

INTERNATIONAL  
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## **A struggle over Europe's religious identity**

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A few sentences spoken by Pope Benedict XVI were sufficient to touch off a firestorm of impassioned reaction. Throughout the Muslim world, religious leaders, presidents, politicians and intellectuals joined their voices with protesting masses angered by a perceived insult to their faith. Most did not read the pope's speech; others had relied on a sketchy summary according to which the pope had linked Islam and violence. But all railed against what they saw as an intolerable offense.

Whatever the judgments of these scholars and intellectuals, one would have hoped that they adopt a more reasoned approach in their critical remarks, for two reasons.

First, the reverence that Muslims have for the Prophet Muhammad notwithstanding, certain groups or governments manipulate crises of this kind as a safety valve for both their restive populations and their own political agenda. When people are deprived of their basic rights, it costs nothing to allow them to vent their anger over Danish cartoons or the words of the pontiff.

Second, the mass protests we have been witnessing, characterized primarily by uncontrollable outpouring of emotion, end up providing a living proof that Muslims cannot engage in reasonable debate and that verbal aggression and violence are more the rule than the exception. Muslim intellectuals bear the primary responsibility of not lending credibility to this counterproductive game.

There is ample reason to be startled by an obscure 14th-century quotation critical of the "malevolent works" of the prophet of Islam. And perhaps the pope's whole speech was rather elliptical, lacking in clarity, superficial and even a bit clumsy. But was it an insult for which formal apology should be demanded? Is it either wise or just for Muslims to take offense at the content of the quotation, simply because the pope chose it, while ignoring daily questions they have faced for the past five years on the meaning of jihad and the use of force?

Benedict is a man of his times, and the questions he asks of Muslims are those of the day: questions that can and must be answered clearly, with solid arguments. To start with, we must not accept that jihad be translated as "holy war." Our priority should be to explain the principles of legitimate resistance and of Islamic ethics in conflict situations, not to encourage people to protest violently against the accusation that they believe in a violent religion.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the crisis is that the real debate initiated by Benedict seems to have eluded most commentators.

In his address last week at the University of Regensburg, Benedict developed a dual thesis. He reminded those rationalist secularists who would like to rid the Enlightenment of its references to Christianity that these references are an integral component of European identity; it will be impossible for them to engage in interfaith dialogue if they cannot accept the Christian underpinnings of their own identity, whether they are believers or not.

Then the pope attempted to set out a European identity that would be Christian by faith and Greek by philosophical reason. Islam, which has apparently had no such relationship with reason, would thus be foreign to the European identity that has been built atop this heritage.

A few years ago, when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he set forth his opposition to the integration of Turkey into Europe on a similar basis. Muslim Turkey never was and never will be able to claim an authentically European culture. It is another thing; it is the Other.

These are the messages that cry out for an answer, far more than talk of jihad. This profoundly European pope is inviting the peoples of the continent to become aware of the central, inescapable Christian character of their identity, which they risk losing. The message may be a legitimate one in these times of identity crisis, but it is deeply troubling and potentially dangerous in its reductionism.

This is what Muslims must, above all, respond to; they must challenge a reading of the history of European thought from which the role of Muslim rationalism is erased, in which the Arab-Muslim contribution would be reduced to mere translation of the great works of Greece and Rome.

The selective memory that so easily forgets the decisive contributions of rationalist Muslim thinkers like al-Farabi (10th century), Avicenna (11th century), Averroes (12th century), al-Ghazali (12th century), Ash-Shatibi (13th century) and Ibn Khaldun (14th century) is reconstructing a Europe that practices self-deception about its own past. If they are to reappropriate their heritage, Muslims must demonstrate, in a manner that is both reasonable and free of emotional reactions, that they share the core values upon which Europe and the West are founded.

Neither Europe nor the West can survive if we continue to attempt to define ourselves by excluding, and by distancing ourselves from, the Other - from Islam, from the Muslims - whom we fear.

Perhaps what Europe needs most today is not a dialogue with other civilizations, but a true dialogue

with itself, with those facets of itself that it has for too long refused to recognize, that even today prevent it from fully benefiting from the richness of its constituent religious and philosophical traditions.

Europe must learn to reconcile itself with the diversity of its past in order to master the imperative pluralism of its future. The pope's reductionism has done nothing to help this process of reappropriation along. A critical approach should not expect him to apologize but it must simply and reasonably prove to him that historically, scientifically, and ultimately, spiritually, he is mistaken.

It would also give today's Muslims a way of reconciling themselves with the immense creativity of the European Muslim thinkers of the past, who 10 centuries ago were confidently accepting their European identity (not obsessed by the ongoing sterile debates on "integration") and who deeply enriched with their critical reflection both Europe and the West as a whole.

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