

Benedict's jihad remark

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 15, 2006 All Things Catholic

All Things Catholic by John L. Allen, Jr.

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UPATED: John Allen updated this story with a report posted to NCRonline.org Monday morning. Here's the link: Pope apologizes: '[Medieval text does not express my personal thought](#)' [1].

A discussion table opened on NCRcafe.org on this topic. Take a look: [Papal apologies](#) [2]

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I was forced to miss this week's trip by Benedict XVI to Bavaria due to lectures I had agreed months ago to give in Irvine, California, and Cleveland. Among other things, this means I had to pass up the world's best sausage and beer, and as I told both groups to which I spoke, they will never need additional evidence of the full measure of my devotion to their cause.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR: THE FORMAT FOR THIS COLUMN HAS CHANGED. THIS IS ONLY THE FIRST SECTION OF JOHN ALLEN'S WEEKLY COLUMN. YOU MUST USE THE MENU IN THE UPPER RIGHT CORNER TO VIEW ALL THE SECTIONS FOR THIS WEEK.

(It turns out that local Bavarian authorities banned the sale of beer during events on the papal itinerary, but the word from colleagues on the trip is that this did not prove an insurmountable obstacle).

Even at a distance, it's possible to offer some general observations about the Sept. 9-14 homecoming of Benedict XVI.

I have written before that Benedict XVI is not a PC pope. By that, I don't mean that he sets out to give offense; on the contrary, he's one of the most gracious figures ever to step on the world stage. Instead, he simply does not allow his thinking to be channeled by the taboos and fashions of ordinary public discourse.

For example, any PR consultant would have told the pope that if he wanted to make a point about the relationship between faith and reason, he shouldn't open up with a comparison between Islam and Christianity that would be widely understood as a criticism of Islam, suggesting that it's irrational and prone to violence. Yet that is precisely what Benedict did in his address to 1,500 students and faculty at the University of Regensburg on Wednesday, citing a 14th century dialogue between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a learned Persian.

News headlines immediately focused upon the pope's use of the term jihad and its implied swipe at Muslim-influenced terrorism, shaping up as something of a replay of the Danish cartoon controversy.

Yet he brought up the dialogue between Paleologus and the Persian to make a different point. Under the influence of its Greek heritage, he said, Christianity represents a decisive choice in favor of the rationality of God. While Muslims may stress God's majesty and absolute transcendence, Christians believe it would contradict God's nature to act irrationally. He argued that the Gospel of John spoke the last word on the biblical concept of God: In the beginning was the *logos*, usually translated as word, but it is also the Greek term for reason.

The lecture, titled "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," ran to almost 4,000 words (more than a half-hour of speaking time), and its main concern was with what Benedict sees as an artificial truncation of human reason in the West. Since the Reformation, he argued, Western thinkers have come to regard theology and metaphysics as unscientific.

That is problematic, Benedict said, on two counts.

First, it leaves reason mute before the great questions of life and death, questions about why we are here and how we should act.

This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity, the pope said, as we see from the disturbing pathologies of religion and reason which necessarily erupt when reason is so reduced that questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it. Attempts to construct an ethic from the rules of evolution or from psychology and sociology, end up being simply inadequate.

Second, it's logically self-defeating for science itself, which depends upon the assumption of order and reason in the universe, but can't explain why things should work that way in the first place.

The question why this has to be so is a real question, and one which has to be remanded by the natural sciences to other modes and planes of thought to philosophy and theology, the pope said. For philosophy and, albeit in a different way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding.

Ultimately, Benedict argued, a form of reason which rejects religious and philosophical thinking cannot promote dialogue with other cultures.

In the Western world, it is widely held that only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid, he said. Yet the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their most profound convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures.

Whatever the merits of Benedict's argument, it is a subtle and carefully modulated analysis of Western intellectual history head and shoulders above the standard fare most leaders offer on the stump. Of course, that's not what the world is talking about right now, raising the question of whether Benedict could do with a dash more sensitivity to how wires in today's hair-trigger world are tripped.

The Vatican on Thursday issued a statement insisting that Benedict had no intention of giving offense, and that part of his argument at Regensburg was precisely in favor of respect of the religious convictions of humanity.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/update/bn091806.htm>

[2] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/460>

[3] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/27>

[4] <http://nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/archives>

[5] <mailto:jallen@natcath.org>