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Vatican experts say Pope 'unrepentant'

By Peter Popham in Rome

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As protests against the Pope continued to rumble around the Muslim world yesterday, Catholics began asking themselves if this highly intelligent man can really have been so crass as to have ignited the passions of millions of Muslims without realising that he was doing it.

If the alternative version is more credible - that he knew exactly what he was doing - then the next question arises: why? The gloomy conclusion of some Vatican experts is that there was no inconsistency in the Pope's choice of the words "inhuman and evil" - quoted from the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus - to characterise Islam. Such a negative view, they say, is consistent with all his words and actions with regard to Islam.

Their claims make for a tragic contrast with the decades devoted by John Paul II to the challenge of bringing Islam, Judaism and Christianity closer together after many centuries of hatred and bloodshed. Now all that hard work, rowing against the tide of history, seems to be at risk.

Marco Politi, Vatican expert at La Repubblica newspaper, wrote: "The debacle into which the Holy See has fallen after [the Pope's speech at the University of] Regensburg ... is much more than an accident of communication. The unhappy anti-Mohamed quotation, followed by the violent reaction of the Islamic world and the bitter indignation of moderate European Muslims, has brought violently to the light the rupture completed by the Pope with the strategy conducted for more than two decades with success by John Paul II."

Politi said John Paul II went out of his way to find points in common between the three revealed religions: "From Casablanca to Cairo, from Sudan to Syria, in every corner of the world in which there was a significant population of Muslims, John Paul II preached the common faith in the one God of the sons of Abraham, their common prayer and the common duty of Jews, Christians and Muslims in favour of peace and justice," he wrote. "It wasn't merely rhetoric. It was the wish to put together, in the name of spiritual brotherhood, a shared platform from which to repudiate religious violence, religiously motivated terrorism and any other manipulation of the name of God to justify sanguinary projects."

But his successor indicated from the start that he would not continue down the same road, Politi said. "At his inaugural mass as Pope, Benedict XVI cut out any reference to a fraternal relationship" with Islam. The Pope is also, according to Politi, "tormented with worry born from the messages of violence woven into the Koran, and doubtful of the ability of Islamic religious leaders to get to grips with the problems of secularism." But if the Regensburg address was his way of airing those doubts, it has had the effect of multiplying them. "Now," Mr Politi concludes, "the Vatican must try to rebuild its strategy towards Islam from scratch."

Writing in La Stampa, the political scientist Gian Enrico Rusconi said the Pope's apology on Sunday "was an act such as has not been recorded in the modern history of the papacy. It was an unheard-of gesture. But at the same time the discourse at Regensburg and its consequences indicate an irreversible break, not only in relations between Islam and the Catholic Church, but also in the public image of the Pope in the West."

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