

# TIME

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FROM THE MAGAZINE

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## The Passion of the Pope

**With his blunt talk on Islam, Benedict XVI is altering the debate between the Muslim world and the West. On the eve of his visit to Turkey, TIME looks at the roots of the Pope's views--and how they may define his place in history**

By DAVID VAN BIEMA, JEFF ISRAELY/ROME

For the traveling Pontiff, it was not a laid-back Turkish holiday. The citizens of the proud, predominantly Muslim nation had no love of Popes. To the East, the Iranian government was galvanizing anti-Western feeling. The news reported that an escaped killer was on the loose, threatening to assassinate the Pontiff when he arrived. Yet the Holy Father was undaunted. "Love is stronger than danger," he said. "I am in the hands of God." He fared forward--to Ankara, to Istanbul--and preached the commonality of the world's great faiths. He enjoined both Christians and Muslims to "seek ties of friendship with other believers who invoke the name of a single God." He did not leave covered with garlands, but he set a groundwork for what would be years of rapprochement between the Holy See and Islam. He was a uniter, not a divider.

That was 1979 and Pope John Paul II. But when Benedict XVI travels to Turkey next week on his first visit to a Muslim country since becoming Pope last year, he is unlikely to cloak himself in a downy banner of brotherhood, the way his predecessor did 27 years ago. Instead, Benedict, 79, will arrive carrying a different reputation: that of a hard-knuckle intellect with a taste for blunt talk and interreligious confrontation. Just 19 months into his tenure, the Pope has become as much a moral lightning rod as a theologian; suddenly, when he speaks, the whole world listens. And so what takes place over four days in three Turkish cities has the potential to define his papacy--and a good deal more.

Few people saw this coming. Nobody truly expected Benedict to be a mere caretaker Pope--his sometimes ferocious 24-year tenure as the Vatican's theological enforcer and John Paul's right hand suggested anything but passivity. But this same familiarity argued against surprises. The new Pontiff was expected to sustain John Paul's conservative line on morality and church discipline and focus most of his energies on trimming the Vatican bureaucracy and battling Western culture's "moral relativism." Although acknowledged as a brilliant conservative theologian, Benedict lacked the open-armed charisma of his predecessor. Moreover, what had initially propelled John Paul to the center of the world stage was his challenge to communism and its

subsequent fall, a huge geopolitical event that the Pope helped precipitate with two exhilarating visits to his beloved Polish homeland. By contrast, what could Benedict do? Liberate Bavaria?

Well, not quite. But this year he has emerged as a far more compelling and complex figure than anyone had imagined. And much of that has to do with his willingness to confront what some people feel is today's equivalent of the communist scourge--the threat of Islamic violence. The topic is extraordinarily fraught. There are, after all, a billion or so nonviolent Muslims on the globe, the Roman Catholic Church's own record in the religious-mayhem department is hardly pristine, and even the most naive of observers understands that the Vicar of Christ might harbor an institutional prejudice against one of Christianity's main global competitors. But by speaking out last September in Regensburg, Germany, about the possible intrinsic connection between Islam and violence, the Pontiff suddenly became a lot more interesting. Even when Islamic extremists destroyed several churches and murdered a nun in Somalia, Benedict refused to retract the essence of his remarks. In one imperfect but powerful stroke, he departed from his predecessor's largely benign approach to Islam and discovered an issue that might attract even the most religiously jaded. In doing so, he managed (for better or worse) to reanimate the clash-of-civilizations discussion by focusing scrutiny on the core question of whether Islam, as a religion, sanctions violence. He was hailed by cultural conservatives worldwide. Says Helen Hull Hitchcock, a St. Louis, Mo., lay leader who heads the conservative Catholic organization Women for Faith and Family: "He has said what needed to be said."

But Benedict now finds himself in an unfamiliar position as he embarks on the most important mission of his papacy. Having thrust himself to the center of the global debate and earned the vilification of the Muslim street, he must weigh hard options. Does he seize his new platform, insisting that another great faith has potentially deadly flaws and daring it to discuss them, while exhorting Western audiences to be morally armed? Or does he back away from further confrontation in the hope of tamping down the rage his words have already provoked? Those who know him say he was clearly shocked and appalled by the violent reaction to the Germany speech. Yet it seems unlikely that he will completely drop the topic and the megaphone he has discovered he is holding. "The Pope has the intention to say what he thinks," says a high-ranking Vatican diplomat. "He may adjust his tone, but his direction won't change."

