What Is The Pope Up To?

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Pope Benedict XVI, the German-born former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, is the leader of over a billion Catholics worldwide and presides over a multi-billion dollar empire of land holdings, churches and cathedrals, companies, universities, institutions, hospitals, etc. His representatives, official and otherwise, are in every nation on the globe, influencing policy to the advantage of the Roman Catholic Church. He has hundreds of advisors and assistants, many of whom are among the most learned men on earth. He sits atop an organization that wields power and influence far beyond the confines of tiny Vatican City in Rome.

If he has all this wealth, knowledge, and authority behind him, why did he make such a colossal blunder in his comments at Regensburg University in Germany on September 12? Did he not know that even quoting a fourteenth-century Christian emperor's anti-Islamic remark would ignite protests and perhaps violence as well across the Muslim world?

Without a doubt.

The Pope, who turned 79 in April, has observed the world long enough to be able to predict accurately just how his audiences will react to his ideas. The Vatican, long steeped in both politics and cultural sensitivity, understands the hair-trigger reactions of Islamic fundamentalists to anything even remotely offensive to "the religion of peace" or its prophet, Muhammad—remember that the furor over the Danish cartoons erupted just months ago. If his words, then, were not a thoughtless blunder, what were they designed to do? Why did he intentionally make them? What is the Pope up to?

There are probably at least two answers to these questions. The first is contained in the public response to Muslim demands of the Pope to apologize to the faithful for his "outrageous slander" of Muhammad. In his remarks to invitees to a meeting at his summer residence near Rome on September 25, the Pope regretted that his comments offended Muslims, yet he went on to explain briefly that Christians and Muslims "must learn to work together . . . to guard against all forms of intolerance and to oppose all manifestations of violence."

A reading of his Regensburg speech makes it plain that this was his intention all along. Notice this passage:

> The [Byzantine Emperor Manuel Paleologos II, a Christian] must have known that Sura 2,256 reads: "There is no compulsion in religion." . . . But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Quran, concerning holy war. Without descending to details, . . . he addresses his interlocutor . . . on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, 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." The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. "To convince a

> reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death. . . ."

Here he introduces his real subject, the relationship of reason and faith in religion. Muslim extremists—and frankly most Muslims period—have abandoned reason in their wholehearted devotion to Islam, and the result has been conflict, destruction, and death. On the other side, Western Christianity has rejected faith in favor of rationalism, producing cultural relativism and an essentially godless society. Benedict's speech was designed to steer a course toward the future between the two extremes.

At this point, the second answer to the *why* of the Pope's intentions comes to the fore. Upon ascending to the pontificate, Benedict dedicated himself to returning Europe to fundamental Christian values in response to increasing secularization. In a May 1996 address titled "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," he noted, presaging his papal theme:

> Today, a particularly insidious obstacle to the task of education is the massive presence in our society and culture of that relativism which, recognizing nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criterion only the self with its desires. And under the semblance of freedom it becomes a prison for each one, for it separates people from one another, locking each person into his or her own ego.

To counter this creeping narcissism, he recommends Europe's re-Christianization, urging Europeans "to open ourselves to this friendship with God . . . speaking to him as to a friend, the only One who can make the world both good and happy. . ." ("St. Josemaría: God Is Very Much at Work in Our World Today," *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 9, 2002). In early 2006, this theme still on his mind, he reiterated, "It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of the activism and the growing secularism of many Christians . . ." ("Friendship with God," *Zenit News*, February 7, 2006).

In this light, his remarks at Regensburg were a rallying cry to Europe to reject the fanatical, violent faith of its burgeoning Muslim minority as well as the sterile, empty secularism of modern society—and to embrace the reasonable, traditional, and beneficial faith of Christianity. By doing so, he sets up himself and the Roman Catholic Church as sound-minded bastions of European solidarity and strength.

Despite the violence his remarks caused, he has calculated that they were worth the turmoil so that he could gauge, not the Muslim reaction, which was predictable, but the European response. He is hoping to see a shift in attitudes toward the Catholic Church and the papacy to defend Christendom from the ongoing Islamic assault. So far—and granted, his remarks still echo across the Continent—he has seen nothing from secular Europe to give him hope.