

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
And may Peace and Blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad*

OPEN LETTER TO HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
Do not contend with people of the Book except in the fairest way
(The Holy Qur'an, al-Ankabut, 29:46).*

Your Holiness,

WITH REGARDS TO YOUR LECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF REGENSBURG IN GERMANY ON September 12th 2006, we thought it appropriate, in the spirit of open exchange, to address your use of a debate between the Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a “learned Persian” as the starting point for a discourse on the relationship between reason and faith. While we applaud your efforts to oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life, we must point out some errors in the way you mentioned Islam as a counterpoint to the proper use of reason, as well as some mistakes in the assertions you put forward in support of your argument.

There is no Compulsion in Religion

You mention that “according to the experts” the verse which begins, *There is no compulsion in religion* (al-Baqarah 2:256) is from the early period when the Prophet “was still powerless and under threat,” but this is incorrect. In fact this verse is acknowledged to belong to the period of Quranic revelation corresponding to the political and military ascendancy of the young Muslim community. *There is no compulsion in religion* was not a command to Muslims to remain steadfast in the face of the desire of their oppressors to force them to renounce their faith, but was a reminder to Muslims themselves, once they had attained power, that they could not force another’s heart to believe. *There is no compulsion in religion* addresses those in a position of strength, not weakness. The earliest commentaries on the Qur’an (such as that of Al-Tabari) make it clear that some Muslims of Medina wanted to force their children to convert from Judaism or Christianity to Islam, and this verse was precisely an answer to them **not** to try to force their children to convert to Islam. Moreover, Muslims are also guided by such verses as *Say: The truth is from your Lord; so whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.* (al-Kahf 18:29); and *Say: O disbelievers! I worship not that which ye worship; Nor worship ye that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion* (al-Kafirun: 109:1-6).

God’s Transcendence

You also say that “for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent,” a simplification which can be misleading. The Quran states, *There is no thing like unto Him* (al-Shura 42:11), but it also states, *He is the Light of the heavens and the earth* (al-Nur 24:35); and, *We are closer to him than his jugular vein* (Qaf 50:16); and, *He is the First, the Last, the Inward, and the Outward* (al-Hadid 57:3); and, *He is with you wherever you are* (al-Hadid 57:4); and, *Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God* (al-Baqarah 2:115). Also, let us recall the saying of the Prophet, which states that God says, “When I love him (the worshipper), I am the hearing by which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks.” (*Sahih al-Bukhari* no.6502, *Kitab al-Riqaq*)

In the Islamic spiritual, theological, and philosophical tradition, the thinker you mention, Ibn Hazm (d.1069 CE), is a worthy but very marginal figure, who belonged to the *Zahiri* school of jurisprudence which is followed by no one in the Islamic world today. If one is looking for classical formulations of the doctrine of transcendence, much more important to Muslims are figures such as al-Ghazali (d.1111 CE) and many others who are far more influential and more representative of Islamic belief than Ibn Hazm.

You quote an argument that because the emperor is “shaped by Greek philosophy” the idea that “God is not pleased by blood” is “self-evident” to him, to which the Muslim teaching on God’s Transcendence is put forward

as a counterexample. To say that for Muslims “God’s Will is not bound up in any of our categories” is also a simplification which may lead to a misunderstanding. God has many Names in Islam, including the Merciful, the Just, the Seeing, the Hearing, the Knowing, the Loving, and the Gentle. Their utter conviction in God’s Oneness and that *There is none like unto Him (al-Ikhlās 112:4)* has not led Muslims to deny God’s attribution of these qualities to Himself and to (some of) His creatures, (setting aside for now the notion of “categories”, a term which requires much clarification in this context). As this concerns His Will, to conclude that Muslims believe in a capricious God who might or might not command us to evil is to forget that God says in the Quran, *Lo! God enjoins justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbids lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorts you in order that ye may take heed (al-Nahl, 16:90)*. Equally, it is to forget that God says in the Qur’an that *He has prescribed for Himself mercy (al-An’am, 6:12; see also 6:54)*, and that God says in the Qur’an, *My Mercy encompasses everything (al-A’raf 7:156)*. The word for mercy, *rahmah*, can also be translated as love, kindness, and compassion. From this word *rahmah* comes the sacred formula Muslims use daily, *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*. Is it not self-evident that spilling innocent blood goes against mercy and compassion?

