

## **Pontiff's remarks regrettably showed a poor grasp of history**

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By SEAN FOLEY

For days now, Pope Benedict XVI's speech to a group of German academics regarding the compatibility of reason and the biblical understanding of faith in God has resonated throughout the Islamic world. It has sparked demonstrations, mass condemnations, formal papal apologies, mass violence and murder.

Muslims have vigorously objected to Benedict's use of an exchange between a Byzantine emperor and a Muslim scholar on a variety of issues, including the Islamic concept of jihad, which Benedict defines as "holy war."

During this exchange, the emperor reportedly stated, "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." Benedict also cites the emperor's statement that violence is incompatible with God's nature and that one only needs to speak well and use reason to convince others of the righteousness of God's teachings. Citing the French Muslim R. Arnaldez, Benedict implies that Muslim thought is fatalistic: completely antithetical to Euro-Greek concepts of reason and approaches to religion.

When thinking about the pope's statement and Muslim reaction to it, two key points are worth bearing in mind.

First, though jihad is commonly thought of as holy war, most Muslims look at jihad as a two-part concept. The first and most important part is "greater jihad;" it involves the struggle to adhere to God's teachings in one's own life and behavior. The other, or "lesser jihad," involves working to make the world conform to God's will and/or defending Muslims from injustice. It is only within the confines of "less jihad" that the concept of holy war appears.

Second, it is worth noting that Muslims are at least as familiar with the ideas of Aristotle, Plato and other Greek philosophers as their European counterparts: They do not have to be taught "reason."

Indeed, if Muslims had not valued the learning of Greek philosophers highly, it is unlikely that Europeans would have benefited in recent centuries from such thinking.

During the Middle Ages, Greek thought was largely unknown in the West until European scholars encountered texts on Greek philosophy in Muslim-controlled lands. These texts had been translated from Greek into Arabic.

My conclusion is that Pope Benedict XVI's unfortunate statements are not historically based.

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