From the Editors

Benedict on Islam

Pope Benedict XVI has issued a series of apologies for the ill-conceived remarks made in an academic lecture in which he quoted a medieval Christian emperor who called Islam “evil and inhuman.” At least in one sense, then, the pope appears to agree with those who charged him with misrepresenting the teachings of Islam and offending its adherents.

It is hard to make sense of this incident, especially given Benedict’s reputation for intellectual clarity and forthrightness. “I wished to explain that not religion and violence, but religion and reason, go together,” Benedict said in trying to calm the uproar. Some Catholic commentators, eager to align this pontificate with U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and the tendentious contention that the world is now embroiled in a apocalyptic “clash of civilizations,” rushed to the pope’s defense. According to these pundits, Benedict was right and brave—“hard-headed” and “serious”—in criticizing Islam’s encouragement of religious violence. To be sure, Benedict has rightly condemned Islamic radicalism in the past and challenged the suppression of religious freedom for Christians in Islamic countries.

That many Islamic radicals turn to the Qur’an to justify violence cannot be disputed. The burning of Christian churches and death threats against the pope following the lecture only confirm that ugly fact. Islamic leaders must unequivocally reject such reactions. But if, as some argue, Benedict’s purpose was to forcefully engage Islamists, why did he then apologize for his remarks?

A more benign explanation for the pope’s gaffe is that he is still new to the papacy and has not yet come to terms with how his every word will be scrutinized. Assuming the role of political and pastoral head of a church that is also a state is an adjustment. Benedict is now a diplomat and leader of the Catholic Church as well as a theologian, and the sorts of careful distinctions an academic theologian makes can cause confusion when issued by a head of state.

Anyone who reads the pope’s lecture will be reminded that he is a formidable thinker. His entire paper on the connection between reason and faith was not intended for general consumption. By not carefully distinguishing his own thinking from the inflammatory quotations he employed, he provoked unnecessary suspicion among his Islamic listeners. Moreover, in seeming to point to a propensity for violence within Islam while conspicuously failing to mention Christianity’s own historical failures in this regard, he appeared to be making an accusation rather than a philosophical argument. This aversion to grappling with the church’s own violent history seems characteristic of Benedict’s deeply eschatological understanding of the church and his often ahistorical approach to theology. For example, during his visit to Auschwitz in the spring, the pope avoided any reference to the long history of Christian anti-Semitism. He subsequently apologized for that curious omission. Benedict has written eloquently and inexcusably about the dangers “historicism” poses to theology, but a refusal to come to terms with the church’s past sins and errors poses just as great a danger to its integrity and mission. While Benedict is eager to defend the church’s metaphysical claims and transcendent reality, he has a tendency to slight its messier incarnational character.

To be honest, the pope fudges a bit in distancing himself from the quotation he used to criticize Islam. His lecture endorses the emperor’s assessment at several points. Still, a fair-minded reading of the pope’s remarks shows him to be more concerned about the threat posed by “radical skepticism” and Western secularism than by Islam. Yes, he made several dubious allusions to Islam’s notion of God as “absolutely transcendent,” and therefore “not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality.” Many Islamic scholars take issue with such a characterization. The pope’s larger point, however, was to call attention once again to the West’s own cramped notion of rationality, one that increasingly deprecates religious belief, and makes contact and communication with Islam and other religious cultures extremely difficult. Benedict is keen to defend the rationality of religious faith, and to remind his secular readers that the modern scientific ethos itself is based on a leap of faith that asserts a correspondence between what reason reveals and the ultimate nature of reality. “The intention here is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism,” he said in the lecture’s most persuasive section, “but of broadening our concept of reason and its application…. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons.”

Discrediting those horizons is what a pope is called to do, and the idea that there might be a “new way” to reconcile reason and faith, one that is not just a reassessment of traditional Catholic certainties, is most welcome. Let’s hear more about it.

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John Garvey
Theology of the Body
SACRED & PROFANE LESSONS

The body is the only sign of who we are. That is why in canonical iconography God the Father is not depicted (because he cannot be imagined, which is to say imaged), and why the Son can (because he is the only image we can have of God's relationship to us). In the halo above Jesus' head in Orthodox icons we see the Greek words that mean "the existing one," showing that he is at once the Lord who said to Moses, when asked his name, "I Am," and the particular human being so haloed, a Jew who was with us for a few decades.

This is why the dignity we must bring to every human encounter matters, why we are formal in first meetings. Whether we are Christians or not, this sense of the holiness of encountering another living body is built into us, and every culture honors it with varying degrees of gracefulness, from the most formal bow to the high-five. Only robots would begin an encounter with no acknowledgement of the other as other, without a sign of respect for that otherness.

A lot of the Christian sense of embodiment has been taken up with questions of sexuality and the moral questions that sex leads us to. But the simple fact of being embodied—of being, because of our embodied character, both alike and radically unlike, the same and individual—has been less a matter of concern. We should have the sense, meeting any person, of one new world encountering another.

That sense of otherness and respect for the body continues beyond the body's life. It is a mark of all human societies that we treat the bodies of the dead with care, and how we regard them says much about our feeling for the living—our sense of the value we give those we meet and interact with.

Two very different sets of images made me think of what the body means as a sign. One was heartbreaking, and that is a terribly inadequate word here. In the August 9, 2006, issue of the New York Times, there was a photograph by Joao Silva of the bodies of a mother and child after an Israeli air strike in Beirut. It showed a mound of rubble with scattered shards of concrete surrounding the uncovered brocade of the sleeve of a mother's arm, at the back of a baby's neck, the small dark head against her breast, the hand tenderly at the child's back. It was like a defiled icon of Mary and Jesus. I hope they died instantly.

There is everything holy and evil about the world in this image—the trust of the child, the comforting embrace of the mother, both seen even in this terrible context, placed in a landscape that shows how little the power that rules this world cares about what should matter to us most.

The other was a set of photos of flayed plasticized bodies, opened up for our inspection, part of an exhibit of bodies (most of them Chinese, and there is some controversy about the consent required for their use) on exhibit at the South Street Seaport in Manhattan. The bodies are posed in a number of ways that make them seem obscenely alive, doing athletic feats, running, doing everything but those things that make us really human, things like breathing, loving, being filled with doubt, joy, anxiety, caring. It is precisely because dead people are posed as if they were alive for the amusement or instruction of gawkers that I find this obscene. These are displayed, posed objects, stretched despite rigor mortis into sculptures made of the most inappropriate material. Human flesh is, in ways that should make us tremble, a sign of God's presence, and when it has died it should be a sign of the hope of resurrection, or at the very least a veneration of the particular life that was lived there. These are generalized, generic corpses, doing Norman Rockwell things, a Dracula approach to Hummel figurines.

My point is not to generalize about our culture or our age. This obscenity—the killing of a mother and child, the making of bodies which should be reverenced into things on display—is everlasting. From the beginning of time we have known how to show the body a complete and contemptuous dishonor, a denial of its holiness, a way of making a thing of something that should be addressed as "You." From ancient times to the present, one form of torment has been to force a father to watch the slow murder of a child, and then put his eyes out, so that the last thing he sees will be the worst sight imaginable. These are dreadful signs of a fallen world which needs redeeming, which needs waking up. As long as we continue to deny the reality of genuine evil—an evil that exists in every human heart, and can harden itself to perform whatever it sees as the necessary horrible task at hand by justifying itself politically, artistically, even religiously—we can't begin to awaken.