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Fall out from Benedict's comments on Islam

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

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The cover story in the Sept. 29 *National Catholic Reporter*, which went to press last night, is a piece I wrote analyzing the controversy over Pope Benedict's comments on Islam, especially the question of where the relationship between Christianity and Islam goes from here. The story will be posted to NCRonline.org by midday Tuesday Sept. 26.

On Sept. 19, I published an op/ed piece in *The New York Times* analyzing Benedict XVI's position on Islam. It may be found here: [A Challenge, Not a Crusade](#)

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One of the dangers of a crisis is that people who don't ordinarily follow a story may form quick impressions based largely on scripts with which they are already familiar, rather than a close analysis of the actual case at hand.

This is perhaps especially so with Pope Benedict, who since his election in April 2005 has kept a generally low media profile. For those who don't hang on Vatican vicissitudes, this may well be the first time the new pope has popped up on their radar screens in 18 months, and the temptation is to draw conclusions about his outlook or agenda almost exclusively on the basis of the last week.

For example, in the uproar surrounding Benedict's citation of a 14th century Byzantine emperor to the effect that Mohammad brought things "only evil and inhuman," and that he "spread by the sword the faith he preached," three charges have been floated in much critical commentary:

- Benedict has aligned himself with U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, especially the war in Iraq;
- Benedict is hostile on principle to inter-faith dialogue, with some citing his criticism of Pope John Paul II's summit of religious leaders in Assisi in 1986;
- Benedict is a theological Islamophobe, with some associating his statements with a movement in conservative evangelical Christianity known as "Christian Zionism."

As a careful consideration reveals, each of these charges carries just enough of a grain of truth to keep it in circulation, but, as stated, each is false.

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One interesting piece of writing offering reactions from within the Muslim world to Benedict's comments came from Fawaz A. Gerges, a Carnegie scholar and visiting professor at the American University in Cairo. In it, Gerges suggests that Benedict's statement has made life more difficult for precisely the moderate Muslims the pope wishes to encourage.

I was on Anderson Cooper's "360" show on CNN the other night with Gerges, and Cooper asked him to describe reaction on the street in Cairo. Gerges responded that many Muslims believe that Benedict has now placed himself on the side of U.S. President George Bush in his "crusade" against the Muslim world.

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I interjected to say that whatever judgment one reaches about the wisdom of the pope's comments, to connect the dots in this particular fashion is unwarranted, given that the Vatican was actually a leading moral critic of the war in Iraq.

"That was the other pope!" Gerges replied.

It should be noted that this is not just a Muslim reaction, but one shared by some secular observers in the West. When I appeared on "Morning Edition" on National Public Radio a few days ago, the eminent historian James Reston suggested that we are now hearing from Benedict the same things about Islam we've heard from Bush and from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Given the sensitivities generated by the war, and the ideologically charged nature of debate over American foreign policy, perhaps that reaction was inevitable. In reality, however, it just isn't so.

It is certainly true that during the run-up to the war in Iraq in late 2002 and early 2003, when left-wing protestors in Europe were staging massive peace rallies with banners of John Paul II and Che Guevara, some senior Catholic officials, including then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, were concerned about the fashion in which the pope's critique of the war was being "lumped in" with the ideological opposition of the "no-global" movement. Key Ratzinger intimates such as Bishop Rino Fisichella and Cardinal Camillo Ruini spoke about the importance of not being boxed into knee-jerk anti-American positions.

On a wide range of matters, from specifics such as abortion or stem cell research, to more general

questions such as the role of religion in public life, Ratzinger's circle finds much to admire in the Bush administration.

It's also true that Ratzinger, at the time the church's top theologian, made it clear that opposition to the war was not an article of faith. In an interview with *30 Giorni*, an Italian Catholic publication, he said: "The pope has not proposed the [antiwar] position as the doctrine of the Church, but as the appeal of a conscience illuminated by the faith. ? This is a position of Christian realism which, without dogmatism, considers the facts of the situation, while focusing on the dignity of the human person as a value worthy of great respect."

