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Franz , where are you when we need you?

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From Where I Stand

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Let's put it this way: The world in which we're living with its scramble for big oil, its rising sense of nationalism in a globalized world, its tendencies to economic imperialism, its capacity for global terrorism as well as Neanderthal militarism and its rising sense of anti-Americanism is at a very sensitive period in human history.

In fact, in a setting like that, we may well be precariously poised on the brink of a new Franz Ferdinand moment.

In that case, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist seeking independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire unleashed a catastrophic series of events. As a result, the world found itself plunged into a period of wars that lasted for more than 40 years and killed more than 70 million people. It wasn't so much what the assassination of an obscure Austrian Duke did to the world as it was what it catapulted so many others into doing in response.

It might be important for us to remember in our own time how it is that seemingly benign situations, given the right environment, can become potentially lethal.

In our own times, for instance, fundamentalism everywhere, including here, is more than enough to kindle

a global fire.

And now an unexpected spark has come from the strangest place of all: the Vatican.

This week the pastoral, the political and the professorial dimensions of the present papacy of Benedict XVI found themselves on a fast-track to collision with forces far beyond the arena in which he spoke.

The world has been debating for over a week now whether Pope Benedict XVI simply forgot that he was a universal pastor and international politician as well as past professor or simply didn't care to attend to all three roles at one time. Whatever the case, in one university speech all three facets of this current papacy came into play.

In this speech, universal pastoral sensitivity, as well as the political responsibilities that come with the papacy, seem to many to have been abandoned. In their place, his long-time identity as professor -- meaning someone who has the luxury, indeed, the responsibility to pursue abstract ideas free of the social consequences of their implications -- had free rein.

But it wasn't the subject matter of the lecture that was the problem. The question of the nature of God is, in fact, an ancient one.

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Christians, Benedict XVI reminded us - using the words of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, the Logos" -- hold that God, by nature, cannot do the unreasonable. On the other hand, those in Islam (as well as some Christian theologians like Duns Scotus and Benedict) argue that God transcends all human categories. God, that is, can do a thing whether it looks reasonable to human beings or not.

Benedict, of course, argued for the traditional Christian view. Otherwise, he pointed out, violence in behalf of faith -- "jihad" -- could be practiced in the name of God. That, he went on, is simply a rational impossibility for the God of peace and love.

But then, for no clear reason, Benedict quoted from a 14th century conversation between the Christian Emperor Paleologus and a Persian scholar . In the conversation, Paleologus contends that the Prophet Mohammed brought forth "only things evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

Then and there, the academic subject becomes a pastoral one, a political one, a social one, a current one.

Then and there the speech raises two major problems for the Islamic world -- and so for us.

The first problem is that Muslim scholars maintain that the word "jihad" most commonly means that the Muslim must make an "effort" -- must struggle -- to live life in accordance with the teachings of Mohammed. It is incumbent on all Muslims at all times -- just as "avoiding the occasions of sin" is part of Christian discipline, as well. "Holy war," as jihad, is at most a secondary meaning of the word that has become common to radical Islamic fundamentalist groups, but not to the Islamic community in general.

The second problem is that Muslims see the words of Paleologus, and so of Benedict XVI, as a direct insult to the Prophet Mohammed. It is, purely and simply, blasphemy to accuse the prophet of being either inhumane or evil.

The outcry against the pope and the speech was swift in coming. Some called the references to a 600-year-old theological debate in an otherwise benign speech "tragic;" some called it "unfortunate;" a few called it brave -- and, if not politically smart, definitely necessary. But by the time the news cycles had made their way around the globe for a day or two, no one was calling it insignificant.

Whether or not it was right or wrong for the pope to say what he did, one thing is now clear, certainly to the world, hopefully to the pope: what popes say, however much they mean it to be an academic conversation starter, transcend the academic.

But it must be clear to the rest of us, as well, how easy it is to light a tinder box when we fail to acknowledge what we ourselves have committed against others in the name of religion.

It is Christians who call God "rational" who, in that God's name, have done a history-full of irrational things to other religions and to Christians themselves. In times past, Christians drove Jews and Muslims out of Europe. We slaughtered Jews in pogroms and Muslims in the Crusades.

In the New World, Christians converted Indians at the end of a sword and persecuted gays and kept slaves and suppressed women. We watched white Christians burn crosses in the front yards of black Christians -- and then burned those black Christians themselves.

We have all sinned in the name of religion.

If we want as Christians to begin a dialogue on the role of violence in religion, we need to cite some of our own sins as well as theirs.

And frankly, I'd leave both Mohammed and Jesus out of it as we do.

We had all better learn to talk so Christian a language that there is no doubt about its meaning.

From where I stand, a teacher friend of mine has it right. She taught her public communication students the basics of communication when she told them, "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

And that goes for all of us, pope and people alike. Otherwise, Franz Ferdiand may rise from his grave only to find us no wiser now than we were in his time. And maybe on the brink of 40 more years of war, as well.

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