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A Catholic Stamp to a U.S. War

By Nicola Nasser

No mistake, the Successor of Saint Peter, the Vicar of Christ on Earth, the Sovereign Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI has erred and the damage is done: His anti-Islam remarks are out and cannot be retracted, like bullets that cannot be retrieved once shot, adding a Catholic stamp to the Evangelist "Islam versus the West" justification for the U.S. neoconservative-led "WWIII on Islam." (1)

Coincidentally the Pope and the U.S. President George W. Bush on Wednesday expressed "a deep respect" for Islam and Muslims, but both men failed to calm Islamic angry reactions because both of them blatantly sounded self contradictory.

The Pope in two public apologies in less than a week cited "reason" to justify unconvincingly his unreasonably quoted anti-Islam remarks "to explain that not religion and violence, but religion and reason, go together," (2) but failed to dispel a rapidly growing impression that he has positioned the Vatican in a role in the U.S.-led international war on "Islamic terror" similar to its role in the U.S.-led anti-communism war.

His self-contradiction was further highlighted by repeatedly stating that he quoted a 14th-century dialogue to encourage interfaith dialogue, not spark controversy, but his quotation was unquestionably at least a "setback" for any such dialogue.

Even if His Holiness could or would take out his defamatory and inflammatory quotation from the official text of his controversial speech at Germany's University of Regensburg in Bavaria on September 12, which nothing yet indicates that he might do, the damage done is snowballing rapidly to vindicate the rejection of the Catholic dogma of Papal Supremacy and infallibility by the Orthodox and other mainstream Christian churches, the secular and liberal intellectuals and the Muslims.

Were his remarks a "lapse," a "tumble"? Even those Muslim religious and political leaders who have wisely and ardently taken upon themselves the difficult mission of trying to contain the damage and control the angry reactions found insufficient the Pope's apologies on Sunday and Wednesday. If his slur against Islam was unintentional he should have made a more convincing apology.

"You either have to say this 'I'm sorry' in a proper way, or not say it at all; are you sorry for saying such a thing, or because of its consequences?" Turkey's cabinet minister, Mehmet Aydin, said.

The minimum acceptable "proper way" according to the Qatar-based Egyptian Islamic influential and prominent scholar Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qardawi is to drop out the "insulting" quotation from the official text of the Pope's speech.

Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei this week charged that Benedict's words were "the latest link in the chain of a crusade against Islam started by America's [President George W.] Bush." Khamenei as well as the former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami have been spearheading an international campaign for dialogue among civilizations, an effort that the Pope's quotation could not in any way be interpreted as a helpful contribution.

Apologists may acknowledge that the Pope's offending quotation was insensitive but unintentional.

Islamic leaders in Indonesia and Malaysia -- the first being the world's largest Islamic country and both converted peacefully to Islam and easily could be cited to refute the Pope's quoted thesis that Islam spreads by sword -- have accepted the Pontiff's apology, seeing no Islamic interest in antagonizing the largest Christian church and playing in the hands of the Christian Zionists who have been trying to undermine the Islamic - Christian dialogue. (3)

Similarly the world's largest secular Islamic nations of Turkey and India -- the second being the home to world's largest Islamic minority -- were swift to demand papal apology but were also interested to contain the damage. Turkey's Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gul, said the Pope's planned visit to the country in November was still on. Russia's Christian leader Vladimir Putin, whose country is home to more than 20 million Muslims, also indirectly warned that "religious leaders" should be more careful in their statements.

The most internationally wide-spread and influential Islamic political movement, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, has also accepted Pope's apology as "sufficient."

However, the mainstream rank and file of an estimated one and a half billion moderate Muslims worldwide could not swallow the fact that the leader of the largest Christian church who is highly educated and sophisticated and speaks about ten languages could have "lapsed." Al-Qardawi told the Arabic al-Jazeera satellite television station that the Pope added insult to injury when he assumed that Muslims could not apprehend his speech.

Sheikh Mohammed Tantawi of Egypt's Al Azhar, the Sunni Arab world's most powerful institution, said the Pope should have refused the Emperor's quotation but he did not.

Muslim and non-Muslim critics wonder why the Pope chose to quote from a 14th century "dialogue carried on - perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara - by the erudite Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam, and the truth of both," (4) and not from the 21st century inter-religious dialogue, thus jeopardizing the future of the modern debate on religious truth.

In Tehran the Shiite Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Taskhiri, Secretary-General of the World Forum for Rapprochement Among Islamic Schools of Thought, stressed that Pope's statements were a "great setback" to the dialogue among divine religions. (5) "Instead of preaching peaceful coexistence among the great divine religions, the pope is planting seeds of division," Grand Ayatollah Saafi Gholpaygani separately added. (6)

The Vatican said it hoped the self-inflicted "wave of hate" sweeping the world did not lead to "grave consequences" for the church. Burning of effigies of the Pope and anti-Vatican riots in many countries tarnished its image of tolerance and hand-stretched initiatives for inter-religion dialogue, an image that was carefully promoted by his predecessor.