## APPOINTMENT IN ANKARA

If the test of a new act is to see how well it plays in a tough room, Benedict has certainly booked himself into a doozy. In the racial memory of Western Europe, the Turks were the face of militant Islam, besieging Vienna in 1529 and 1683 and for centuries thereafter representing a kind of stock bogeyman. In 2002, after nearly a century of determinedly secularist rule, the country elected a moderate Islamist party. For many in the West, that makes Turkey simultaneously a symbol of hope (of moderation) and fear (of Islamism).

The Pope's original invitation came in 2005, from the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which represents a nervous 0.01% of the country's population. The Turkish government, miffed that as a Cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger had opposed Turkey's urgent bid to join the European Union, finally issued its own belated offer for 2006. But even now, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has discovered a previous engagement that will take him out of the country while Benedict is in it. Although modest, sales of a Turkish novel subtitled *Who Will Kill the Pope in Istanbul?* (the book fingers everyone but Islamists) have increased as his trip approaches. The country is expected to place about 22,000 policemen on the streets of Istanbul while he is there. "This is a very high-risk visit," says Cengiz Aktar, a Turkish political scientist. "There is a vocal nationalist movement here, and there is the Pope, a man who likes to play with fire."

Actually, Benedict will probably try to stay away from matches during his successive stops in Ankara, Ephesus and Istanbul. Speculation about what the Pope will say and do on this visit has consumed Rome for weeks. Papal watchers say Benedict cannot out-Regensburg himself, but gauzy talk about the compatibility of Christianity and Islam isn't likely either. Over the course of his career, Benedict has been averse to reciting multifaith platitudes, an aversion that has sharpened as he has focused on Islam. And that's what could make his coming encounter with the Muslim world, says David Gibson, author of *The Rule of Benedict*, either "a step toward religious harmony or toward holy war."

## A BRIGHT-LINES KIND OF GUY

In 1986, Pope John Paul convened a remarkable multifaith summit in the medieval Italian town of Assisi. Muslims and Sikhs, Zoroastrians and the Archbishop of Canterbury, among others, convened to celebrate their (distinct) spiritualities and pray for peace. It was a signature John Paul moment, but not everybody caught the vibe. "It was a disaster," sniffs an observer. "People were praying together, and nobody had any idea what they were praying to." The witness, whose view undoubtedly reflected that of his boss, was an aide to Cardinal Ratzinger.

Unlike John Paul, who had a big-tent approach, Ratzinger has always favored bright theological lines and correspondingly high walls between creeds he regards as unequally meritorious. His long-standing habit is to correct any aide who calls a religion other than Christianity or Judaism a "faith." Prior to his papacy, the culmination of this philosophy was his office's 1999 Vatican document *Dominus Iesus*, which described non-Catholics as being in a "gravely deficient situation" regarding salvation. The fact that this offended some of the deficient parties did not particularly bother him. Notes the same assistant: "To understand each other ... you have to talk about what divides."

That approach includes Islam. In Ratzinger's 1996 interview book *Salt of the Earth*

(with Peter Seewald), he noted that "we must recognize that Islam is not a uniform thing. No one can speak for [it] as a whole. There is a noble Islam, embodied, for example, by the King of Morocco, and there is also the extremist, terrorist Islam, which, again, one must not identify with Islam as a whole, which would do it an injustice." This sophisticated understanding, however, did not keep Ratzinger from slapping down a bishop who wanted to invite peaceable Muslims to a papal ceremony in Fatima, Portugal, or, in 2004, from objecting to Turkish E.U. entry on grounds that it has always been "in permanent contrast to Europe," a contrast his other writings made clear had much to do with religion.

Islam played a particular role--as both a threat and a model--in the drama that probably lies closest to Benedict's heart: the secularization of Christian Europe. In the same 1996 book, he wrote that "the Islamic soul reawakened" in reaction to the erosion of the West's moral stature during the 1960s. Ratzinger paraphrased that soul's new song: "We know who we are; our religion is holding its ground; you don't have one any longer. We have a moral message that has existed without interruption since the prophets, and we will tell the world how to live it, where the Christians certainly can't."

After Sept. 11, Ratzinger's attitude toward Islam seems to have hardened. According to Gibson, the Cardinals in the conclave that elected Ratzinger made it clear that they expected a tougher dialogue with the other faith. After the London subway bombings in July 2005, the new Pope responded to the question of whether Islam was a "religion of peace"--as George W. Bush, among others, has always stressed-- by saying, "Certainly there are also elements that can favor peace." When he met with moderate German Muslims in the city of Cologne that August, Benedict delivered a fairly blunt warning that "those who instigate and plan these attacks evidently wish to poison our relations." In Rome, he removed Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, a relatively dovish Islam expert, as head of the Vatican's office on interreligious dialogue and replaced an ongoing study of Christian violence during the Crusades with one on Islamic violence today. And he has stepped up the Vatican's insistence on reciprocity--demanding the same rights for Christians in Muslim-majority countries that Muslims enjoy in the West.