The Use of Reason

The Islamic tradition is rich in its explorations of the nature of human intelligence and its relation to God’s Nature and His Will, including questions of what is self-evident and what is not. However, the dichotomy between “reason” on one hand and “faith” on the other does not exist in precisely the same form in Islamic thought. Rather, Muslims have come to terms with the power and limits of human intelligence in their own way, acknowledging a hierarchy of knowledge of which reason is a crucial part. There are two extremes which the Islamic intellectual tradition has generally managed to avoid: one is to make the analytical mind the ultimate arbiter of truth, and the other is to deny the power of human understanding to address ultimate questions. More importantly, in their most mature and mainstream forms the intellectual explorations of Muslims through the ages have maintained a consonance between the truths of the Quranic revelation and the demands of human intelligence, without sacrificing one for the other. God says, *We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that it is the truth (Fussilat 41:53)*. Reason itself is one among the many signs within us, which God invites us to contemplate, and to contemplate with, as a way of knowing the truth.

What is “Holy War”?

We would like to point out that “holy war” is a term that does not exist in Islamic languages. *Jihad*, it must be emphasized, means struggle, and specifically struggle in the way of God. This struggle may take many forms, including the use of force. Though a *jihad* may be *sacred* in the sense of being directed towards a sacred ideal, it is not necessarily a “war”. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Manuel II Paleologus says that “violence” goes against God’s nature, since Christ himself used violence against the money-changers in the temple, and said “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword ...” (Matthew 10:34–36). When God drowned Pharaoh, was He going against His own Nature? Perhaps the emperor meant to say that cruelty, brutality, and aggression are against God’s Will, in which case the classical and traditional law of *jihad* in Islam would bear him out completely.

You say that “naturally the emperor knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur’an, concerning holy war.” However, as we pointed out above concerning *There is no compulsion in religion*, the aforementioned instructions were not later at all. Moreover, the emperor’s statements about violent conversion show that he did not know what those instructions are and have always been.

The authoritative and traditional Islamic rules of war can be summarized in the following principles:

1. Non-combatants are not permitted or legitimate targets. This was emphasized explicitly time and again by the Prophet, his Companions, and by the learned tradition since then.
2. Religious belief alone does not make anyone the object of attack. The original Muslim community was fighting against pagans who had also expelled them from their homes, persecuted, tortured, and murdered them. Thereafter, the Islamic conquests were political in nature.
3. Muslims can and should live peacefully with their neighbors. *And if they incline to peace, do thou incline to it; and put thy trust in God (al-Anfal 8:61)*. However, this does not exclude legitimate self-defense and maintenance of sovereignty.

Muslims are just as bound to obey these rules as they are to refrain from theft and adultery. If a religion regulates

war and describes circumstances where it is necessary and just, that does not make that religion war-like, anymore than regulating sexuality makes a religion prurient. If some have disregarded a long and well-established tradition in favor of utopian dreams where the end justifies the means, they have done so of their own accord and without the sanction of God, His Prophet, or the learned tradition. God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Let not hatred of any people seduce you into being unjust. Be just, that is nearer to piety (al-Ma'idah 5:8)*. In this context we must state that the murder on September 17th of an innocent Catholic nun in Somalia—and any other similar acts of wanton individual violence—'in reaction to' your lecture at the University of Regensburg, is completely un-Islamic, and we totally condemn such acts.