The Pope's quotation is also going down into Muslims' collective memory as fitting into the U.S.-led war on "Islamic terror," which is cloaked in anti-Islam terminology like President Bush's blunders of "crusade," "Islamic terrorists," and his latest "Islamic Fascists."

It boils down to be serving as a Catholic justification for an American political-military anti-Islam campaign. "Many Muslims are on the defensive in our modern world with its dominance of western secular perspectives, backed up by brutal military force which is often indistinguishable from the terrorism it claims to be fighting." (7)

The Pope's attempts to portray his speech as a scholarly and theological

matter is not convincing enough to distance the Vatican from being embroiled in political involvement or to shadow the fact that the Pontiff is also a politician and a head of a state, which helped to undermine communism; no one can expect him to be happy or eager to see a U.S. defeat whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or the overall war on terror.

"Why the pope chose to throw a hand grenade into a powder keg, and why he chose to do it at this moment in history"? asked George Friedman.

"Bush has been trying to portray the war against Islamist militants as a clash of civilizations, one that will last for generations and will determine the future of mankind. Benedict, whether he accepts Bush's view or not, offered an intellectual foundation for Bush's position," Friedman added. (8)

Whether it was his intention or not, the Pope has cornered his church in the role of providing a Catholic justification for the US-led Evangelist WWII on Islam. "Ironically, despite the lip service by leaders like President Bush and Pope Benedict XVI about the need to isolate the lunatic jihadi fringe, by word and deed they have succeeded in accomplishing exactly the opposite." Wrote an Indian Hindu. (9)

Nor Muslim observers can isolate the Pope's defaming quotation from his record of anti-Islam indications:

Benedict XVI during his 17-month papacy has been lecturing Muslims on the need to teach their young to shun violence, suggesting that violence is part of Islam.

In March he decided to merge the Vatican's office for dialogue with Muslims with its culture office and to send the English prelate who headed it, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, - considered a top Islamic expert - to Egypt as papal envoy.

Recent statements by senior Catholic bishops have singled out Lebanon's Hizbullah and the Palestinian Hamas in names as violent groups under his papacy.

His insensitivity could not also be forgiven on the backdrop of the latest anti-Islam cartoons blunder.

The Pope's reported opposition to Turkey's membership in the European Union because of its Islamic different culture is cited as another anti-Islam indicator.

His quotation is also viewed within the context of the Vatican's intolerance of other churches. How could a church be tolerant vis-à-vis another religion when it cannot afford to accept Christian Protestants as "sister churches" and describe them as "ecclesial communities"? (10)

Similarly Muslims could not view positively the Vatican's reported anti-immigration into Europe of immigrants of different cultures, especially Muslims, within the context of its preoccupation with a campaign to incorporate Christian ethics and values in the constitution of the European Union in the face of a strong secular opposition.

The Pope's insensitivity also embroiled the decreasing Christian minorities in the Muslim countries -- especially in the Arab countries and particularly in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories -- in an antagonistic environment that could contribute further to the ever shrinking Christian presence, a headache that has become a permanent item on the agenda of the annual meetings of the Middle East Churches.

"I wish the Catholic pope had considered the reaction to his remarks," the head of the Egypt's Coptic Orthodox church, Pope Shenouda III, told journalists, adding: "Being enthusiastic about one's religion shouldn't lead to judging other peoples' religions. Criticizing others' faith breeds enmity and divisions." (11)

It's a pity that the Pope has chosen to exacerbate a world divide over religious lines that have nothing to do with the real problems humanity faces today, and it is saddening to watch how humanity in the post-cold war era has shifted from a real divide to absurd divides that contribute to humanity's deteriorating material as well as moral and ethical tragic status quo under the U.S.-led globalization world order.

One could not but lament the collapse of the USSR, when the times were dominated by an international divide between the international liberation movements and the remnants of western colonialism, and between the transcontinental capitalist warmongers and the overwhelming majority of the tramped-to-earth billions of people yearning for justice and peace.

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Notes

- (1) "WWIII on Islam" is a term used by the former Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich in a recent speech at the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI); he was quoted by Jim Lobe, Asia Times on September 14, 2006.
- (2) Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday, September 20, 2006.
- (3) UCANews (www.ucanews.com), September 18, 2006, and Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's statements in New York on the same day.
- (4) Pope's speech at Germany's University of Regensburg on September 12, 2006.
- (5) SANA, September 18, 2006.
- (6) UAE's Gulf News, September 17, 2006.
- (7) Tina Beattie, Open Democracy, September 18, 2006.
- (8) George Friedman, www.stratfor.com, September 19, 2006.
- (9) Ajoy Bose, Indian "The Pioneer," September 18, 2006.
- (10) Christian Century, 13 September 2000.
- (11) AP, September 17, 2006.

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