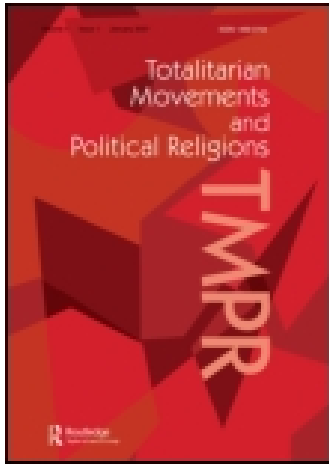


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Ana Belen Soage ^a

^a University of Granada ,

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CROSS CURRENTS

The Muslim Reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg Address

ANA BELEN SOAGE

University of Granada

Once again, western television screens have shown hysterical crowds of bearded men and veiled women – strictly segregated, of course – marching and burning effigies to protest against what they consider an offence to their religion. There have been reports of attacks on churches in Palestine, and an elderly Italian nun was assassinated in Somalia – just the kind of reactions that seem to confirm the prejudices of those who argue that dialogue with the Muslim world is not possible. Even those westerners who criticised the Pope's address at the University of Regensburg fail to understand why a quotation from a fourteenth-century controversy should have provoked such an emotional, disproportionate response. In this article, we will try to elucidate just that.

We have examined reactions to the Papal lecture in the following Arab media: firstly, the websites of the Qatari channel Al-Jazeera, whose mixture of professionalism and populism has made it the favourite source of information in the Arab world, and of its main competitor, Saudi-financed, Dubai-based Al-Arabiya. Secondly, the international Arab press, i.e. the Egyptian *Al-Ahrām* and the pan-Arab, Saudi-owned newspapers published in London *Al-Ḥayāt* and *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* – the first, rather more liberal in its outlook than the second. Finally, Islamist websites such as that of the leading ulema Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, a regular guest of the Al-Jazeera program 'Al-Sharīa wa-l-Ḥayāt'; *Al-Islām al-Yawm* (Islam Today), coordinated by the controversial *shaykh* Salmān al-'Awda, who hosts the religious program 'Al-Ḥayāt Kalima' on the Saudi-financed MBC satellite channel; and *Ṭarīq al-Islām* (The Way of Islam) and *Ṣawṭ al-Ṣalaf* (The Voice of the Righteous Predecessors¹), both of which offer fiery sermons by radical preachers who attract large crowds and whose tapes are on sale on Arab pavements for less than 30 cents.²

We will be considering, in turn, the impact of the following factors: (1) the timing of the address; (2) the personality of the lecturer; (3) the quotation itself; (4) the aims of the address; and (5) its aftermath.

Correspondence address: University of Granada, Faculty of Humanities, Granada 18071. Email: anasoage@hotmail.com

1. The timing of the address

As many commentators have pointed out, the unfortunate quote came in the wake of the row over the caricatures of the prophet Muḥammad published by a Danish newspaper and reproduced in other European media, which led to violent demonstrations and the ongoing boycott of Danish products.³ Some believed that Benedict XVI's speech put into perspective his earlier condemnation of those who mock religion in the name of freedom of expression: obviously, he was only referring to his own religion (Ḥamīd). An article published by *Ṣawṭ al-Salaf* entitled 'Ramadan gift from the Pope' goes even further, stating that 'the most prominent figure in their crusading religion has put the caricatures into words', which shows that the West was lying when it claimed that those caricatures 'did not represent the "Islam-loving" Christian world' (al-Shaḥḥāt 1).

Other recent rebuffs were mentioned to contextualise analyses of the Pope's lecture: many referred to George W. Bush's sweeping comments against those he dubbed 'Islamic fascists', which were not well received in an Arab world where the Islamists are often perceived as the main opposition force to autocratic regimes (e.g. Ḥamīd, al-Qaḥṭānī, Shabīb). Some of them added Tony Blair's references to an 'arc of extremism', which were understood as an allusion to an Islamic threat which has substituted, in western minds, Zbigniew Brzezinski's 'arc of crisis' (Ḥamīd). Berlusconi's assertion of the superiority of western culture was also mentioned (Shabīb).

In addition, the war against Lebanon, which was followed live through the Arab satellite channels, is still fresh in everybody's mind, as is the West's reluctance to demand that Israel stop the hostilities. The onset of the holy month of Ramadan has been accompanied by an upsurge of TV advertisements reminding Muslims of the need to continue their donations to aid both the embattled Lebanese and the besieged Palestinians. In effect, the situation in the Occupied Territories does not cease to worsen, while the picture in Iraq looks even less encouraging – and the blame for both tragedies is put squarely on Israel and the USA. Moreover, the anti-terrorist legislation recently adopted by several western countries has received wide coverage and strong criticism in the Arab world, and Muslims living in the West are portrayed as a beleaguered minority. After reviewing this background, Sawsan al-Abṭaḥ commented in *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* on the irony that it is 'the occupied and assailed Muslims' who are asked about violence and *jihād*.

