

*Sightings* 9/18/06

The Pope and Islam

-- Martin E. Marty

Pope Benedict XVI has had a free ride so far. Back when there were still Protestant anti-Catholics, some would have found much fault with him, but most appreciated his encyclical on divine and human love, and said so. Many Catholics and non-Catholics whose friends suffered under him as Cardinal Ratzinger now empathically choose to help the wounded nurse their bruises. Some among the Catholic right even think he should be more of a hardliner.

For all those reasons, it is regrettable that in the midst of a well worked out (of course) formal speech at Regensburg, his old academic turf, the pope lapsed for a moment and did what we tenured folk sometimes do -- and remember, the pope has lifetime tenure: We come up with an allusion that gets us in trouble, let a side point take center stage, or fail to count the cost of a remark. So it was that almost inexplicably the pope began his talk in Regensburg with inflaming words from an obscure fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor to show that jihad as holy war is bad. That emperor through this pope said that what Muhammad brought to the world was "only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Like Christians often did? The pope did not mention that.

His Holiness must have underestimated how useful such words would be to extreme fight-picking Muslim clerics and right-wing American talk show folk. His people now stress that he did not intend to offend Muslims, but his plea for "genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today" will be set back and out-shouted by those clerics and rightists. What sounds at least half appropriate in a history-and-theology classroom sounds different when spread to a billion Christians and a billion Muslims, as words such as these will be. The only thing that will be remembered from the pope's new call for reason and dialogue is the unreasonable and monological citation that Muhammad contributed only "evil and inhuman" speech and action in human history.

I know I'll get hit for suggesting "equivalencies" here, though I am always clear in stating that there is no equivalency between today's radical and extreme Muslims and today's ordinary Christians. But it must also be said that Christians, from the fourth to the eighteenth century, can match the Muslims one-for-one when it comes to having spread the faith with the sword. Read the history of the Christianization of Europe and you have to go hunting for that minority of the faithful who spread the faith without the sword, merely by witness and works.

We live today not in the time of Christian Crusades and Inquisitions, but in a time when the pope is needed as a bridge-builder, a link-maker. Having quoted claims seven centuries old that only "evil and inhuman" things were new in the program of the Prophet and in the name of Islam, it will be harder for the pope to have dialogue with the Muslims who do good and human things. Some on the Muslim and American right seem to be craving a war of civilizations, a war about which we know only one thing: Both sides (or the many sides) would lose.

Rather than point to the "evil and inhuman" nature of Islam's, Judaism's, Christianity's, Hinduism's, Buddhism's, and other holy wars, the pope will serve better if he can still find dialogue partners in search of the good and human. All is not lost. Yet.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at [www.illuminos.com](http://www.illuminos.com).