



Editors' Page

Are American Muslims the New Catholics?

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Three years ago many American Catholics were praying for a Vatican II-friendly Pope. It is said that every prayer is heard and sometimes the answer is no. Muslims were not praying at the time but they probably should have.

Upon donning his tiara the new Pope demoted Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, his predecessor's point man on discourse with Muslims and revoked the autonomy of the Franciscan monks of Assisi for holding their ongoing dialogues with Muslims. Five months later he attacked Islam at his Regensburg address. Muslims were of course taken aback by the repetition of the false medieval charges that Islam was spread by the sword and that its sole contribution to humanity was wickedness and inhumanity. Regensburg starts by an untenable scholastic claim that rational religions are less likely to engage in warfare. History seems to prove the opposite: making logocentric assumptions about

God does not decrease the likelihood of holy wars. Sufis, mystics and fatalists are no more pugnacious than smug theocrats who identify their reasoning with what goes on in the divine mind.

The substantive claim of the Regensburg address that Islam is less "rational" than Christianity is also untrue. Both Islamic and Christian traditions have their rationalists and non-rationalists. Christian rationalists argue along with the Pope that their god is the "logos" of the first three verses of the Gospel of John. Muslim rationalists would have better scriptural support for a similar claim as the word reason or "Aghl" occurs dozens of times in the Qur'an. It must be borne in mind that these are rationalist theological arguments that are contested by rival non-rationalists within both Islam and Christianity. The Pope is cherry picking when he quotes the obscure Islamic non-rationalist Ibn Hazm as the voice of Islam while ignoring the fact that it was the grand Muslim philosopher Averroes who inspired Saint Thomas Aquinas in

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the harmonization of reason and revelation. In other words, the Christian theological rationalism of Benedict XVI is indebted to Islam: a religion he castigates as irrational.

American Muslims are indeed interested in dialogue with the pontiff but not on the basis of tendentious medieval argumentation. It may be that some voices in the Vatican and some leaders of American Catholicism (e.g., the Papal biographer and the author of a new book on Islam, George Weigel) continue to insist that Regensburg must be the basis of future dialogue with Muslims. However, this cannot be sustained, as the assumption that Islam is inherently irrational and violent vitiates all attempts at a constructive dialogue.

At the same time, we have no other way but genuine, pluralistic dialogue. As an American Muslim I wish to converse with my fellow Catholic citizens about the role of religion in the modern world. And I believe that American Muslims are also eager to mend fences with the Holy See. Pope Benedict XVI, who recently visited the United States where his faith has been rising to prominence, should carefully reassess the unique situation of American Muslims today.

Unlike their coreligionists in Europe, American Muslims are not an immigrant underclass. African American Muslims are an inseparable component of American society. Immigrant Muslims are generally better educated and wealthier than their brothers and

sisters in Europe. There is no doubt that a great deal of European angst about Islam is anchored in issues related to migration, unemployment and poverty. That kind of anti-immigrant animus is markedly less salient in the US.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in America is of a different kind. It was triggered by the events of September 11th 2001 and is augmented by a resurgent Protestant nativism. In this sense American Muslims are the new Catholics. Every religious and racial slur that anathematized Catholics before the middle of the twentieth century is now hurled at Muslims by televangelists and right wing anchors of the twenty first century. Like Catholics of half a century ago, today's Muslims are associated with Antichrist and accused of patriotic disloyalty, irrationalism, inability to assimilate, theocratic tendencies and anti-modernism. If Muslims are to bring about their own *Aggionramento* (and the reformists among them are trying hard) they will need the friendship, support and rational critique of their Catholic interlocutors not another round of old time theological jujitsu.