Given the above panorama, it is not surprising that Islamists saw Benedict XVI's speech as yet another proof of the existence of a concerted western campaign against Islam (e.g. al-Shaḥḥāt 1, al-Qaḥṭānī, al-Zāyidī). Such a view seems to be widespread: of the more than 25,000 people who took part in a poll on the issue in Al-Jazeera Net, an overwhelming majority (70%) considered the Pope's declarations part of a conspiracy against Islam, whilst less than a quarter (22%) attributed them to religious fanaticism, and a tiny minority (7%) thought that his words had been misunderstood (in 'Al-Sharī^e wa-l-Ḥayāt').

2. The personality of the lecturer

The gravity of the crisis was due to the fact that the quote came from somebody whom many consider the most important religious leader of Christianity (e.g. al-Qaraḍāwī in 'Khuṭab wa-Muḥāḍarāt' 1⁴). It was rightly pointed out that

'whenever [the Pope] talks, he is addressing Muslims and Buddhists as much as Christians' (al-Abṭah). Many compared him unfavourably to John Paul II, who was a firm believer in dialogue (e.g. Hamīd, al-Sayyid, Shabīb). It was remarked that he did not attend the annual interfaith meeting at Assisi, launched by his predecessor two decades ago (Al-Arabiya's Articles), and that, following his election, the experts had observed a change in the discourse of the Vatican towards Islam (ibid., Shabīb, Wild Abāh). For some, his anti-Islamism was made clear by events like his receiving the controversial Italian journalist and author Oriana Fallaci (Wild Abāh).

Muḥammad Jābir al-Anṣārī argued in *Al-Ḥayāt* that Benedict XVI represents a greater threat to Europe than to Muslims themselves, because his words contradict the humanitarianism and the openness to the Other that the continent is trying to achieve. Writing in *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, Wild Abāh referred to a debate he maintained with one of his compatriots, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, before he became Pope, in which he attributed 'the illness of the Western mind' to the embracing of pluralism. On the same subject, al-Qaraḍāwī said that, although the Pontiff had asked the German government to facilitate the integration of Muslims, his lecture contradicted such words and showed his real feelings ('Khuṭab wa-Muḥāḍarāt' 2). It was indicated that the quotation was not strange coming from someone who has declared his opposition to the accession of Turkey to the European Union (e.g. al-Sayyid); al-Anṣārī added that the choice of the quotation – the words of a Byzantine emperor besieged by the Ottomans – expressed an unconscious 'fear of the Turk'.

3. The quotation⁵

The subject of the Pope's speech was the relationship between faith and reason, and he implied that Christianity is a rational faith, whilst Islam is not. Al-Qaraḍāwī explained that the opposite was true: he quoted several Koranic verses and classical Muslim authors to argue that it is Islam that is based on rationality, whilst Christianity rests on sentimentality (in 'Al-Sharī'a wa-l-Ḥayāt'). In a debate on Al-Jazeera, Tāhā Jābir al-'Alwānī, president of the School of Islamic and Social Sciences of Leesburg, Virginia, mentioned that, in his dialogue with western Catholics, the latter often reproached Muslims that it was them who had introduced secularism and rationalism to Europe ('Mā warā' al-Khabar'). Nabīl Shabīb remembered in Al-Jazeera Net that the Catholic Church had fought science and rationality for five centuries. On the radical end of the spectrum, Mus'ad Anwar started off a sermon by urging Muslims to respond to the Pope 'calmly, with logic, using the brain' and went on to state that 'Islam is a self-evident truth, and that which is self evident does not need any proof ... Do we ask for proof of daylight? [Do we ask for proof] of the light of the sun in the strength of daylight?'