Forced Conversion

The notion that Muslims are commanded to spread their faith "by the sword" or that Islam in fact was largely spread "by the sword" does not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, as a *political* entity Islam spread partly as a result of conquest, but the greater part of its expansion came as a result of preaching and missionary activity. Islamic teaching did not prescribe that the conquered populations be forced or coerced into converting. Indeed, many of the first areas conquered by the Muslims remained predominantly non-Muslim for centuries. Had Muslims desired to convert all others by force, there would not be a single church or synagogue left anywhere in the Islamic world. The command *There is no compulsion in religion* means now what it meant then. The mere fact of a person being non-Muslim has never been a legitimate *casus belli* in Islamic law or belief. As with the rules of war, history shows that some Muslims have violated Islamic tenets concerning forced conversion and the treatment of other religious communities, but history also shows that these are by far the exception which proves the rule. We emphatically agree that forcing others to believe—if such a thing be truly possible at all—is not pleasing to God and that God is not pleased by blood. Indeed, we believe, and Muslims have always believed, that *Whoso slays a soul not to retaliate for a soul slain, nor for corruption done in the land, it shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether (al-Ma'idah 5:32)*.

Something New?

You mention the emperor's assertion that "anything new" brought by the Prophet was "evil and inhuman, such as his alleged command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." What the emperor failed to realize—aside from the fact (as mentioned above) that no such command has ever existed in Islam—is that the Prophet never claimed to be bringing anything fundamentally new. God says in the Holy Qur'an, *Naught is said to thee (Muhammad) but what already was said to the Messengers before thee (Fussilat 41:43)*, and, *Say (Muhammad): I am no new thing among the messengers (of God), nor know I what will be done with me or with you. I do but follow that what is Revealed to me, and I am but a plain warner (al-Ahqaf, 46:9)*. Thus faith in the One God is not the property of any one religious community. According to Islamic belief, all the true prophets preached the same truth to different peoples at different times. The laws may be different, but the truth is unchanging.

"The Experts"

You refer at one point non-specifically to "the experts" (on Islam) and also actually cite two Catholic scholars by name, Professor (Adel) Theodore Khoury and (Associate Professor) Roger Arnaldez. It suffices here to say that whilst many Muslims consider that there are sympathetic non-Muslims and Catholics who could truly be considered "experts" on Islam, Muslims have not to our knowledge endorsed the "experts" you referred to, or recognized them as representing Muslims or their views. On September 25th 2006 you reiterated your important statement in Cologne on August 20th 2005 that, "Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends." Whilst we fully concur with you, it seems to us that a great part of the object of inter-religious dialogue is to strive to listen to and consider the actual voices of those we are dialoguing with, and not merely those of our own persuasion.

* * *

Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. As the leader of over a billion Catholics and moral example

for many others around the globe, yours is arguably the single most influential voice in continuing to move this relationship forward in the direction of mutual understanding. We share your desire for frank and sincere dialogue, and recognize its importance in an increasingly interconnected world. Upon this sincere and frank dialogue we hope to continue to build peaceful and friendly relationships based upon mutual respect, justice, and what is common in essence in our shared Abrahamic tradition, particularly ‘the two greatest commandments’ in Mark 12:29-31 (and, in varying form, in Matthew 22:37-40), that, *the Lord our God is One Lord; / And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy understanding, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. / And the second commandment is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.*

Muslims thus appreciate the following words from the Second Vatican Council:

The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting. (*Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965)

And equally the words of the late Pope John Paul II, for whom many Muslims had great regard and esteem:

We Christians joyfully recognize the religious values we have in common with Islam. Today I would like to repeat what I said to young Muslims some years ago in Casablanca: “We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection” (*Insegnamenti*, VIII/2, [1985], p.497, quoted during a general audience on May 5, 1999).

Muslims also appreciated your unprecedented personal expression of sorrow, and your clarification and assurance (on the 17th of September) that your quote does not reflect your own personal opinion, as well as the Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone’s affirmation (on the 16th of September) of the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate*. Finally, Muslims appreciated that (on September 25th) in front of an assembled group of ambassadors from Muslim countries you expressed “total and profound respect for all Muslims”. We hope that we will all avoid the mistakes of the past and live together in the future in peace, mutual acceptance and respect.

And all praise belongs to God, and there is neither power nor strength except through God.

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