All of this led observers to expect him to eventually make a major statement about Islam, although most assumed that it wouldn't stray too far from John Paul's fraternal tone. Nobody anticipated what happened in southern Germany.

## THE POINT OF NO RETURN

On Sept. 12, 2006, the day after the world had marked the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Benedict threw himself into the maelstrom. The unlikely venue was his old teaching grounds, the University of Regensburg. His vehicle was a talk about reason as part of Christianity's very essence. His nominal target was his usual suspect, the secular West, which he said had committed the tragic error of discarding

Christianity as reason-free. But this time he had an additional villain in his sights: Islam, which he said actually did undervalue rationality and which he strongly suggested was consequently more inclined to violence.

To show that Islam sees God as so transcendent that reason is extraneous, Benedict cited an 11th century Muslim sage named Ibn Hazm. To establish the connection between this position and violence, he quoted a 15th century Christian Byzantine Emperor (and head of the Byzantine, or Eastern, Church) named Manuel II Paleologus. Paleologus criticized Muslims for "spreading [their faith] by the sword," both because "God is not pleased by blood" and because true conversion depended on reason. "Show me just what the Muhammad brought that was new," Paleologus said, in a passage quoted by Benedict, "and there you will find things only evil and inhuman."

It remains unclear whether Benedict was deliberately trying to raise the temperature. Many analysts, especially in Rome, think he knew exactly what he was saying and regard the Islamic section of the 35-min. speech as a brave and eloquent warning of Islam's inherent violence and of a faithless West's inability to offer moral response. Yet Benedict's argument was slapdash and flawed. His sage, Ibn Hazm, turned out to have belonged to a school with no current adherents, and although reason's primacy is debated in Islam, it is very much part of the culture that developed algebra. Paleologus' forced-conversion accusation misrepresents the sweep of Muslim history, since more often than not, Islam has left religious groups in conquered territory intact, if hobbled. And assuming that a punctilious scholar like Benedict really wanted to engage on Islam and violence, why do it through the idiosyncratic lens of an embattled king in the 1400s who made his name partly for his efforts at drumming up enthusiasm for a new Crusade?

The reaction to the speech was intense. Small bands of Muslim thugs burned Benedict in effigy, attacked the churches in the Middle East and, on Sept. 17, murdered the nun in Somalia. Over the course of a month, Benedict issued a series of partial apologies and corrections unprecedented in the papacy. He expressed regret to those offended, summoned a group of Muslim notables to make the point personally and disowned the "evil and inhuman" slur on Muhammad as Manuel's sentiment but not his own. He even issued a second version of the speech to reflect those sentiments.

But he never retracted his more basic association of Islam with unreason and violence. Indeed, if he had, it would have caused considerable confusion--if only because the behavior of the extremists seemed, at least to some, to prove his point. No editorialist could express frustration with him for initiating the row without condemning the subsequent carnage--and a good many decided his only fault was in speaking truth. Says a high-ranking Western diplomat in Rome: "It was time to let the rabbit out of the can, and he did. I admire his courage. Part of the Koran lends itself to being shanghaied by terrorists, and he can do what politicians can't." In late October, Benedict received a different kind of validation in an open "Your Holiness" letter from 38 of the best-known names in Islamic theology. The missive politely

eviscerated his Regensburg speech but went on to "applaud" the Pope's "efforts to oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life" and expressed a desire for "frank and sincere dialogue." At a time when the credibility of Western political leaders in the Muslim world has sunk to new depths, the letter treated Benedict as a spokesman for the West.

Says a Vatican insider with a shrug: "Everyone's asking, Did the Pope make a mistake? Was it intentional? It doesn't really matter at this point." Whether Benedict had actually intended Regensburg to be the catalyst, he had become a player.

## THE PAPAL MEGAPHONE

After Regensburg, the mainstream Italian daily La Stampa ran the headline THE POPE AND BUSH ALLIED AGAINST TERROR. The association with the Iraq war and U.S. interrogation methods must have horrified the Pontiff, if only because it could undermine the church's honest-broker role in regional conflicts. "It's easy to say, 'Go Benedict! Hit the Muslims!'" says Gibson. "But that's not who he is. He is not a Crusader." Shortly before Regensburg, Benedict had endured Western criticism for repeatedly demanding a cease-fire after Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Angelo Cardinal Scola, a protégé of the Pope's who edits Oasis, a Church quarterly on dialogue with Islam, says the fact "that radical Islam can turn to violence does not mean we must respond with a crusade."