On the issue of *jihād* – which, according to the quotation, was used to spread Islam – most religious figures insisted on its defensive character: *Jihād* was invoked to carry the Islamic message, fight tyranny and allow religious freedom; furthermore, it was an ethical war in which non-combatants were spared⁶ – contrarily to the Torah, the 'distorted' book that both Jews and Christians consider sacred,⁷ which calls for the enslavement or extermination of those who stand on your way (e.g. Anwar, al-Qaraḍāwī in 'Khuṭab wa-Muḥāḍarāt' 2 and 'Al-Sharī'a wa-l-Ḥayāt', al-Shahḥāt 1). As well as religious sources, they cited the work of western intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle or Gustave Le Bon to support

their claims. Whilst avoiding such arguments, most columnists pointed out that Muslim conquerors did not force conversions, and lamented that the Pope had chosen to ignore less-than-glorious episodes in Christian history such as the Crusades, the Inquisition and colonialism (e.g. Ḥamīd, Ḥijāzī, al-Shūbāshī). However, some admitted that the bad image of Islam in the West should be at least partly attributed to the atrocities committed by Muslims purporting to be acting in the name of religion (al-Sayyid, al-Shūbāshī).

4. The aims of the address

A significant number of analysts compared the Pope's address with the discourse of the American Neo-Conservatives, considering both a retreat from Enlightenment liberalism and a return to mediaeval radicalism (e.g. Ḥijāzī, al-Qaḥṭānī). Some went as far as establishing a direct link between Benedict XVI and the American Religious Right: the first would be following the lead of the latter either to build bridges with them or to obtain a larger role for the Catholic Church in European politics (al-ʿAlwānī, al-Anṣārī, Shabīb). Al-Shūbāshī wrote in *Al-Ahrām* that the Pontiff seemed to be giving his blessing to the war launched by Bush 'against what is dubbed terrorism', and al-ʿAlwānī suggested that, now that Communism has been defeated, the Pope has chosen to battle Islam in the hope of entering the club of saints through the front door (in 'Mā warā' al-Khabar'). The same author added that Benedict XVI might also be trying to restore the Church's reputation after the series of scandals that have shaken it (ibid.). For his part, Shabīb suggested that, foreseeing a violent reaction from Muslims, he might have been trying to get Christians to stand by the Church.

As we have seen, many interpreted the Pope's discourse as a change in Vatican policy towards Islam. However, others maintained just the opposite: a sermon by a Salafi preacher entitled 'The Vatican takes off its mask' argued that the Church had finally come clean (al-Shaḥḥāt 2). Writing on Al-Jazeera Net, Sāmī Brāhim examined the II Vatican Council's 'Declaration on the Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions' (*Nostra Aetate*) and came to the conclusion that, by denying that Muslims are the descendants of Ibrahim (Abraham) – through Ismāʿīl (Ishmael) – and excluding their holy book from the chain of revealed scriptures, the Church had refused them Salvation. He advised the Vatican to follow the lead of a fourteenth-century theologian who 'admitted' that the Gospels had predicted the emergence of the Islamic faith (although as a trial for Christians); the irony of the fact that the book in question, 'translated' by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbdullah al-Shaykh, was 'written' by a George Bush and published by the Saudi 'Mars [*sic*] Publishing House' was lost on Brāhim.

Yet why the animosity? Several hypotheses were put forward: some argued that Islam, the fastest growing religion in the West, represents a direct threat to the supremacy of Christianity (e.g. Wild Abāh, al-Zāydī). Others thought that, by breaking the taboos in the dialogue with Muslims, the Pope was trying to force them to change certain aspects of their religion in order to assist in the creation of the 'New Middle East' that politicians are so keen on (Shabīb). Populist preachers went further: In their opinion, the aim of the West is to turn Muslims away from their religion in order to sap the source of their strength, i.e. their faith, which is the main cause of the difficulties Americans, Russians and Israelis experience in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Palestine, respectively (e.g. al-Shaḥḥāt 1). That is why 'the Muslim is put before two choices: either to

abandon his religion ... or to endure a vicious war against terrorism in which everything is allowed' (ibid.).

5. The aftermath

Analysts tended to agree on the seriousness of Benedict XVI's comments. Some argued that he was attempting to turn Europe into a Christian fortress, which would have grave consequences for Catholics both inside and outside the continent (al-Sayyid), as well as for Arab and Muslim communities in the West (Ḥamīd). Others expressed fears that the angry reactions to his words would be exploited by extremist organisations in the Muslim world and by those in the West who dislike Islam (Ḥijāzī). Whilst *Al-Ḥayāt* columnist ʿAlī Muḥsin Ḥamīd believed that the controversy provided an opportunity to establish an honest, long-term dialogue with the West, al-Qaraḍāwī called for the next Friday, 'the last before Ramadan', to be 'a day of rational [i.e. non-violent] rage', of demonstrations and sit-ins, to show that Muslims are 'an *umma* that cannot be looked down on' (in 'Al-Sharīʿa wa-l-Ḥayāt'). In one of his Friday sermons, he stressed the need to take a firm stand to avoid opening the floodgates to similar attacks, such as that by 'a self-styled philosopher [Robert Redeker] in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*' (in 'Khuṭab wa-Muḥāḍarāt' 2).

