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Pope Benedict's hierarchy of truth, faith

By James Carroll | September 25, 2006

ROME HAS SPOKEN. Once, that meant the question was settled. Now that means the question has been inflamed. In this case, the question is whether to accept Osama bin Laden's invitation to the clash of civilizations. Sure, why not?

Pope Benedict XVI celebrated the fifth anniversary of 9/11 by citing, on the next day, a 14th-century slur that Mohammed brought "things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The patently false characterization of Mohammed's teaching, displaying an ignorance of the Koran, of the magnificence of Islamic devotion, and of history was offered almost as an aside in the pope's otherwise esoteric lecture about reason and faith. After Muslim uproar, the pope, while not really apologizing, insisted he had meant no harm.

President Bush famously used the word "crusade," then backed away from it. But playing by bin Laden's script, Bush launched a catastrophic war that has become a crusade in all but name. Now Benedict has supplied a religious underpinning for that crusade. Claiming to defend rationality and nonviolence in religion, the pope has made irrationality and violence more likely, not less. Bush and Benedict are in sync, and bin Laden is grinning.

Even abstracting from the offending citation, the pope's lecture reveals a deeper and insulting problem. Benedict properly affirms the rationality of faith, and the corollary that faith should be spread by reasoned argument and not by violent coercion. But he does so as a way of positing Christian superiority to other faiths.

That was the point of the passing comparison with Islam -- which, supposedly, is irrational and therefore intrinsically violent, unlike Christianity which is rational and intrinsically eschews coercion.

But this ignores history: Christianity, beginning with Constantine and continuing through the Crusades up until the Enlightenment, routinely "spread by the sword the faith" it preached; Islam sponsored rare religious amity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the very period from which the insulting quote comes.

More significant, though, for any discussion of reason and faith is the fact that Christian theology's breakthrough embrace of the rational method, typified by St. Thomas Aquinas's appropriation of Aristotle, and summarized by Benedict as "this inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry," was made possible by such Islamic scholars as Averroes, whose translations of Aristotle rescued that precious tradition for the Latin West.

Benedict makes no mention of this Islamic provenance of European and Christian culture. Indeed, he cannot, because his main purpose in this lecture is to emphasize the exclusively Christian character of that culture. The "convergence" of Greek philosophy and Biblical faith, "with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can be rightly called Europe." Europe remains Christian. That is why the pope, as Cardinal Ratzinger, opposed the admission of Muslim Turkey to the European Union.

Benedict seems to have forgotten that the European rejection of violent coercion in religion came about not through religion but through the secular impulses of the Enlightenment.

The separation of church and state, in defense of the primacy of individual conscience, was the sine qua non of that rejection of religious coercion -- an idea that the Catholic Church fought into the 20th century. Even now, Benedict campaigns against basic tenets of Enlightenment politics, condemning pluralism, for example, and what he calls the "dictatorship of relativism."

The pope's refusal to reckon with historical facts that contradict Catholic moral primacy has been particularly disturbing in relation to the church's past with Jews. Last year, he said Nazi anti-Semitism was "born of neo-paganism," as if Christian anti-Judaism was not central. This year, at Auschwitz, he blamed the Holocaust on a "ring of criminals," exonerating the German nation. By exterminating Jews, the Nazis were "ultimately" attacking the church. He decried God's silence, not his predecessor's. A pattern begins to show itself. Forget church offenses against Jews. Denigrate Islam. Caricature modernity and dismiss it.

In all of this, Benedict is defending a hierarchy of truth. Faith is superior to reason. Christian faith is superior to other faiths (especially Islam). Roman Catholicism is superior to other Christian faiths. And the pope is supreme among Catholics. He does not mean to insult when he defends this schema, yet seems ignorant of how inevitably insulting it is. Nor does the pope understand that, today, such narcissism of power comes attached to a fuse.

James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Globe. ■

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