Yet there is no doubt on the specific question of the moral legitimacy of the war in Iraq where Ratzinger stood.

On Sept. 21, 2002, *L'Avvenire*, the official newspaper of the Italian bishops, published the text of an address by Ratzinger at a conference in Trieste. Asked if the war in Iraq could be justified, Ratzinger said bluntly: "In this situation, certainly not."

"There is the United Nations," Ratzinger continued. "It is the authority that should make the decisive choice. It's necessary that the choice be made by the community of peoples, not a single power. The fact that the United Nations is seeking a way to avoid the war seems to me to demonstrate with sufficient proof that the damages which would result [from the war] are greater than the values it would seek to save."

Ratzinger criticized the new Bush doctrine of preventive war.

"The concept of preventive war does not appear in the Catechism," Ratzinger said. "One cannot simply say that the Catechism does not legitimate war, but it's true that the Catechism has developed a doctrine such that, on the one hand, there may be values and populations to defend in certain circumstances, but on the other, it proposes a very precise doctrine on the limits of these possibilities."

The point is that moral rejection of the war in Iraq was not a personal idiosyncrasy of John Paul II; it was the corporate position of the Holy See, with Ratzinger very much included.

This pattern was repeated during the recent crisis in Lebanon. The cornerstone of Benedict's position was the call for an immediate cease-fire, in contrast with the United States and Great Britain, who wanted to give Israel the chance to change the situation on the ground first. On July 31, Benedict issued a direct appeal: "In the name of God, I appeal to all the responsible parties in this spiral of violence: immediately lay down arms on all sides!" Behind the scenes, American and British diplomats tried to introduce some flexibility in the pope's position, to no avail.

In fact, in several conversations I've had with senior Vatican officials this week, I've picked up some grumbling on precisely this point. The Holy See has paid a price, they argued, for its clear public opposition to the Bush administration's policy in the Middle East, especially the war in Iraq. Where, they wonder, is the credibility such stances were supposed to have earned the Vatican in the "Muslim street" during this crisis?

This background is important to make the following point: While Benedict XVI does not want to be painted into a corner of ideological opposition to the United States, and while he is sensitive to the threat posed by terrorism, he is not simply the "chaplain" of the Atlantic Alliance, and by no means should his recent comments be read as signaling approval for military adventurism. His track record, and that of the Vatican, clearly cuts in the opposite direction.

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Some have taken the present crisis as additional confirmation that Benedict XVI is adverse to the whole enterprise of inter-faith dialogue, citing in this regard his criticism of John Paul II's 1986 Assisi summit, in which he called together the leaders of diverse religious traditions, such as the Dalai Lama, muftis, rabbis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and many others, to pray for peace.

Ratzinger's concerns are a matter of public record. He told a German newspaper at the time: "This cannot be the model!" In a 1987 press conference, Ratzinger said the common interpretation of what had happened in Assisi, which was that participants recognized each had a valid set of beliefs based on different historical experiences, was false.

"That is the definitive rejection of truth," he said. "The debate on religions has to be begun all over. The category of truth and the dynamism of truth are put aside. The attitude that says that we all have values and nobody possesses the truth expresses a static position and is opposed to true progress. To accept that historical identity is to imprison oneself in historicism."

He returned to the theme in his 2003 book, *Truth and Tolerance*.

"It is in disputable that the Assisi meetings, especially in 1986, were misinterpreted by many people," he wrote. "We should not lightly set aside such questions."

Yet as should be clear, Ratzinger's concern was not the idea of conversation with other religions in itself, but the potential for such gatherings to promote a sort of religious relativism in which all religions are seen as equally valid.

Whatever one makes of this stance, there's little evidence to suggest that Benedict XVI is hostile on principle to inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. On the contrary, he attended the 2002 summit in Assisi called by John Paul II, and riding back to Rome on the Vatican-sponsored "peace train" afterwards, he pronounced the day highly positive. In the passage quoted above from *Truth and Tolerance*, he went on to state, "It would be wrong to reject, completely and unconditionally, multi-religious prayer of the kind I have described."