Reactions to the Pope's 'regret' at the 'misunderstanding' of his lecture ranged from that of *Al-Ahrām* pundit Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Ḥijāzī, who argued that his apology, however forced and flawed, should be accepted, to that of al-Qaraḍāwī, who considered that those words were a further insult to Muslims, who were accused of ignorance, and declared that, if a 'real' apology was not forthcoming, inter-religious dialogue with the Vatican should stop (in 'Al-Sharīʿa wa-l-Ḥayāt'). In the course of the same program, presenter ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Nāṣir cited a CNN survey according to which 67% of those polled believed that the Pope should apologise to Muslims. Sawsan al-Abṭāḥ added that the Pope had been trying to prove that present-day Christianity was a European creation, and for that he should apologise first and foremost to Eastern Christians, whom he seems to disregard.

Other opinions included that of Musaffar ibn ʿAlī al-Qaḥṭānī of *Al-Islām al-Yawm*, who believed that the 'ridiculous and laughable' accusations of the 'emperor of the West' (i.e. George W. Bush) and of the 'highest Christian religious authority' should not be dignified with any demand for an apology. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Saʿīdī, director of Islamic Studies at the Teachers' College in Mecca, wrote on the same media outlet that the Pope should not be expected to apologise because that would mean contradicting the tenets of his faith, and that such demands could lead to Christians calling for an apology for those Koranic verses that accuse them of heresy. One of the sons of Libyan president Muammar al-Gaddafi said that, if the Pope really was an educated person, he would convert to Islam, and that the ones who should apologise to Islam are Muslims themselves, for their inability to confront the enemies of their faith (*Al-Arabiya's* Articles). On a softer note, *Al-Ahrām* columnist Wajdī Zayd reproached Muslims for their failure to put across a real picture of Islam.

Finally, others chose to make light of the affair: Nabīl Shabīb wrote in Al-Jazeera Net that 'everything Benedict XVI said does not change the realities of religion or the realities of history, nor does it change the fact that current developments prove that the deviation of Western civilisation from human values is on

the verge of destroying it, and that Islamic civilisation is about to re-emerge – to the benefit of the whole of humanity, not just Muslims, because Islam is the [only] religion that was revealed as mercy for all creatures [reference to Koran 21:107]'. Maybe beyond Shabib's triumphalism, his words contain a message that we in the West would do well to heed: attitudes such as that found in the Pope's choice of quotation mark a sharp departure from the spirit of tolerance and acceptance of difference that took so much time and effort to develop, and does not augur well for the future.

Notes

1. The term *salaf* alludes to the first believers in the message of the prophet Muḥammad. Salafism, which started with Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī as a reformist movement to restore the faith to its original purity and fight imitation and inertia, has become an ultraconservative, literalist trend within Islam.
2. Such preachers incite the crowds not only against the West but also against everything they consider a deviation from true Islam; in particular, the Shiites are a favourite target (e.g. Barhāmī, Zahr).
3. For instance, the front page of *Ṭarīq al-Islām*'s English version shows a pamphlet urging Muslims to continue the boycott (al-Barrak *et al.*). For a study of Arab reactions to the Danish caricatures, see Soage in a previous issue of this journal.
4. In contrast, al-Qaraḍāwī praised the attitude of Arab Christians, who unanimously condemned the Pope's words, and lamented the attacks on churches in Palestine (in 'Al-Sharī'a wa-l-Ḥayāt').
5. The Pope quoted the following words, uttered by the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos during a debate with a Persian scholar: 'Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached'.
6. According to Islamic tradition, when the first caliph, Abū Bakr, sent his military chiefs on their campaigns, he issued ten commandments which included: do not kill any child; do not kill any elderly person; do not kill any woman; do not uproot any tree; do not disturb the monks, etc. Needless to say, Muslim military leaders did not always adhere to these worthy rules.
7. Islamic orthodoxy accounts for the differences between the Koran and the previous revealed books – the Torah and the Gospels – by saying that the latter were distorted. This explains why both al-Qaraḍāwī (in 'Al-Sharī'a wa-l-Ḥayāt') and al-^ḥAlwānī (in 'Mā warā' al-Khabar') claimed that the only way to prove the historical existence of Jesus and Moses was through the Koran, 'the only heavenly document that has remained free from distortions' (al-Qaraḍāwī in 'Al-Sharī'a wa-l-Ḥayāt').

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