

Islam and the West

By Jim Seghers

C. S. Lewis records the advice that the senior devil, Screwtape, gave to his nephew, the junior demon, Wormwood:

“And since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time, it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truths of another.”

When a people do not know the lessons of history, it is doomed to repeat its mistakes.

Pope Pious V

The 16th century was a chaotic period. Europe was badly divided religiously and politically. Christianity was ruptured by the Protestant revolt. The emperor Maximilian of Austria was desperately trying to hold together his half of the Habsburg Empire. Philip II of Spain governed the other half with severity. Much of his attention was directed to the vast lands of the New World. The French king, Charles IX, opposed the Habsburgs. In addition the French were exhausted from their internal fight with the Huguenots. England, which had abandoned the Catholic Church under Henry VIII, had its own empire building agenda. Queen Elizabeth was assiduously establishing her cult and shaping a church submissive to her will. Italy was divided.

Amid this turmoil divided Europe faced a grave military threat from the Ottoman Empire, the center of Islamic power. Muslim armies threatened the Habsburg Empire through the Balkans, while Islamic armies ranged along the coasts of Africa, the Middle and Near East, and brought pressure against the Adriatic. The Sultan's massive fleet threatened the entire Mediterranean. Spanish vessels frequently clashed with the Barbary corsairs. Muslims viewed Europe as the land of the infidels. Therefore the Ottoman Turks were impatient to force Europe under submission of Islamic law.

Pope Pious V was the one man in Europe who clearly understood the dangers of this external threat. This former shepherd was just what the Church needed. He was a reforming ascetic who brought monastic purity and discipline to the office of Peter. The renewal of religious orders, educating the faithful, evangelizing and caring for the poor, which he often did personally, were his priorities.

In 1565, the Turks laid siege to the island of Malta, which was heroically defended by the Knights Hospitallers. For four months they hurled back the besieging Ottomans, inflicting massive losses on their attackers. After their humiliating withdrawal the Turks turned their rapacious appetite on Cyprus, which was under the control of Venice. Jihad was declared against the Christians on Cyprus in 1570.

The Turks attacked with 70,000 men outnumbering the Christian defenders 7 to 1. The city of Nicosia held out for nearly seven weeks. When it surrendered 20,000 men, women and children were slaughtered. The former Crusader fortress of Famagusta was

then the only defensible point left on the island. Pious V was the man most committed to the aid of Famagusta. However, his tireless diplomacy could not stay the inevitable. After 10 months of resistance, the commander Marco Antonio Bragadino opened negotiations with the Turks because of the citizen's pleading. The agreement called for the garrison's exile and the people to be spared. After they were disarmed the troops and their commanders were slaughtered. Bragadino was tortured, flayed alive, then killed. His corpse was stuffed and sent to the sultan.

Battle of Lepanto

In response to this debacle, Pious V drew together the unruly Holy League under the leadership of Don Juan of Austria, the 24-year-old illegitimate son of Charles V and the half-brother of Philip II. Don Juan's first task was keeping the Venetians, the Genoese, and the Spaniards from killing each other. Then, against the advice of some of his commanders, he pressed the attack against the Ottomans.

The massive Turkish fleet consisted of 328 ships, of which 208 were galleys. Aboard were 77,000 fighting men and 50,000 oarsmen, many of whom were Christian slaves. Don Juan's fleet consisted of 206 galleys, with 40,000 oarsmen and sailors, and only 28,000 fighting men. Pope Pious V called on the power of God to win the battle. He pleaded with all Catholics to ask for God's help by praying the Rosary.

The fleets clashed on October 7, 1571 with an overwhelming Christian victory. In Rome Pious V was meeting with his treasurer. Suddenly he rose, went to the window, and stood staring intently at the sky. Turing, he said: "This is not a moment for business; make haste to thank God, because our fleet this moment has won a victory over the Turks." The Turks lost 170 galleys and 33,000 men killed, wounded or captured. In addition 12,000 Christian slaves were liberated. The Catholic losses were 7,500 dead and an additional 22,000 wounded. Because of this victorious Battle of Lepanto the Pope established the feast day of Our Lady of Victory, now called Our Lady of the Rosary.

Benedict XVI

Today, not only Europe but also all Western societies are badly divided. Again a grave threat from Islam looms. Yet, most Western leaders and the majority of its citizens seem oblivious to the fact that we are headed toward a world of chaos, anarchy and totalitarianism. As in the 16th century, there is one voice that speaks with clarity. That is the voice of Pope Benedict XVI. He alone, of all the leaders in the West, is willing to call attention to the real issue. This battle cannot be won with massive fleets of ships and armed men, but with values. Ideology is the focal point of this conflict. This currently puts the West at a disadvantage because we have temporarily lost our philosophical and religious moorings. Expediency and relativism have now become the accepted norm.

On September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI gave a formal academic lecture at the University of Regensburg where he formerly taught as a professor. The renowned School of General Rhetoric of the University of Tübingen recently named this brilliant presentation as the "Address of the Year."

The major thrust of the pontiff's lecture addressed the essential relationship between reason and faith. He affirmed the Christian conviction that to act according to reason corresponds to the very nature of God because God is Reason; God is *Logos*. Therefore truth matters. Thus, the main body of his lecture was a spirited defense of reason both within philosophy and within faith. In particular, he called Europeans to rediscover their unique historical roots and to recapture the rational core of their historical faith in Jesus Christ. Secularism not only alienates religious believers, but it also reduces its adherents to irrelevancy in this struggle of ideas.