In a Sept. 20 editorial, *The New York Times* said that Benedict "has been a no-show at inter-faith gatherings in Assisi," asserting that because he chose to send a message last year, "his absence speaks louder than his words." Without entering into a discussion about whether Benedict's commitment could be greater, it should be noted that John Paul II himself only went to Assisi three times (1986, 1993 and 2002), and sent a message in all the other years that Sant'Egidio or other groups organized inter-faith events. In fact, the last time John Paul showed up in Assisi, Ratzinger was with him. Hence the *Times'* admonition seems a bit overdrawn.

Benedict does, perhaps, have a different conception of the aim of inter-religious dialogue. He tends to believe progress will come less from abstract theological exchange, since the great doctrinal differences among the religions are destined to endure, than from concrete cooperation on social, cultural and political questions where the religions have shared values, such as struggles against poverty, war, and assaults on the integrity of human life. That, for example, was the point of his four-hour reunion with Hans Küng last summer at Castelgandolfo, when Benedict essentially endorsed Küng's "World Ethics Project," an effort to delineate just such a set of shared values.

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One of the ironies of the present controversy is that in this approach to inter-faith relations, Benedict has assumed that Muslims would be his most natural allies. He has said repeatedly that he admires their commitment to clarity about their own identity; no one expects a Muslim to back away from a strong conviction that there is no God but Allah, and that Mohammed is his prophet. In that sense, Benedict has long felt that in the attempt to balance inter-faith openness with fidelity to one's own tradition, he should find a receptive partner in Islam.

His readiness for conversation seems clear.

When Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, for example, a member of the powerful Council of Guardians in Tehran, wrote a book comparing Islamic and Christian eschatological themes in the late 1990s, then-Cardinal Ratzinger swapped theological ideas with him in the Vatican.

In 1999, Ratzinger joined Prince Hassan of Jordan, Orthodox Metropolitan Damaskinos, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan (a former United Nations official and an Ismaili Muslim who died in 2003), and former French chief rabbi Rene Samuel Sirat, in launching the Foundation for Interreligious and Intercultural Research and Dialogue in Geneva. The foundation is dedicated to promoting relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims. Ratzinger also took part in a Christian-Muslim dialogue sponsored by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople in the 1980s.

Immediately after his installation Mass last year, Benedict thanked Muslims for attending an inter-faith meeting.

"I express my appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians," he said. "I assure you that the Church wants to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions."

None of this, of course, is to suggest that his citation of Emperor Manuel II Paleologous was a shining example of inter-faith outreach. But there's little evidence that it's part of a pattern of complete closure. Benedict XVI said on Sept. 17 that he wants a "frank and sincere" dialogue with the followers of other religions, and his track record provides a basis to take him at his word.

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There's little doubt that Benedict XVI takes a tougher line on Islam than John Paul II, especially on issues of terrorism and reciprocity, a point I tried to make in a Sept. 19 op/ed piece in *The New York Times*.

Given that background, along with the incendiary nature of the quotation he used in Regensburg, some have concluded that Benedict has a particular aversion to Islam. In response to my *Times* essay, one reader e-mailed me: "This man is a Christian Zionist, and to our misfortune, the pope."

The claim of Christian Zionism is particularly difficult to sustain, given that eschatology is more or less Ratzinger's primary field of specialization as a dogmatic theologian. His *Habilitationschrift*, the book-length contribution to original research that German doctoral students are required to complete, was devoted to St. Bonaventure's theology of history in the controversy with Joachim of Fiore, which turned on eschatological questions. Ratzinger's best-developed theological work is his 1977 *Eschatologie: Tod und ewiges Leben* ("Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life"), published just before he left professional

theology to become a bishop.