The Pope's pursuit of his newfound calling as Islamic interlocutor will be tricky, theologically and politically. Unlike the holy books of Judaism and Christianity, the Koran and Hadiths contain verses precisely regulating the conduct of war and exhorting Muslims to wage battle against various enemies. The bellicosity of some Koranic passages owes much to the fact that they were written at a time when Muslims were engaged in almost constant warfare to defend their religion. But when suicide bombers today go to their fates with the Koran's verses on their lips, it invites questions about Islam's credentials as a religion that is willing to police its own claims of peace and tolerance. As conservative Catholic scholar Michael Novak points out, the Vatican's pacifism gives Benedict unmatched moral standing to press this point. "Being against war, he can say tougher things ... than any President or Prime Minister can. His role is to represent Western civilization."

Perhaps so, but then he might have to represent its past as well, including all the historical violence done in Jesus' name (despite the Gospels' pacifism). Discussion of Christianity's dark hours has not been his penchant. Moreover, the position Benedict took in Regensburg--that Islam and violence are indeed essentially connected--worked as an opening gambit but doesn't leave much room for either side to maneuver. People asked to flatly renounce their Holy Writ generally don't. And Benedict has little give--because first, he seldom says anything he is not prepared to defend to the bitter end and second, if he retreats now, he risks being accused of the same moral relativism that he rails against.

Still, many Catholics are rooting for him to come up with a way to engage without enraging. The widely read Catholic blogger Amy Welborn says, "I think there's a pretty widespread fed-up-ness with Islamic sensitivity. I agree that elements of Islam that either explicitly espouse violence or are less than aggressive in combatting it need to be challenged and nudged, [just as] I would like to see the Pope continue to challenge and nudge people of all different religions--Christian and non-Christian--to look at the suffering of people." She thinks that, given the heat he's taking in parts of the Islamic world, his willingness to go through with his Turkish trip is "so brave."

But what should he do while he's there? John Esposito, a respected Islam scholar at Georgetown University, says the Pope can't confine himself to meetings with Christian leaders. "He must address the Muslim majority." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a professor at George Washington University and one of the 38 signatories to the October letter to Benedict, says the Pope should deliver an "earnest expression of commonality"--even if it's only the widely accepted observation that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim descent from the biblical figure of Abraham. Father Richard McBrien, a theologian at Notre Dame, says that "if he doesn't bring up the issue of reciprocal respect for Christian minorities, he's not doing his job," but that he should avoid an absolutist, now-or-never stance.

High-ranking Vatican sources say Benedict will avoid repeating the Islam-and-violence trope in any form as blatant as Regensburg's. Instead, suggests Father Thomas Reese, a senior research fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, an independent nonprofit institute at Georgetown, the Pope may take a less broad-brush approach to the issue by repeating his sentiment from Cologne: "He could say, 'You, like me, are concerned about terrorism' and he would like to see Islamic clerics be more up front condemning it." Once over the hump, happier topics should be easy to find. "Quite frankly," says Reese, "the Pope and the Muslims are on the same page on abortion. They [agree on] relativism and consumerism, hedonistic culture, sex and violence, Palestinian rights." Conceivably, like John Paul's first journey back to communist Poland, Benedict's simple presence in this Muslim land may speak louder than words.

Whether this is the way Benedict will choose to proceed remains to be seen. But whatever he does, bold or subtle, the explosiveness of the current relationship between Islam and the West will require him to become a diplomat as much as a scholar. As he strives to assume that role, holding out an olive branch to other religions while fiercely defending his own, the Pope may want to consider the story of a much earlier walker of the Catholic-Islamic tightrope. In the 13th century, during the middle of the Fifth Crusade, St. Francis of Assisi briefly departed Italy and journeyed to the Holy Land to evangelize to the Muslims. According to Christian traditions, he preached the gospel to the Sultan, only to be told that Muslims were as convinced of the truth of Islam as Francis was of Christianity. At that, Francis proposed that he and a Muslim walk through a fire to test whose faith was stronger. The Sultan said he didn't know whether he could locate a volunteer. Francis said he

would walk through the fire by himself. Impressed with Francis' devotion, the Sultan, while maintaining his own faith, agreed to a truce between the two warring sides.

Francis' precise methods may be a bit outdated. But 800 years later, his mixture of flexibility and tenacity could be a useful paradigm for a frank and sincere dialogue in an ever turbulent religious world.

With reporting by With reporting by Jeff Chu/ New York, Andrew Purvis/ Berlin, Pelin Turgut/ Ankara with other bureaus

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