Pope Benedict XVI also recognized that reason affords the vital framework for the West and Islam to dialogue if the current atmosphere of mistrust, misunderstanding and hostility is not to escalate into massive chaos and armed conflict. Therefore, during his stunning lecture the Pope recalled the discussion, during the Muslim siege of Constantinople in the 14th century, between Byzantine Emperor Manuel II and a scholarly Persian gentleman on the differences between Islam and Christianity. Pope Benedict noted that the emperor "addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence... saying:

"Show me just what Mohammed 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."

Muslim extremists quickly orchestrated riots and angry protests before the protestors could have read the Pope's speech, which was initially available only in German and English. Islamic extremists in Somalia murdered Sister Leonella Sgorbita. These irrational outbursts only served to punctuate the Pope's message to the world of Islam. Discussion between religious faiths is possible only if the parties respect the rule of reason. The alternative is political and religious fanaticism.

This creates a dual challenge. The modern secular societies of the West have discarded the idea that God is Reason. Many have adopted the fallacy that reason is a mathematical process divorced from religious faith. God is relegated to private naïve beliefs that do not influence the important decisions of men and nations. Benedict XVI proclaimed that faith and reason are not opposing forces. He pointed out that the current trend in the West to doubt that faith and reason belong in the same sphere undermines the very fabric of western civilization, and makes the West impotent in meeting the ideological challenge of Islam.

Ultimately, the thinking that excludes religious faith is as dangerous as a faith that denies reason. In Christianity, however, God is inseparable from reason: "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1:1). Benedict XVI declared that attempts to use religious faith, as a justification for violent attacks on innocents is incompatible with the nature of God.

In the Muslim world the prevalent teaching is that God is absolutely transcendent. Allah is pure will only and, therefore, he is not bound to any categories. Therefore, God can change his will. He can make what was evil to be good and reasonable because what is "good" or "evil" is totally dependent of God's whim. True worship means following

whatever God is said to say even if it is contradictory to what he said previously. Within this understanding there is no truth that is true everywhere and always.

This exposes the fundamental flaw of jihad. It justifies killing oneself along with innocent others as a act of “martyrdom.” It justifies the murder of those deemed to be infidels or blasphemers. It justifies the use of violence to compel someone to “convert” to Islam. If God is above reason, all rational arguments are useless against terrorism, forced conversions, the execution of Muslim converts to Christianity, and the military enforcement of Islamic law.

Sects Within Islam

Sunnis make up about 85% of Muslims worldwide. Sunni Muslims follow the doctrines and practices derived from the Sunna (tradition) of the Prophet, that is, as interpreted by Muslim scholars throughout history.

The *Wahhabis* are a Sunni subset. They follow the reformer Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who wanted to rid Islam of everything that developed after the first few centuries after Mohammed. This violent sect makes war against other Muslim groups it considers heretical. The Wahhabis control Saudi Arabia and aggressively export Wahhabism around the world.

Shiites form the second largest Muslim group. They believe that Ali, the husband of Mohammed’s daughter Fatima, was the Prophet’s only rightful successor as leader of the Muslim community. Their traditions and practices are distinct from those of the Sunnis. They believe that the Imams who succeeded Ali in Mohammed’s prophetic line inherited Mohammed’s prophetic spirit. Most believe that there were 12 such Imams. The last one who disappeared from the earth will return as the Mahdi, a Messianic figure, at the end of the age.

Sufis are a small mystical sect that stresses love for Allah and union with him in terms that resemble Christian mysticism. They are ferociously persecuted as heretics in many areas of the Islamic world.

Other small sects are: the *Bahais* of Iran, the *Kharijites* of Oman, and the *Alawites* of Syria. The Sunnis and Shiites often view the members of these sects as heretics and subject them to persecution.

Debate Within Islam

The issue of faith and reason raised by Pope Benedict XVI has been a fundamental question within the Islamic world. The Mu’tazilite philosophers held that Allah was not power only, but also reason. They viewed man’s reason as God’s gift. They taught that God did not expect men to act contrary to reason. The Mu’tazilites held that the Qur’an must be interpreted in accord with reason.

In 877 Caliph al-Ma’mn proclaimed that the teaching of the Qur’an was created. Those who believed in the primacy of power and the uncreated Qur’an were punished and imprisoned. However Caliph Ja’afar al-Mutawakkil (847-861) overturned the

Mu'tazilites making their beliefs punishable by death. Nevertheless, Islamic philosophers like al-Farabi (870-950), Avicenna (980-1037), and Averroes (1126-1198) continued to flourish for a time.

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) was probably the most influential Islamic teacher after Mohammed. He vehemently rejected Greek philosophy. He insisted that Allah is not bound by any order, rejected cause and effect, and repudiated the idea that things function according to their own natures. Rather, everything acts according to God's momentary and arbitrary will. He also taught that man's reason was so defective that it cannot know moral principles. They can only be known through revelation. He believed that God has no reason and cannot be known by reason. Man's only task is to obey. *Submit* is the catchword. This view predominates in the Islamic world today.

As a result a Christian convert in Afghanistan was threatened with beheading for apostasy. Most imams and Afghans seemed to approve. In Indonesia, Nigeria, and Sudan, Muslims are at war with Christians, in the Middleast with Israelis, in Chechnya with the Russians, in India with Hindus, and in Thailand with Buddhists. There are, of course, other issues involved, but in every case the religion of Islam seems ever present as a prime motivator of violence.

In his December 22, 2006, address to the Roman Curia Pope Benedict XVI surveyed the major issues facing the world. He cited the danger of clashes between cultures and religion, Western secularism and its forgetfulness of God, and the need for faith to dialogue with reason. He recognizes that the tension between faith and reason is particularly acute in both the Islamic world and in the West. The pope understands that any civilization depends on the ability of its people and leaders to think rightly about God and man.

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