Nowhere in any of this work, or in subsequent writings or statements, will one find any of the key themes of Christian Zionism, especially the idea that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land marks the beginning of the "last days." Ratzinger was once asked by a Jewish rabbi if he accorded any theological significance to the Holy Land, and his answer was: "Of course it's of significance to us, because it's significant to you."

Nor has there been any movement towards aggressive proselytizing of Jews under Benedict, which many Christian Zionists believe must precede the final consummation of history. On the subject of the salvation of non-Christians, Ratzinger wrote in 2003, "What God makes of the poor broken pieces of our attempts at good, at approaching him, remains his secret, which we ought not to presume to try to work out."

It's also worth recalling that prior to the current uproar over his comments on Islam, Benedict's biggest inter-religious challenges have come in his relations with the Jewish world.

For example, in a July 24, 2005, Angelus address, Benedict expressed sympathy for the victims of recent terrorist actions in Great Britain, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, but not in Israel, where five people died on July 14, 2005, after a bombing in Netanya. Mark Regev, a spokesperson for the Israel foreign ministry, said that the omission of Israel "cries out to heaven," and that it "could be interpreted as a license for acts of terrorism against Jews."

After a nasty exchange between Israeli officials and the Vatican's spokesperson, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the rhetoric cooled, and both sides seemed to put the episode behind them.

Wounds reopened, however, after Benedict's May visit to Auschwitz. By neglecting to say anything about anti-Semitism in his address that day, and by avoiding the complicity of ordinary Germans, Benedict seemed to some observers to be "rolling back" post-Second Vatican Council gains in relations with Judaism.

Israeli commentator Sever Plocker was unsparing in Ynetnews.

"The visit was extraneous, annoying and infuriating," he wrote. "The German pope failed to do the most basic thing he should have done at Auschwitz: He failed to kneel next to the ovens, look to the blue skies of the Auschwitz afternoon and ask forgiveness for the murder of six million Jews, in the name of German or the German Catholic church."

None of this is to suggest that a checkered history with Jews proves that Benedict likes Muslims, or vice-versa. In fact, in both cases Benedict seems to be struggling to balance respect for other religions, and with the sometimes sad history of Christian engagement with those religions, against clarity about the doctrinal teachings and identity of the church. He's also learning what it means to the pope, when one's every public utterance is scrutinized to an exaggerated degree, seeking traces of bias or disregard where often none is intended.

What this does mean, however, is that sweeping conclusions about where the pope stands on the basis of the over-heated atmosphere are generally misleading. There is precious little evidence that Benedict is operating out of a "Zionist" perspective, whether of the Christian variety or any other kind.

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As I hope is self-evident, nothing here is by way of "excusing" or "justifying" Benedict's Sept. 12 comments on Islam.

It's not my business to pass judgment on the pope's statements, though I think even a neutral observer may be permitted the observation that had Benedict said originally what he said this past Sunday, i.e., that the quotation from the Byzantine emperor does not reflect his personal opinion, much of the heartache of the last few days might have been avoided.

The point, however, is that constructive reflection requires an accurate grasp of where the pope is coming from, what he meant and what he didn't mean. Unfortunately, the hothouse environment of a global crisis usually means that such patient analysis is in short supply.

Now that some measure of calm seems to be returning, one hopes that Christians and Muslims can pick up the pieces and return to the rational reflection that Benedict understood himself to be advocating in his Sept. 12 address, based on an honest evaluation of the motives and convictions of the other.

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One correction regarding my *New York Times* piece.

When I submitted the copy, I referred to comments by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on Islam with the introductory phrase, "In a 1997 interview ?" In the editing process, that phrase became, "In a 1997 interview with me ?" I didn't catch the change until the piece had already appeared in print.

In fact, that interview was with German journalist Peter Seewald, which formed the basis of the book *Salt of the Earth*.

I offered this point as a correction to the *Times*, but in the meantime, I wanted to use this chance to set the record straight. I know how much effort goes into collecting and publishing interview material, and I don't want to take credit for somebody else's work.

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