliefs.

But Benedict has confused this necessary pluralism with the relativism he opposes and makes statements that look provocative because they do not seem to invite a dialogue.

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"This Pope hasn't really accepted pluralism," said Wilkins. "He confuses it with relativism.

"A real pluralist approach would not make statements but ask questions. He could say 'Yes, we were violent in the past and we have repented for this. Can you do the same?'

"Or he could ask if the Muslims saw anything positive in what the church was doing," Wilkins said.

Christian leaders in Turkey, the only secular state in the Muslim world and one that straddles Europe and the Middle East, saw misunderstanding prevailing on both sides.

"Deep down, Muslims here see the pope's visit as a symbol of an effort to re-Christianize Turkey," said Father Francois Yakan in Istanbul, the former Byzantine Christian capital conquered by the Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453.

"This controversy has started out just like the cartoon crisis," said the patriarchal vicar of the Chaldean Catholic Church, who was born in eastern Turkey and speaks Aramaic.

The Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Mesrob II, head of another church linked to the Vatican, told visiting Paris-based religion journalists that Benedict spoke like the professor he once was rather than as a pope who must weigh his words carefully.

"The pope doesn't have to present his excuses, but I think he should explain his thinking," he said.

Akyol said only small minorities on either side actually wanted a clash, but the reasonable dialogue needed to understand each other requires a calm he cannot now see.

"People here tell me I'm wasting my time," said Akyol, who describes himself as a moderate Muslim.

"They say the Westerners have made up their mind. We're the new enemy after communism and they only want to take Muslim oil."

"Unless we calm down, it will only get worse," he said.

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