

## 6.3 Cardinal Errors in Dialogue

September 2005, the cartoons, September 2006, the Pope. Although both incidents have little in common, they have been perceived in Muslim countries as symptoms of Western arrogance. Thus, they indicate major problems of understanding between the West and the Islamic world.

On his first visit to the University of Regensburg in Germany, where he taught Catholic theology for decades, Pope Benedict XVI gave an academic lecture. He performed again as Professor Ratzinger, one of the most brilliant intellectuals among German theologians. Focus of his lecture was on one of the basic problems of any religion, the relationship between religious truth and scientific knowledge, belief and reason. As profound as always, the Pope highlighted contradictions and problems inherent in the Christian tradition: the mainstream of theology combines belief that God transcends all human imagination, being eternal and therefore totally different from all earthlings, with the belief that there is a spark of divinity in every human being. In line with humanistic and earlier thought, such spark is believed to be in what humans consider makes them different from animals: reason. The lecture culminated in harsh criticism of the tendency to overestimate the power of reason and to forget about human limitations, resulting in growing distance from God. Most Christian leaders and, with minor modifications, also leaders of other religions could agree with such a call for modesty. Most Christian and Islamic theologians would also agree with the Pope's comparative statement that God is seen more transcendent in Islamic than in Christian belief, in the words of the Pope: "absolutely transcendent". Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology of religion, has established the term of "magic origins of Christianity", referring to a historical period in which "making miracles happen" was a common place in all stories about outstanding personalities, Jesus included.

Pope Benedict's lecture could have animated a very interesting academic debate or even an inter-religious dialogue with social scientists participating. However, almost nothing about the main message of his lecture reached such audiences. Media and public opinion focused on the Pope quoting from an almost forgotten historical inter-faith dialogue that took place in 1391 between the Emperor of what was then left of the Roman Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean, Manuel II Paleologos, and an Islamic scholar whose name was not recorded in Christian archives. Manuel invited his counterpart to show him what

was new in what Mohammed has brought to the world, “apart from spreading belief through the sword”. It would have been interesting to know what answer he got. According to what is known about the Pope’s speech, he limited his quoting to the question. In this context, his focus was not on opening up to answers other than those defending Catholic claims. Like almost every religious leader, the Pope felt it necessary, in this part of his lecture, to suggest that his religious tradition would be closest to truth.

Returning to Rome, the Pope made extra-ordinary efforts to calm down the waves his historical citation had provoked among Muslims all over the world. He reconfirmed his commitment to the principles of peace, understanding and respect between religious communities. Different from many European political leaders and journalists some months earlier, he did not engage himself in a public showdown about freedom of speech against religious feelings. The fact that the Pope gave not in to such temptations marks a clear distinction between the aftermaths of the cartoons and of the Regensburg incident.

There are many lessons to be learned. Measured against the principles of an open dialogue, the Pope’s historical citation represents a number of cardinal errors which seem to be so common that they went almost unnoticed in public reactions.

The *first problem* that could have been avoided are historical references out of context. Manuel II was one of the last leaders of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 1391, Constantinople (today Istanbul) was already surrounded by Turkish troops, soon besieged before falling 60 years later. Manuel was definitely not in the best mood for an open Christian-Islamic dialogue. Throughout this historical period, the whole Euro-Mediterranean space was marked by confrontations between troops fighting under Christian and Islamic banners: Turks close to Vienna, the defeat of the Serbian army by Sultan Murad’s troops in what is today Kosovo, Cordoba falling to the catholic reconquista of Al Andalus, the Middle East still wounded of the atrocities by Christian crusaders. There would have been many other Christian voices worth being cited but besieged Emperor Manuel. Among them the new Christian Governors of Cordoba who continued for more than hundred years the regime of religious tolerance that was established by the Islamic Al Andalus Empire since the 8<sup>th</sup> century on the Iberian peninsula. It was completely abandoned in Southern Spain upon completion of its reconquista by the Catholic rulers, when there was no more competition between two systems of governance in Spain.

The *second problem* concerns theory and practice, and the internal diversity of the major religions. Too often, inter-religious dialogue focuses on what is highlighted as “true”

Christianity or Islam. Practice should be at least equally important. In almost every religion, there are spiritual movements who have often more in common across religions than with other movements within their own tradition. There are other tendencies which sociologists describe as hierarchical and well organised, and there are others focused on local leadership or even grassroots principles. There are religious communities that contest science, and others that have no problem with coexistence of religious truth and scientific knowledge. There are very strong and less strong believers living within the same religious community. And there are numerous attempts to fuel hatred and violence with religious differences. As much as for historical references, it is important for a contemporary dialogue to be evidence-based in making comparative judgements.

The *third problem* is an attitude towards excessive self-referencing which is shared by mainstream Christianity and Islam. The poor Manuel's question might have played its role in Christian training seminars in skills of "apologetics", of elaborating partisan claims for truth. There is, however, no possibility for dialogue in which each side insists in its own terminology and tradition instead of giving way to the other's point of view. Dialogue starts with the assumption that the other might be right. And dialogue requires efforts to find a common language for understanding and respecting differences.

*This text is adapted from the Editorial (TS) to the September/October 2006 Newsletter "Euro-Med Dialogue" of the Anna Lindh Foundation. The Regensburg lecture of Pope Benedict prompted 38 leaders of Muslim communities to address an open letter to the Pope, explaining their view of Islam and stressing the principle that "there is no coercion in matters of religion". In September 2007, 138 leaders of Muslim communities all over the world added a new and much longer open letter to not only the Pope but leaders of all major Christian churches, stressing the large number of shared values and shared traditions. It seems as if Pope Benedict XVI, well beyond his intentions, would have first provoked and then encouraged Muslim communities to leave behind their traditional defensive approach and try new modalities of inter-faith dialogue. (The texts are available under [www.acommonword.org](http://www.acommonword.org))*